

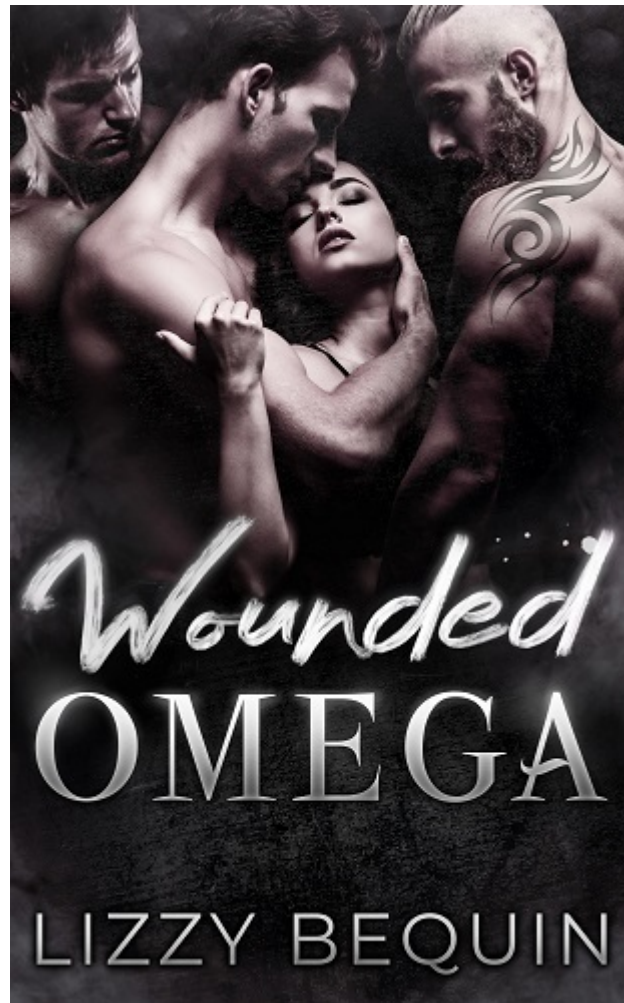
Quarantine
OMEGA

— COMPLETE SERIES —
BOOKS 1-5

LIZZY BEQUIN

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Quarantine Omega

Complete Series: Books 1-5

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Quarantine Omega

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BOOK 1:
MARKED OMEGA

PART ONE:

THE ZONE

CHAPTER 1: LILY

The armored transport rumbles over a hill, and we see it for the first time—the quarantine wall. It twists across the barren landscape like a ribbon of iron and rust.

On this side of the wall is the so-called civilized world. Sure, it's no picnic, but for all its multitude of problems—overpopulation, rampant crime, pollution, depleted resources—it's got nothing on what lies on the other side of that ugly, metal boundary.

The quarantine zone. By all accounts, it is hell on earth. And that's exactly where we are heading.

I shudder as I think about the dangers awaiting us beyond that wall—horrible, twisted mutants who will tear a man limb from limb. Based on everything I've read, they'll do even worse things to any woman unfortunate enough to fall into their clutches.

Seated beside me, in the middle row of the cramped vehicle is Sara, another young SynerGen research assistant like myself. I don't know her too well, as she only joined the team recently, after her predecessor Eva went missing.

When I glance over at her, Sara brushes back her brown hair and tries her best to give me a reassuring smile. But the nervous way that she fidgets with the ring on her finger betrays her fear. When she notices me looking, she stops her

fidgiting and pulls on her thick protective gloves, snapping them into the sealed sleeves of her bodysuit.

She has no reason to be ashamed. I completely relate to her fear. She's thinking the same thing that I am right now.

What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?

"Nervous?" our boss, Dr. Lucian, calls from the front passenger seat as if he can sense our emotions. His head of thick, dark hair bobbles as the transport rocks over the cracked pavement. He turns in his seat and darts his eyes between me and Sara.

"Don't worry," he says. "We'll be perfectly safe inside this transport. It's vacuum sealed and radiation resistant to protect us from any contagions in the zone. And the armor plating is more than adequate to resist a *physical* attack should we run into any Alphas."

Alphas. That word makes my skin prickle with goosebumps. I swallow hard. Sara asks the question that I'm thinking.

"Do you think that's likely, Dr. Lucian?" Sara asks. "That we will encounter any Alphas, I mean?"

A mysterious smirk curls at the corner of his full lips. Dr. Lucian is not your typical nerdy scientist. His clean-shaven jaw is strong and masculine. He has a veritable mane of slightly curly dark hair that is silvered at the temples, and intense brown eyes stare out from beneath a pair of thick brows.

Dr. Lucian's most attractive feature, however, is that picture perfect smile of his.

A lot of the young female assistants at the lab have a crush on Dr. Lucian, and if I'm being completely honest, there was a time when I counted myself among that group too. By now, however, I've worked with him long enough to recognize that smile for what it really is—a manipulation. An empty promise. A way to cajole young women into doing all of his hard work for him while he reaps all of the accolades.

Well that's about par for the course these days. The men have all the money and power, while the women are left with the scraps. Dr. Lucian's self-satisfied smile shows that he knows that fact all too well.

But this time, there's a hint of mystery in that smile, and I don't like it. It makes me feel like there's something Dr. Lucian isn't telling us.

“No,” he answers Sara in a patronizing tone. “It's highly unlikely that we will run into any Alphas on the other side. As I'm sure you both know, they are extremely elusive. They prefer hiding to confrontation.”

He flicks his gaze up and over our shoulders and juts his chin.

“Besides,” he says calmly, “should we run into any trouble, the security troopers will protect us. They are more than a match for a pack of wild animals.”

I turn and look at the two troopers seated behind us. Deakon and Chappel. Two solid bricks of men with matching crew

cuts. Their massive bodies jostle in the seats as the transport bumps down the road. Their faces are impassive.

Their team leader, Bishop, is up front driving the transport. He has a grizzled, black beard that is slashed across his right cheek by a nasty pink scar. I can't see his face from where I'm sitting, but I have no doubt that it is wearing that same mean-looking scowl as always.

For these security troopers, it's just another day at the office.

But not for me. The quarantine wall is getting closer by the minute, and I'm practically shitting my pants at this point.

Well, I'm practically shitting my *protective bodysuit*, I should say. Everyone in the transport is wearing one. The suit is a one-piece of a heavy, black, leathery material. A metal ring around the neck allows for a special helmet and ventilation mask to be attached should we need to exit the vehicle.

That thought makes my stomach turn, and I feel a sour taste in the back of my throat as the synthetic peanut-butter sandwich I ate for lunch threatens to return.

I need something to calm me down, and fast.

I wait until Dr. Lucian has turned back around in his seat to face the front. Then I lean forward, my mobility restricted by this uncomfortable suit, and I rifle through the satchel that is stowed under my seat. After a bit of frantic digging, I finally find what I'm looking for.

My small, rattling pill bottle of nihiloxin tablets.

I can feel Sara eyeing me as my clumsy, gloved fingers struggle with the child-proof lid, but I don't care. Yeah, I'm a desperate nihiloxin addict. So sue me. Half the population is addicted at this point, so it's hard to be too embarrassed about it.

Hell, the government practically encourages the use of nihiloxin at this point. Along with its sedative effects, it has the side effect of inhibiting sexual urges. In the government's view, that's a good thing, considering the rampant overpopulation that's stretching the hive city's resources to their limits.

Once I manage to get the stupid bottle open, I shake one small purple tablet into my palm and knock it back. It is chalky and bitter on my tongue, and I swallow it back without water.

As I'm about to put the pill bottle back into my satchel, Sara touches my arm.

"Can I get one of those?" she whispers.

I pass her a pill, trying to be as discreet as possible about it.

Almost immediately, I can feel the relaxing effects of the drug washing through my body. It doesn't erase my terror about venturing into the quarantine zone. It just dulls it. It doesn't negate my fear of getting eaten alive, or worse. It just makes it seem...like it doesn't matter all that much.

It helps me detach, like I'm watching everything happen to somebody else in the third person. When it comes to the soul-

crushing existence of daily life in the hive cities, a lot of people find this drug very useful.

Settling back into my seat, my mind now slightly at ease, I remind myself why I'm doing this.

Eva.

The reason I'm here is Eva. She was my best friend at SynerGen Labs. In fact, she may have been my only friend.

Shit, I need to stop thinking about her in the past tense. She may still be alive.

Eva went missing several weeks ago during a previous top-secret excursion into the zone. The mission was so secret, in fact, that I haven't been given any details about it. All I know is that Dr. Lucian was present on that mission too, and Eva was accompanying him as his assistant, just as Sara and I are accompanying him now.

I remember when Eva confided in me that she would be going on an excursion into the zone. I thought she was crazy for doing it, but I suspected the professor's winning smile had helped persuade her.

Or even more likely, he threatened her job if she didn't go along. It's hard enough for a woman to find anything better than menial work these days, and lab assistant is an extremely prized position. I have little doubt that Dr. Lucian used that leverage to cajole Eva into making the trip.

Now she's gone missing. And now *I'm* the one going into the zone like a damn fool.

I wish I could say I'm not second guessing my decision now. I wish I could say that I'm that courageous girl who fearlessly charges into harm's way to save her friend, no matter the cost. But the truth is I'm scared shitless.

Oh well, at this point, the decision has been made. There's no turning back.

Still, I can't help wondering why on earth a pair of lowly corporate research assistants like me and Sara would be brought along on a rescue mission. In my case, it's even weirder considering my skill set. Yes, I work in the biotech sector, but my area of expertise is with computers, designing programs to run data analysis operations. I'm hardly a field researcher.

Dr. Lucian simply claimed that he needed someone to assist him during the mission, but that just raises another question...

Why is a corporate biotech expert participating in a *rescue* mission?

When I questioned him about it, he told me that it is standard protocol to bring a scientific expert on every excursion into the quarantine zone.

But I'm starting to wonder if I can trust anything that man says.

All that talk about the protective armor of our vehicle and the big strong security troopers who will defend us against the mutants? That's all well and good. But obviously it wasn't enough to keep Eva safe.

The comm unit on the vehicle's front console crackles to life, startling me out of my thoughts.

"This is Vigilance Station Thirteen," a stern, militaristic voice comes over the speakers. "Identify yourselves. Over."

Commander Bishop takes one massive, black-gloved hand off the steering wheel and reaches over to the console to depress a large green comm button there.

"Copy, Vigilance Station, this is Sword of Fire, embarking on Directive Sixty-Six. Request entry to the quarantine zone. Over."

There is a moment of silence, and then a reply comes back. The voice is flat and scratchy with radio static.

"Acknowledged Sword of Fire. Preparing to open the gate. Please hold."

Sara and I both lurch forward against our seatbelt harnesses as Bishop brings the transport to an abrupt stop. The heavy treads of the tires crunch to a halt on the weathered rockcrete pavement. Leaning forward in my seat, I gaze out through the dusty windshield.

Now the wall looms over us. Fifty feet of pitted steel paneling, the old rivets trailing brown rust where the rain has dripped and corroded the metal.

High atop the imposing structure, dark-clad security troops move about on the parapets. Every twenty yards or so are stationed massive 50-caliber machine guns on tripods aimed into the zone on the far side of the wall. Some of the troops

appear to be shouldering sniper rifles, grenade launchers, and even flame throwers.

Is all that firepower really necessary to keep the beasts on the other side at bay? The thought makes me shudder again.

Then I notice a sound. I feel it deep in the marrow of my bones before my ears actually pick it up. It is like a low, excruciating groan. The sound of massive gears cranking back the impenetrable steel gate.

Slowly the broad metal surface slides aside until all that's left is a gaping maw revealing the quarantine zone. To my surprise, the landscape on the other side of the wall appears identical to the side we are on.

Somehow, I thought Hell would look different.

Well, I know better than that. I know all about the feral Alpha beasts that are lying in wait on the other side.

“You may proceed, Sword of Fire,” the comm unit hisses.

“Acknowledged.” Bishop glances back at us passengers in the rear-view mirror. “All right, we’re going in.”

The transport lurches forward slowly, tires grinding against the pavement.

Going in.

The phrase is accurate. The quarantine wall surrounds an enormous area comprising hundreds of thousands of square miles, containing the twisted mutants and keeping them from escaping into the outside world.

But somehow, it feels like the other way around. I have a feeling that I have spent my life inside the protective barrier of the civilized world, and now I am venturing into the outer darkness.

A shadow passes across the blast resistant arma-glass of the vehicle's windshield as we roll beneath the arch of the gate. As soon as the back tires have passed the threshold, the gate immediately begins rumbling shut behind us.

That feeling of terror returns, sitting heavily in the pit of my stomach like I've swallowed a chunk of ice. I resist the temptation to melt it with another nihiloxin tablet. I need to keep my wits sharp from here on out.

Bishop hits the throttle, and we speed ahead down the road.

After a minute, I turn to look back at the wall receding behind us into the distance. Already the troopers manning the 50-cal guns looked like small black bugs.

This is it. We are in the zone.

CHAPTER 2: LILY

“Levels?” Bishop grunts as he steers.

A few miles in, the highway became too clogged with the rusted-out carcasses of cars left behind during the cataclysm, so Bishop took us off-road. Now the vehicle is jolting over the uneven terrain, rocking me violently in my seat harness. I glance over at Sara, and she is clutching the arm rest of her own seat tightly. Even with that nihiloxin in her system, she’s rattled as hell, and I don’t blame her. I’m right there with her.

Dr. Lucian, on the other hand, seems totally at ease. Even though he’s shaking and bouncing in his seat up front, he manages to tap the glossy screen of the data slate that he’s holding in his lap, scrolling through an array of tables and digital charts—information streaming in from the sensors mounted on the roof of the vehicle.

“Looks like the levels are at...three fifty,” he calmly answers Bishop. “We still need to go a little deeper.”

Bishop nods and jams the accelerator down even harder.

Three hundred and fifty. He must be talking about the levels of omega contamination outside the vehicle right now. That’s high enough that we would all become warped mutants within a matter of minutes were it not for the protective shielding built into the armor of this vehicle.

Close to the barrier wall, the radiation levels are low, almost zero. Certainly not enough to lead to mutation. Still, the wall guards wear environmental gear as a precaution. But the closer you get to ground zero, the contamination levels and the risk of mutation increase quickly.

Ground zero. That's where the cataclysm started nearly a century ago.

To this day, nobody knows what happened there.

There has been, of course, a great deal of speculation about the source of the omega contamination. Some people suggest it was the result of a biological attack, but the fact that the contamination levels have not abated for over ninety years seems to rule that out.

Other more outlandish theories propose an off-world source.

Sara and I both squeal in unison as we are bounced violently in our seats. The vehicle just hit a particularly nasty ditch, making it rock precariously.

The men seem totally unfazed by it all. Sara and I exchange a knowing glance, both feeling embarrassed for our little frightened outburst.

"Don't worry, girls," Dr. Lucian says, flashing one of his trademark smiles. "We're almost there."

I don't appreciate him calling us girls, and I'm tempted to remind him that I'm twenty-one, but I decide it's best to keep my mouth shut.

"Almost where?" Sara asks.

Dr. Lucian's face darkens, and the smile drops from his lips. He hesitates briefly before he responds.

“The, um...the last known location where Eva was spotted. That's where we will...you know, start the search.”

Before he turns back around, I could swear that his eyes flick behind me briefly to look at the troopers in the back seat.

Start the search?

I can't believe we're actually going outside in the zone. I mean, I guess there's no way around it if we are going to search for Eva, but the prospect fucking terrifies me.

Silence settles on the passengers, and I turn my gaze out the window at the world passing by.

As we have gotten farther away from the quarantine wall, the landscape has changed around us. First, the barren, rocky wasteland became dotted with tufts of rough, wiry plants. Then the stony terrain gradually gave way to gently sloping hills covered in patchy grass swaying in the breeze. Now we are speeding over rolling meadows edged by dark, old-growth forests.

I've never seen such greenery in all my life. Galadon-1, where I reside, is like any other city hive. It is a towering, claustrophobic conglomeration of thousands upon thousands of dingy skyscrapers. Crumbling rockcrete and steel corroded by poison rains. Barely any dirty sunlight makes it through the smothering blanket of smog. Sure there are some trees lining

the streets in the wealthier districts of the upper tiers, but even those are sickly, anemic things.

Here in the interior of the zone, on the other hand, things look almost primordial. The land appears virginal except for the few remnants of humanity from before the cataclysm. The occasional husk of a long abandoned car. A houseless stone chimney peeking over the high weeds. An old telephone pole curling with green creeper vines and leaning precariously like a dead tree where a vulture perches and ruffles his black wings, eyeing us suspiciously as we race past.

Part of me can't help thinking that the wilds of the quarantine zone hold a strange, almost forbidden beauty.

I immediately chastise myself for harboring any favorable thoughts about this place.

This is the zone. The quarantine zone. I know full well that its lush, idyllic appearance belies the predatory danger of its inhabitants. Hell, I've spent my whole life studying those freaks.

Within minutes after the cataclysm first struck, those humans unfortunate enough to be in range of the contamination started to mutate.

The vast majority of them became betas. Mindless, shambling zombies with pale, translucent skin and dull white eyes, they showed no signs of sentience at all. Within days they would die of dehydration or starvation if they didn't aimlessly wander off a bridge first.

Much less common, at least in the days following the cataclysm, were the Alpha mutations. These only occurred in a small subset of the male population. The Alphas are horrible, hyper-masculine beasts, their bodies bulging with muscles and their minds inflamed with a terrifying lust for carnage and violence.

And mating.

Which brings us to the third, and rarest, of all the mutant forms—the omegas. This mutation only occurred among the female population. The poor women who experienced this mutation immediately fell into a state of intense reproductive receptivity known as estrus.

In short, they went into heat.

Upon mutation, the omega's body would send out an extraordinary quantity of pheromones, signalling to any nearby Alphas that the omega was ready to be mated.

By all accounts, the omegas would lose themselves in a nearly trance-like state of raw, ecstatic lust, begging to be claimed and bred by as many males as they could take. The Alpha's would descend upon a screaming omega in packs, using the female's body roughly and mercilessly for their pleasure until her estrus finally abated.

As I think about that, staring out the window, a trickle of sweat runs down my spine inside my bodysuit, making me shiver once again.

“Levels?” Bishop grunts once more.

“Over five hundred,” Dr. Lucian says after a few quick taps on his data slate. “This will do. We can use the small clearing just beyond those trees up ahead.”

He tilts the data slate so that Bishop can look. The screen is displaying a satellite map of the surrounding area.

“Good,” Bishop says with a nod.

He fishtails the transport to a gut-wrenching stop at the edge of a dark forest.

“Deakon, Chappel,” Bishop calls over his shoulder to the troops in the back, “get ready to disembark.”

I look behind me and watch as the two big men slide back the lid of a steel storage container positioned between them. From inside, they start drawing out weapons and gear to arm themselves.

However, this is not the kind of equipment I was expecting at all. There is a pair of massive restraints that are basically high tech handcuffs that look like they were designed for a gorilla. There is a massive shock collar and electro-wire netting. And to top it all off, the troopers pull two matching sniper rifles from the case and bandoliers of liquid filled darts.

Are those... tranquilizer guns?

I face forward again, and my heart is suddenly pumping double-time with a combination of fury and terror.

“What’s going on? This is supposed to be a rescue mission!” I shout. “You can’t seriously be considering trying to capture an Alpha!”

In the driver's seat, Bishop is checking the magazine and chamber of his sidearm. He ignores my outburst, and barks an order to his men in the back seat.

"Deakon. Chappel. Helmets on." He turns toward Dr. Lucian beside him. "You too, Doc."

"Wait!" I shout again, trying to hide the tremor in my voice. "I'm not going out there until you tell me what's going on! This is completely insane if you think—"

Dr. Lucian, helmet in hand, flashes me another grin, but this time there's a hint of malice behind it.

"You have to understand," he says coolly. "These Alphas are a valuable commodity, Lily. Just think of what we can learn if we are able to capture one and bring it back with us."

My mouth feels dry. My throat tightens, making it difficult to squeeze the words out. When I finally speak, the words leave my mouth as barely a whisper.

"This isn't really a rescue mission, is it?"

There are a series of clicks and hisses as the security troopers fasten their helmets into their protective suits. Sara is wide-eyed and trembling in her seat. Dr. Lucian gives me a phony apologetic look.

"I'm sorry for the duplicity," he says. "But it was the only way to get you to come along, I'm afraid."

"Get your helmet on, Doctor," Bishop says, his voice distorted by the breathing apparatus covering his face. "We're heading out."

“No!” I cry, not even trying to conceal my panic anymore.

“Sara and I don’t have our masks. And I’m not going out there until—“

“Enough!” Bishop barks. “Deakon. Chappel. Subdue the females.”

“Subdue? What the hell are you—“

Before I can get the words out, a heavy gloved hand falls on my shoulder, clamping me in place. There is a hot sting of a needle at the side of my neck. Almost immediately my muscles go slack and my bones seem to turn to jelly.

In my peripheral vision, I see Sara’s body slump in her seat. They got her too, the bastards.

I try to protest, but it’s in vain. My jaw hangs slack and I feel a trickle of drool on my chin.

“Helmet,” I manage to slur.

My vision darkens. I hear Dr. Lucian’s voice. It sounds like a distant echo.

“Don’t worry about your helmet, Lily,” he chuckles. “You won’t be needing it.”

Then I lose myself to the enveloping darkness.

CHAPTER 3: LILY

My consciousness returns in waves.

The first thing I'm aware of is the ringing of steel on steel. Something being hammered. Behind that, farther away, are other sounds that I'm not able to place at first. Strange, almost musical sounds that I've only ever heard in audio recordings.

Birds. We're outside.

My eyes fly open with a jolt of panic as my drugged brain finally starts to grasp the significance of that fact.

My bare back is scraping against something hard and rough, which I realize is the bark of a tree. My arms are raised over my head, and something is biting into the flesh of my wrists.

I roll my head back to look upward, and there in the dots of light poking through the leaves overhead, I see that I am shackled to a heavy iron chain. One of the troopers—I cannot tell which because his face is obscured by his helmet and breathing mask—is hammering a metal spike through the center of one of the links into the thick tree trunk, securing the chain in place.

Cool wind ghosts across my bare skin. Still weakened by the effects of the drug, my head lolls. I look down at my body and see that my protective suit has been removed, leaving me naked except for my underwear.

I glance to my left to find Sara. She has been stripped down to her underwear too, and her body is already hanging limply from a chain nailed to the tree. Her eyes are rolling beneath her closed lids. She's just beginning to wake up too.

We are both exposed. We have no protection against the contamination of the zone.

A woman's voice is screaming. It takes me a second before I realize it's me.

"Shut that bitch up," a distorted voice growls.

The man standing over me has finished his hammering. His broad, gloved hand backhands me across the jaw. Dull, white pain flashes behind my eyes.

"Careful," a different voice calls. "We don't want them unconscious you fool. They are supposed to be *live* bait, after all. The more screaming the better."

I decide to keep quiet. I don't want another blow like that one. Instead, I look around, taking stock of the situation.

We are in a large, mostly circular clearing like a shallow, grassy bowl rimmed with dense, dark forest. In the very center of the clearing is the single, massive tree that Sara and I are chained to.

Under other circumstances, I might find this place beautiful.

Beside me, Sara stirs as she finally begins to wake up. She blinks her eyes, her expression confused and dreamy. Then realization spreads across her features as she rattles the chains

over her head and looks at the four dark-clad masked men standing in front of us.

Now it's her turn to scream.

“Sara,” I hiss, “be quiet. Screaming will only attract Alphas.”

Her tear-filled eyes grow even wider at the mention of that awful word. But she stops screaming, for the time being at least.

“Oh it doesn't matter too much,” one of the men says, stepping forward.

His voice is modulated by his visored helmet, emerging from the breathing grate with a curious sibilance. Still, I can guess from his slightly shorter stature that he is Dr. Lucian.

“As you well know,” he continues, “Alphas have a strong sense of smell. And soon, with a little luck, at least one of you will be deep in estrus.”

Estrus. Heat. And what did he say before about bait?

“Why are you doing this?” I demand. My cheeks are striped with tears, but I manage somehow to keep my voice level and firm.

The sound of Dr. Lucian's chuckle filtering through his mask makes my skin crawl.

“Alphas are such elusive creatures,” he says strolling toward me nonchalantly. “After almost a hundred years, the quarantine zone should be crawling with them. The betas have all but died out, but the Alphas and omegas have continued to

mate. Yet they manage to stay hidden somehow. We have penetrated as deep as our contamination resistant vehicles will allow, yet we've never managed to bring in a live Alpha. Oh we've had our share of run-ins, to be sure. But we've never managed to capture one."

"Hurry up, Doctor," one of the big men growls. It must be Bishop. "Time's wasting, and I don't want to get caught out here with my dick in my hand."

"Patience, Commander. We need to make sure that the mutations have taken effect."

As if on cue, a strange gurgling sound issues from Sara's lips, followed by an inhuman groan. When I turn my eyes toward her, my stomach churns, and for the second time today, I find myself on the verge of vomiting.

Sara's skin has grown pale and sickly, shot with dark, diseased-looking veins. Her eyes have turned dull and murky, and a string of spit dangles from her chin.

"Sara!" I cry out, but she doesn't seem to hear me.

She has already become a mindless beta.

Dr. Lucian clucks his tongue behind his mask.

"Well, that's...disappointing," he mutters. "I was certain that Sara displayed all of the proper traits for the omega mutation. Oh well, even *I* make mistakes sometimes. What a waste."

Tears blur my vision as I turn away. To bring an innocent woman out here into the zone and mutate her into a beta zombie like that is beyond evil. It's a fate worse than death.

And all that bastard Dr. Lucian has to say is that it's
"disappointing."

I steel my nerves, expecting to descend into the same mindless state. I can't imagine what it must be like, but I guess I'm about to find out.

However, nothing happens. Nothing at all.

Dr. Lucian laughs.

"Good, good!"

I blink back my tears and glare at him with fury in my eyes.

"What are you so happy about, you sick fuck?"

I cringe as he steps closer and his gloved fingers brush my hair back.

"You have been exposed to the contamination of the zone," he rasps through his breathing mask, "but you have not become a beta. That only leaves one other possibility.

Oh God. He's right. I'm an omega.

I shake my head in disbelief.

"But...why don't I feel any different?" I ask.

"Come now, Lily. We're scientists, aren't we? We can't rely on *feelings*. We need empirical evidence, hm? Hard data."

It's only now that I notice the device that Dr. Lucian is carrying in his left hand. It must be some kind of scanner because he aims it at my body, first near my exposed armpits, then down my torso, finally stopping at my crotch.

“What the hell is that?” I snarl.

I’m starting to get pissed. In a weird way, being chained up and helpless is taking away some of my fear. It’s like my instincts have recognized that I have no hope for escape, so now all I can think about is how much I would like to gouge this fucker’s eyeballs out.

“Excellent,” he mutters to himself, ignoring my question.

Behind him, the troopers are getting antsy, anxiously scanning the tree line. Deakon and Chappel are both shouldering their tranquilizer rifles. Bishop is resting his hand on the butt of his holstered pistol.

“How’s it look, Doctor?”

“It worked,” Dr. Lucian says happily. “She’s an omega all right. Her body is already descending into estrus. Good Lord, her pheromonal emissions are almost off the charts. She’s the ripest one we’ve had yet.”

Bishop nods. He gestures for Deakon and Chappel to take up sniper positions in the deep shadows of the treeline.

So that’s what this is all about then. He tricked me into coming out here so that he could expose me to the contamination and mutate me into an omega in heat. All so he could lure in an Alpha to capture it.

Dr. Lucian turns to go.

“Why me?” I struggle against my chains as I feel my strength returning. “Why not just use one of those men to mutate yourself an Alpha and save yourself a little trouble?”

The doctor pauses. He turns on his heel and draws near. His breathing is heavy through his mask.

“Despite all of the research we’ve compiled over the past century, we can never be certain how an individual’s mutation will play out.” He nods toward Sara, where she is now slouching in her beta stupor. “And as you well know, it is only the strongest, most athletic men who are likely to display an Alpha mutation. Such men are a valuable commodity. The government needs those men for security roles and to fight foreign wars. We can’t risk wasting good men like that only to get beta mutations.”

I ball my shackled hands into fists. If it weren’t for these chains, I would bring my fists down on this creep’s skull.

“But nobody’s going to care too much if a few young women go missing?” I spit. “I guess we’re not a *valuable commodity*.”

Dr. Lucian tenderly strokes my cheek with his gloved fingers, making my skin crawl and my stomach turn.

“Don’t fret, my dear. Here in the zone, an omega is very valuable indeed, as you will soon discover.”

On a sudden impulse I lash out, trying to bite his hand. If I can just puncture the material of his glove, he will be exposed too. Forced to mutate. At least I might avenge Sara that way. And Eva too.

But Dr. Lucian is too quick for me. He draws his hand away, and my teeth clack together, biting nothing but air.

“Amazing,” he mutters to himself. “The bitch has already gone feral.”

“Come on, Doc,” Bishop growls. “Time to go.”

The commander has come up behind Dr. Lucian to look me up and down. Deakon and Chappel have both disappeared into the surrounding woods.

“We should remove her underwear,” Dr. Lucian says in a creepy voice. “To expedite the diffusion of her pheromones through the surrounding a—“

He is cut off by a low, moaning howl in the distance. The sound sends a tingle up my spine, and my skin prickles with goosebumps. What’s even weirder is the clenching sensation at my core. Slickness pools inside my panties, and I feel a rush of shame for having this kind of reaction at such an inopportune time.

This can’t be happening.

“No time,” Bishop said. “And no need from the sound of it. Deakon and Chappel are both in position and the bait is set. You and I will monitor the situation from the safety of the vehicle.”

I watch as the two men leave, moving at a quick trot up the sides of the grassy incline before disappearing into the shadows of the trees.

And now I’m left all alone with Sara, the poor woman slumped and drooling in her chains.

That's when I notice something strange. All those birds I heard before? They've gone quiet. The entire valley is silent except for the faint clink of our chains.

Another deep howl breaks the silence, closer than before.

CHAPTER 4: ADDOM

The scent is intense and impossible to ignore. My body responds immediately. My heart rate rises, my muscles tense up, and my cock swells with anticipation beneath my fur loincloth.

It's an omega. And she's in heat.

I rush toward the scent, weaving in and out of the dark, moss-covered tree trunks. The dappled sunlight filtering through the forest canopy strobes across my eyes.

My body is barely in control as my muscles strain to run at a full sprint, charging ahead until I find the female and mate her. My mind, however, recognizes the danger. I keep my stealthy hunting form, moving on the balls of my feet, my bare soles almost silent on the carpet of leaves and pine needles and soft moss.

But as I draw closer, the scent becomes stronger. And as the scent grows stronger, it becomes a struggle to keep myself from descending into a delirium of lust.

Without even meaning to, a deep, low howl erupts from my throat, echoing through the trees. It is pure instinct, an ungovernable reflex.

The purpose of the primal call is to signal to my pack brothers that I have found a female in heat. My call will draw the other males in so that we can all claim her cunt.

I remind myself that I must contain my urge to howl. This place is beyond the boundary of my people's territory. These are the far lands. My people rarely venture out here. A few of the old-timers brag about going so far that they could see the great wall, but sometimes I think they are just repeating stories they heard when they were young.

In fact, the only reason I'm here is because the tribal council sent my pack to scout the territory. We have started doing so ever since we started finding those other females mysteriously chained to trees in the area.

Except for one of them, the women were all betas. They were all dead by the time we found them, shot through the chest by a gun—an outsider weapon.

But this female that I smell now is definitely an omega. And she is very much alive.

Now the scent is overwhelming. I can no longer control my urges. I charge ahead through the underbrush not caring if I make any sound. My cock aches beneath my fur loincloth.

Still, in the back of my mind, I am aware that something is wrong. What is an omega doing out here, so far from the others? And why is her scent so intense? It's like when the young females reach their very first estrus.

I should be cautious, but my body won't let me.

Charging ahead, I burst from the forest into a wide rolling meadow. The land dips into a shallow bowl, and at its lowest point there stands a gnarled tree.

Beneath the shade of its spreading limbs I see them.

One of the women is a beta, hanging mindless in her chains. At first I think she is dead until she lolls her head to look at me blankly. Poor creature. I should put her out of her misery.

But my attention is immediately focused on the other female.

She is the most beautiful omega I have ever seen.

She is fair-skinned, with lustrous auburn hair and a body that is impossibly curvy, even for an omega. Her round breasts swell and heave with her rapid breathing. Her torso tapers to a narrow waist, but flairs again at her wide hips which lead to thick meaty thighs.

I want to feast on her. I want to taste every inch of her hot skin.

But first I need to make her safe. Why is she chained like this? And why is she dressed in that strange garb of thin fabric covering her breasts and sex? The pristine whiteness of her clothing makes it clear that this woman is an outsider, from beyond the great wall.

This is a trap.

But my cock doesn't care. My need for her is too great. I need to rend her delicate clothing and claim her breasts with my mouth. I need to bury my face between those luscious thighs and lap the hot slick oozing from her hole.

And most of all I need to plunge my hard cock inside her wet depths and fill her womb with my seed.

Another howl bursts from my throat, and I beat my fists against my chest. I rush toward her.

The omega screams, struggling against the chains that bind her. I'll need to free her eventually so I can take her back to my dwelling. But for now my hard cock and aching balls demand that I fuck her here and now, chained to this tree like an animal.

I must sate my need.

My hand clamps over her mouth, muffling her screams. I press my body tightly against hers, pinning her in place to keep her from struggling and squirming. My snout dips to her neck, and I inhale her aroma.

Beneath the fur of my loincloth, my cock throbs and pulses against her lower belly. She obviously feels it by the way she squeals into my palm.

Keeping her pinned in place, I snuffle down her neck, along her shoulder, down her chest. Her breasts are heaving. Her heart is hammering so hard against her rib cage that I can hear it.

With a snarl, I tear the cloth that is hiding her chest from me. Her plump mounds jiggle free, their pink peaks taut with arousal. Her mouth may be screaming in terror, but her body is begging to be claimed.

She squeals again as I plant my lips on one of her breasts, sucking the nipple into my mouth, biting it and flicking it with my tongue.

I want to taste these breasts when they are flowing with milk. I must breed her and make her ripe with my child.

As I crouch lower, I am forced to remove my hand from her mouth, and a stream of panicked words come tumbling out from between her lips. Her speech is strange, similar to my own, but highly accented.

The only word I can understand is “please.”

Whether she is begging me to stop or to continue, it matters not. My inflamed balls are in control now. I’m going to ravage her hot little cunt whether she likes it or not.

I press my face against her center and inhale her raw scent straight from the source. The smell of her heat sends an intense pulse of violent lust coursing through my veins. My skin prickles. My hard cock drools precum beneath my furs.

The only thing separating me from her needy hole is this thin white cloth that is sopping with her slick.

I reach to tear it away.

Before I can manage to do so, there is a sharp whistling sound almost like an arrow. Something stings my shoulder.

My first thought is that it is an ambush by the far-lander Alphas. Those wretched corruptions are primitive, typically fighting with sticks and stones. But they have been known to use crude arrows from time to time.

However, as I twist to look, I see that it is a dart that has struck me. It is totally unlike the ones that are sometimes used to hunt small game with blowguns. This dart is made of shiny metal,

like the artifacts left behind by the ancestors. Where its tip penetrates my flesh, I feel a searing pain. Then numbness.

My arm falls limp. My muscles grow weak and loose. I slump to the ground with a grunt. The beta lets out a demented laugh.

The last thing I see, before darkness enfolds me is the beautiful auburn-haired omega staring down at me in silent fear.

CHAPTER 5: LILY

My mind is reeling as I try to process everything that just happened.

It's an Alpha. A real Alpha.

I knew that we might encounter one on this expedition. But I certainly didn't expect it would be like this.

Now, actually seeing one face to face, it's almost surreal. Then again, when you are stripped to your underwear and chained to a fucking tree, *most* things seem a bit surreal.

And describing that encounter as face to face is a bit of an understatement. Just a moment ago, his bulky, hyper-masculine body was pressed so tightly against mine that I felt like he would crush me against this tree. My back sings with pain from the way the rough bark scraped me.

What's even weirder is the way my body responded to him, crying out for his aggressive touch. A cool breeze ghosts over my chest where he tore my bra open, and I realize that my nipples are almost painfully stiff with arousal. Beneath my panties, the bud of my clitoris is equally erect.

I've never had that kind of direct contact with another living being before. His musky scent surrounded me. I could feel every bulge and ripple of his muscles, so hard they felt like they were carved from granite.

And his muscles weren't the only thing that was hard. His erection was pressing against me through his primitive clothing. I could feel the heat emanating off of it. All I can say is that it's a good thing Deakon fired that tranq dart when he did. If the beastly Alpha had tried to put that big thing inside me, it would have surely split me in two.

Speaking of troopers, they have come out of their hiding spots now. They are both striding down the grassy hillside, approaching from opposite directions, rifles on shoulders.

"Good shot, Deak," Chappel shouts.

They may have saved my life, but I'm not at all grateful. After all, they're the ones who put me into this situation. And as frightening as he is, I know that the Alpha couldn't help himself. He may look like a human, but I know from my studies that he is just a wild animal, driven by primal urges.

But as I gaze down at his unconscious body, I can't help noticing that he doesn't fit the descriptions I've read in my text books.

Sure, he is bulky, his body covered in thick, powerful muscles. And yes, he is savage in appearance, his hair longish and wild like a mane. However, all of the sources I have read describe the Alphas as hideous. Terrifying mutants with twisted features.

The man lying on the ground before me certainly doesn't fit that description. His face is hyper-masculine, with a heavy bone structure, stern brow, and strong, angular jaw. He has numerous piercings—several through the lobes and cartilage

of his ears and one large steel ring through his septum. These heighten his look of primitive ferocity.

But his features are handsome. Beautiful even. There is a faint animalism to his broad nose and his lips pressed forward by his overdeveloped canines. However, his face also bears an aesthetic symmetry, like a masterpiece of sculpture, and his bronze skin has a healthy glow that I've never seen on a hive dweller.

And then there's the way those intelligent, speckled gray eyes stared at me hungrily.

He is primal, feral. But he is also beautiful, the way a wild tiger must be beautiful.

And my captors want to put him in a cage.

"Hurry up, Chappel," Deakon shouts to his fellow trooper.

"We need to get this fucker restrained before he wakes up."

The two soldiers approach from either side. They don't pay me and Sara any more mind than they would a couple of pieces of meat hanging from hooks.

I'm just bait. They're only interested in what they've caught.

Both men crouch, and with a grunt they roll the Alpha onto his stomach.

"Leave him alone!" I shout, uncertain of what caused that sudden outburst.

As Chappel sets to work restraining the unconscious Alpha's hands behind his back, Deakon turns and laughs at me.

“Don’t tell me you’re already in love with this monster,” he says nastily.

I hate him for the way he’s mocking me, but there’s a part of me that agrees with him. Why should I care what happens to this Alpha? The creature certainly wouldn’t have shown me any mercy if Deakon had not tranquilized him.

Still, I can’t deny that I feel some strange, primal bond.

That Alpha may not be human, but neither am I. I’m an omega now. An animal.

“What are we going to do with them?” Chappel nods toward me and Sara as he struggles to fit a heavy shackle around one of the Alpha’s wrists. “We can’t take them back with us. That one’s braindead, and the omega knows too much.”

I scream as the sudden bark of a pistol startles me. The sound echoes around the little valley and the surrounding woods.

“That takes care of the beta,” Deakon chuckles cruelly.

Blue smoke curls from the muzzle of the pistol in Deakon’s hand. Dark blood runs down Sara’s body from the wound in her chest where he shot her. Her weight hangs limp in her chains.

She’s dead.

I start to cry. Tears roll down my cheeks. Even though I didn’t know Sara too well, I feel heartbroken for the awful way her life has ended.

And I don’t expect my ending to be much better.

“Deakon. Chappel. Come in,” Bishop’s voice growls over the comm unit. “We heard a gunshot.”

Deakon presses the comm button on the side of his helmet.

“Yeah, boss, we’re all good here. The Alpha is tranquilized. We’re just bundling him up now. The shot you heard was the beta.”

“Good. You know what to do with the omega.”

Deakon approaches me. His breath is heavy and ragged through the air filter on his mask. Though they are hidden by his tinted visor, I can feel his eyes wandering over my body, lingering on my bared breasts where the beast tore my bra open. His breath hitches as he sees my swollen, erect nipples. The trooper licks his lips, the disgusting sound amplified by his voice unit.

“Such a shame to let a piece of meat like this go to waste,” he rasps. “If we had a little more time, I’d love to play with her.”

“Yeah, well we don’t have time,” Chappel mutters as he continues struggling with the Alpha’s restraints. “We’ll have to leave her. Now quit fucking around and help me with this.”

Deakon grunts.

“Leave her?” He raises his pistol and points the still smoking muzzle right at my face. “Fine. But I’m the jealous type. I’m not gonna leave this sweet little thing for some other Alpha to ravage. I’m gonna put her out of her misery.”

Deakon's finger slowly squeezes the trigger. I cringe and press my eyes shut in fear.

"Well if you're gonna do it, hurry up and do it," Chappel's voice calls. "Kill the bitch and—"

What happens next is almost too fast to process.

There is a snarl and a sharp crack like splintering wood followed by the most blood-curdling cry of agony that I've ever heard. But those shrieks are cut short by a sickening crunch.

I snap my eyes open, and I instantly regret doing so. Chappel's mangled body lies on the ground. The air is thick with the metallic scent of the blood oozing from the horrific compound fracture to his upper arm. His helmet is dented in, and more blood is dripping from his cracked visor like thick wine.

My first thought is that the tranquilized beast has woken up prematurely. But the Alpha standing over Chappel's mangled, bleeding corpse is different. He is dressed in a similar, primitive loincloth, but his is made of gray wolf fur. His body is broader and stockier, his scalp is shorn bald, and his jaw is grizzled with a gray-streaked beard.

This Alpha is pierced too, in his ears and most prominently through his left eyebrow.

His muscles are so tense and straining beneath his tight skin that I can see every striation, every popped vein.

"Kill!" the bearded Alpha roars.

Amazing. He can speak. His guttural voice is heavily accented, but I can still understand him.

Deakon wheels around, swinging his heavy pistol from me to the second Alpha. The pistol barks once, twice, three times, but the shots miss their mark as the Alpha deftly rolls out of the way, and Deakon is tackled hard from the side by a shadowy blur.

“Deakon! Chappel!” a voice breaks over the comm unit lying on the ground by Chappel. “What the fuck is going on out there?”

But Deakon cannot answer. He is pinned beneath a third alpha with smooth, dark skin, long, raven black hair, and a loincloth of sable fur. The trooper howls in pain as the feral beast claws at his body and slams him against the ground.

There is a nauseating pop as his spine breaks and his cries are silenced. The Alpha tosses the dead soldier’s body aside in disgust and rises to his feet.

“Kill,” the third Alpha mutters.

Although he is enormous compared to an ordinary man, his stature is smaller than the other two Alphas. His skin is smoother, less marked by scars of teeth and claws. His features, while hard and masculine, have a kind of elegant beauty. His eyes are midnight blue.

This younger Alpha has fewer piercings than his companions, but the one that catches my eye is a steel ring that curves around the middle of his sensuous lower lip. When I glance

lower at his muscled chest, I notice that one of his nipples is pierced as well.

These Alphas may be primitive, but they are hardly the inhuman beasts I expected.

“Oh my God,” I gasp as I look around at the carnage.

These Alphas’ appearances may not fit the descriptions I’ve read, but the brutal way they just killed those men sure does. Even more incredible is the speed with which they dispatched them.

The two standing Alphas flick their eyes toward Sara’s lifeless body. Then they turn toward me, and I shiver. Am I next?

“Omega,” the young one growls, a faint smile curling at his pierced lips.

They really can speak, although their linguistic skills are apparently primitive. It seems they are only capable of single-word utterances.

The rough looking one with the bald head cocks his pierced eyebrow and says something incomprehensible in a gravelly voice. He gestures to his fallen comrade on the ground. The younger one stoops and drags the tranquilized Alpha onto his shoulders, carrying him like a fireman. He must be incredibly strong, considering that his unconscious companion is bigger than him.

He nods toward me.

“Omega...”

The burly, bald Alpha stalks toward me and clutches me with his huge, calloused hands. The same hands that just savagely killed Chappel. He tugs at me, trying to carry me away, but my chains instantly pull taut. The edges of my shackles bite into my tender wrists. I'm afraid he might just rip my arms out of their sockets.

“Stop!” I scream. “Stop it! You're hurting me!”

To my surprise, the Alpha does stop. He turns and looks at me. His dark eyes move to the shackles and the taut chains binding me to the tree. The young one gestures to the iron spike holding the chain in place and grunts a few syllables in his crude dialect.

The bald one huffs and snorts like an angry grizzly bear, but he sets me down, his eyes blazing with fury as he looks at the metal spike holding the chain in place.

Bishop's voice bursts over the dead trooper's comm units again.

“Deakon, Chappel, come in! What is your situation? Do you copy?”

Part of me wishes that Bishop would come and save me from these monsters. Of course, I know that he would just kill me the way Deakon was about to do. But maybe a bullet to the head would be better than whatever these feral Alphas have in mind.

With a grunt, the bald Alpha reaches over my head to clasp the metal ring nailed into the tree. His body presses against mine,

his hard chest squished against my face. With his arms raised, his thick, overwhelming scent fills my nose. It should be disgusting. It's body odor after all.

So why does my body thrill at that heady smell? Why do my sore nipples tighten? Why does my swollen sex pulse with desire?

The nail end of the metal spike creaks as the Alpha wriggles it free from the wood. With a sharp yank, it pulls out. A normal man would have needed a sledgehammer and crowbar to get that nail freed, but this guy just did it with his bare hands. Amazing.

Not a guy, I remind myself. A beast. A wild animal.

I shriek as he tosses me over his muscular shoulder and lopes toward the woods at an incredible speed. My hands are still shackled, the chain jangling against his thick back. The other Alpha with long dark hair runs after us, his companion slung across his shoulders.

Behind us, I catch sight of Bishop and Dr. Lucian coming out of the treeline at the rim of the basin. Bishop raises his rifle and fires. The projectile whistles overhead, far too close for comfort. He obviously has no concern for saving my life. It's the Alphas that he wants.

But it's too late. Within moments we have slipped into the shadows of the forest, and my fate is sealed.

PART TWO:
THE ALPHAS

CHAPTER 6: KADMON

The air inside the cave is cool. From the subterranean depths comes the echoes of trickling water. But here, near the mouth of the cave, the stones are still dry enough for sleeping, so we chose this place as our camp during this trek into the far lands.

Addom is still slumbering from the outsiders poisonous dart. I set him onto his bed of straw and leaves, relieved to have his massive frame off my shoulders at last. Though I am young, I am big for an Alpha. Addom, however, is absolutely massive, and carrying his dead weight through the uneven terrain of the forest is enough to exhaust even me.

He is unconscious, but his life signs are healthy. His breathing and heartbeat are steady and strong.

Hasker is farther inside. By the dim light filtering in through the mouth of the cave, I watch him stoop and place the omega onto another bed of leaves and moss. She scrambles away from him, and the long iron chain still binding her wrists rattles.

She says something in her strange outsider dialect.

“She’s afraid,” I call to Hasker.

Hasker is crouching on his heels, arms resting on his knees as he eyes the girl. He turns and looks at me over his shoulder.

“No shit,” he growls.

His pupils are blown, widened into circles of near total blackness. I know that mine are too. It's not just an adjustment to the dimness of the cave. We're both feeling the rut, and we're feeling it bad. The omega's heat-scent was strong before, but within the confines of this cave it's nearly overwhelming.

My cock is painfully hard, throbbing with the need to sate itself inside her sweltering cunt. But I have to restrain my urges.

This little omega is for Addom to claim. It is him who found her, and he is the leader of our pack. Hasker and I will have to wait our turn. This is our way.

"She may be scared, but she's also an outsider." Hasker snarls. He gestures toward her shackles. "And bait for a trap, no less."

His voice is thick with pent up aggression. I know he despises the outsiders from beyond the wall, and I know he has good reason to, as well.

"She's not an outsider anymore," I tell him, keeping my voice respectful.

Hasker bares his teeth, and I bow my head in deference.

He is my elder by nearly twenty years, and he is Addom's second. Therefore, I must give him my respect. But part of that respect involves reminding him of the truth. The girl may have been an outsider when the sun rose today, but now she is an omega. Now she is one of us.

Hasker runs his hand over his shorn skull and turns back toward the omega.

“What’s yer name?”

The omega cringes back against the stony wall. Her breath is short and shallow, her muscles shivering and jangling her chains. Her eyes are two wide circles of fear brimming with tears.

But her pupils are dilated too. Her irises are wire-thin circles of hazel around their black centers. She may be afraid, but she’s also in heat.

“Name?” Hasker draws the word out very slowly this time.

The omega struggles to speak. The way that her plush, pink lower lip trembles with fear causes my hard dick to buck beneath my fur loincloth. A bit of precum dribbles down my shaft.

At last the omega manages to answer.

“Lily,” she says. A tear rolls down her cheek. “My name is Lily.”

Now that she isn’t frantically shouting, I’m able to understand her, despite her unusual accent. Lily. A strange name. An outsider name.

“I am Hasker,” my companion says slowly, gesturing toward his chest. Then he points to me. “He is Kadmon.”

His voice is rough and gravelly. I can hear that he is struggling to restrain his warring urges. Part of him wants to kill the

omega, just as he wishes to kill all those who live beyond the wall. But an even greater part of him wants to fall upon this little omega and ravage her fragrant little cunt until she is overflowing with his seed.

But we must wait for Addom. That is the law of our tribe.

Fuck, I hope he wakes up soon.

The omega's eyes dart back and forth between me and Hasker. Her chains clink as she raises her arms, covering her bare, pink nipples. She is wearing strange, thin clothing to cover her loins, but the outsider fabric does little to obscure her raw, needy scent.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asks, her voice weak with fear.

Hasker glances at Addom, where he lies snoring on his bed of straw, then turns back to Lily. He addresses me, but he keeps his eyes on the female.

“She's in heat,” he grunts, as if I weren't painfully aware of that fact. My balls are so heavy with cum they feel like they might explode if I don't release soon.

“I know,” I answer, “But Addom has the right to first claim. And he clearly intended to take her at the tree.”

Hasker nods.

“Aye, but if we don't do something with her now, her heat-stink will draw every Alpha for miles around. We're not in our home territory. We'll have a hell of a brawl on our hands.”

“Let them come,” I snarl aggressively. When the omega gasps and cringes, I soften my tone. “Let them come. We’re stronger than these Alphas of the far lands, Hasker.”

Hasker chuckles coldly.

“Your balls have grown big, young’un, but your brains have got some catching up to do. With the boss out of commission, we’d be wise to avoid a fight.”

He’s right of course. Before long, the omega’s heat smell will have filled the whole forest. We could have dozens, maybe even hundreds of far-lander Alphas descending on the cave.

“Then what will we do?” I ask.

Hasker palms his bare scalp again, thinking.

“Hold her down, boy.”

The omega squeals as I approach her. She squeezes against the rock wall again. There’s no where for her to run. Hasker and I have her cornered.

“Please,” she begs. “Don’t hurt me.”

But as I get closer, her timid attitude turns defensive. Her lips curl back to reveal her teeth and she growls. She clasps her long chain in her tiny delicate fists as if to threaten me with it as a weapon.

I laugh, and even Hasker can’t help but chuckle behind me.

“See,” I tell him, not taking my eyes off the feral omega. “I told you she is one of us.”

I move cautiously toward her, making no sudden movements that might spook her. I'm not afraid of the omega of course. I could rend her limb from limb if it came to it. But at the same time, I'm none too eager to feel her bite.

Not yet, anyway. That will come later.

"We're not gonna hurt you," Hasker growls as I take hold of her. Then to me he adds. "Lay her down on her back."

With a quick, darting movement, I seize the chain and pull her toward me so her back is against my front. Kneeling on the bed of straw, I cradle the omega in my lap. Her growling stops, but her muscles are tense. She gasps as she feels the hard steel of my cock pressing against her back through my loincloth. She squirms and struggles, but I hold her arms tightly.

"Easy, little one," I soothe her in a gentle but firm voice.

Hasker takes up position in front, grabbing her delicate ankles. His loincloth is tented by his hard cock. His breathing is ragged. His restraint is incredible. It takes every bit of willpower that he has not to claim her here and now with his aching cock.

"What are you going to do to me?" Lily whimpers.

"I'm going to tend to your need."

CHAPTER 7: LILY

While the younger guy with the long dark hair, the one named Kadmon, holds my upper body against his lap, the other guy, Hasker takes hold of my legs.

Not guys, I remind myself. Alphas.

They may look like humans on the outside, but inside they are beasts.

Then again, I was just growling at them. I'm a beast now too, whether I like it or not.

Hasker begins to spread my legs apart, revealing the growing stain at the crotch of my panties.

"No," I shout. "Stop, we shouldn't do this!"

"You're in heat," he growls.

His accent is guttural. Nearly incomprehensible. His people have been separated from the civilized world for so long that their dialect has diverged from standard speech, but I can understand him if I focus.

The thing is, focusing is not easy to do when these two brutes are putting their hands all over my skin.

And Hasker is right, I *am* in heat. My body sings wherever these men touch my flesh. My nipples tighten and ache with raw need as I remember the way the other Alpha, the one named Addom, sucked on them earlier. My sex pulses inside my shamefully wet panties, begging to be filled.

Even the long chain that is still bound to my wrists excites me. My skin tingles at the feeling of the smooth, cool iron links pulling across my tummy as I writhe against my captors.

This is wrong. This is so fucking wrong.

God, some nihiloxin would come in handy right about now. Something to help me detach from the situation. No such luck though. My tablets got left behind in my satchel in the transport vehicle. I'm going to have to go into this with my eyes wide open. I'm going to experience every touch, every smell.

"Don't fight," Kadmon says behind me.

I tilt my head back to look up into his face. He is clearly the youngest of the three. His skin is less scarred, and his face, while decidedly masculine, has slightly more delicate features than his companions. If I were to guess, I would say he is around the same age as me, if not even younger.

Hasker, on the other hand, is very different. He is the most sturdily built. His squarish head is shaved and covered with battle scars. Even the piercing in his eyebrow is thicker and more brutal looking than the others. There is nothing delicate about Hasker.

And there is nothing delicate about the way he suddenly tears away my panties, ripping the fabric in two and leaving me totally exposed down below.

"Wait!" I gasp. "Don't look!"

I clamp my knees together, but it's no use. The Alpha is inhumanly strong, and he easily pries my legs apart, spreading them until the tendons of my inner thighs ache from stretching.

He can see all of me. And he can see how desperately my body needs to be touched.

“By the Source, that's one sweet little cunt,” He groans as something long and hard bucks beneath his fur loincloth.

Before today, the only people to see me naked were a few female doctors. All work and no play has meant pretty much no love life for me. But now I am totally exposed and open in front of a male. An Alpha male. He can see everything—not just the cleft of my outer lips, but my wet pink inner frills as well. He can even see my hungry hole, aching to be shamefully filled by his hard, hot flesh and drenched in his potent semen.

Now I'm completely naked and at the mercy of these two rough Alphas. Well, not completely naked, I remind myself as I feel the cold steel bound around my wrists. Somehow that just makes this even dirtier.

I gasp on an inhale as Hasker's rough, calloused hands slide down my moist thighs until they reach my center.

“Her cunt is practically weeping,” Hasker grunts, and he slides his thumb between my wet folds.

“Please,” I moan as he rubs me. “Oh god, please...”

I toss my head back and forth in Kadmon's lap as his companion continues to stroke me. Hasker swipes some of my

wetness onto my stiff nubbin before rolling it beneath the pad of his thumb.

“Fuck, she’s sensitive,” Hasker rasps.

“I don’t need the commentary,” Kadmon replies softly.

When I look up at him, I’m surprised to see that he has turned his face away to the stone wall of the cave, his teeth worrying the steel ring piercing his lower lip. At first I think he’s jealous of his companion. But then it dawns on me what is happening.

He’s not jealous. He’s simply trying to hold back his urges. The hot, stiff pole beneath my head makes it clear that he’s having a hard time with that.

“Hey, boy,” Hasker snarls, “This isn’t any easier for me. Now lend a hand so we can finish her off faster.”

Kadmon grunts his assent. The younger Alpha’s hands begin to move over my body too. He pulls away the remnants of my tattered bra and tosses it aside. He grabs my naked breasts, squeezing and kneading my soft mounds. He flicks and strums my hard nipples, sending electric tingles of arousal through my body.

The way he looks at me, his eyes filled with raw hunger is terrifying and thrilling. I’ve never been looked at this way before. I’ve never been needed so badly by a man.

Beast, I remind myself again. Not man. Beast.

“Does that feel good?” Kadmon asks, gazing down at me.

“Mm-hm,” I hum and nod, feeling his stiff cock springy beneath my head.

Meanwhile, Hasker continues drawing tight circles around my tender clit with the ball of his thumb, occasionally dipping to my slit to gather more of the moisture that’s oozing from me. He is focused on my pussy like a craftsman. He is all business.

I couldn’t understand much of what passed between Kadmon and Hasker before, but I caught enough to understand that Hasker doesn’t like me too much.

Nevertheless, he’s making me feel pleasure like I’ve never experienced in all my life.

“Oh fuck,” I cry out, “Please don’t stop! That feels so fucking good!”

I clap one hand over my mouth in disbelief at the obscenities that are tumbling out of me. I can’t believe the way that I’m actually begging these filthy Alpha beasts to touch me and probe my body.

Kadmon snickers wickedly, and jerks my hand away from my mouth.

“Say it,” Hasker grunts down below, his face serious and intense. It’s like he is punishing me with pleasure so intense it hurts. “Say what you want, omega.”

“I wanna come,” I whine. “I wanna come so fucking bad, please...”

I toss my head back and mewl as Hasker torments my poor, sensitive clit even more roughly. I’m so desperate for release

that I feel as though I could burst into flames. My chains rattle as my body squirms. My fingers clutch at Kadmon's naked thighs, my nails biting into his smooth muscles.

"That's right," Kadmon purrs. "Come like a good little omega."

His fingers brush my lips, and my tongue darts out, tasting the salty tang of his skin.

"Come," he commands me.

My body shudders as my climax jolts me. My body jerks and spasms. Weak, whimpering sounds escape my nose as my lips wrap around Kadmon's thumb. And all the while, Hasker refuses to let up, his strong thumb relentlessly grinding my throbbing bud.

Moisture jets between my legs as I climax.

"More," I beg, drawing my lips off of Kadmon's thick thumb.

"I need more. Please give me more."

My voice is so needy and demanding. Just one masterful touch is all it took, and now I'm hopelessly addicted. I'm no better than a feral animal. I'm a dog in heat, begging to be used again and again until I'm limp and panting with exhaustion.

"She needs more," Kadmon growls. "Her heat is too strong. We must fuck her,"

Hasker snarls and scowls at the younger Alpha. That sign of aggression should make me cower in fear, but instead it just sends a thousand little shivers of desire wriggling through my veins.

“You know the laws,” Hasker grumbles. “Addom is the pack master. He holds the right to first claim.”

Kadmon growls back, but he concedes.

I feel a twinge of disappointment that I’ll not be speared right now by both of those hard poles. But that feeling is immediately washed away by a flood of shame that I could even consider wanting something so dirty. So sinful.

Still, that soft tickling sensation like a feather inside tells me what I need.

And Hasker already knows. His thick fingers are sliding again between the petals of my inner lips to tease at my opening.

“Touch me,” I beg, my voice dripping with need, “Touch me inside.”

Both Alphas growl approvingly. Kadmon’s left hand never stops roving over my skin, squeezing my breasts and pinching the stiff, pink peaks of my nipples. His left hand caresses my face. His fingers circle my lips while Hasker’s fingers circle my opening below.

“Oh fuck!” I blurt as Hasker pushes one fingertip inside me. But I’m immediately silenced as Kadmon slips one of his own fingers into my mouth. I instinctively begin sucking him submissively as I gaze up into his midnight blue eyes.

Hasker turns his fingertip in my pussy, rubbing it around the rim of my tight hole and stretching me a little wider. He slides his finger deeper, and I feel him stroking and tickling my soft, wet inner tissue.

It's beyond sinful. To be touched by a man is one thing. But to have two of them *inside* me, one above and one below. It's completely beyond the pale.

And it's exactly what my body needs.

My eyes flick back and forth between rough, angry Hasker, who is fingering my hitherto untouched pussy, and Kadmon, who is fucking my lips with his finger.

I whine and mewl while Hasker continues fucking me with his finger. He pushes another finger inside me, spreading them like a V to stretch my opening wider still.

"She's so fucking tight," he growls.

"She'll need a lot of work, this little one," Kadmon muses.

I have a sudden intuition that these talented Alphas are training me. Preparing me. Breaking me in to be penetrated and stretched in ways that my virgin flesh is not yet ready to handle.

My lips make a satisfying smack as Kadmon slides his finger out of my mouth. He dips his head, and his silky black hair drapes and sweeps over my face and neck. His mouth meets mine in a kiss. The hard metal of his piercing stimulates my tender, sensitive lips.

At the same time, between my legs, savage Hasker gives me a different kind of kiss. With his two fingers buried deep, his surprisingly soft lips brush against my clit. He kisses me there, sucking my bud into his mouth to bite it softly and strum it with the tip of his tongue.

I moan and sob with ecstasy, but the sounds are lost into Kadmon's mouth.

His tongue enters me. It rolls against my own, curling against it, soft and raspy. The slip of his wet lips melts me, and his hard steel piercing excites me.

The double attention of these two men is unbearable. Another intense climax is welling in my core, and I realize what I felt before was only a prelude. The oncoming orgasm looms and swells like a tidal wave.

Part of me wants to cry out for them to stop. I'm afraid my body won't be able to survive what's coming.

But Kadmon's lips are clamped tightly over mine, stifling any cries as Hasker continues torturing me inside and out with his wicked tongue and fingers.

My channel swells around him, clenching on his digits like a vice. But Hasker is too strong for my pussy. He forces a third finger into me, scooping at my front wall until my orgasm finally erupts, gushing him with my nectar.

My toes curl and contort. My nails dig into the meat of Kadmon's thighs, breaking the skin.

He pulls his mouth away from mine, our lips bridged by silver threads of wetness. I drink the air in great sobbing gasps. His strong arms bind my convulsing body as my climax rumbles through me like a thunderstorm. Lightning fills my vision.

I beg for Hasker to stop. It's more pleasure than I can handle. More pleasure than I ever thought possible.

But he shows me no mercy. He continues working my pussy over, tearing and sucking one orgasm after another from between my slick and quivering thighs. The climaxes roll over me like waves, tumbling me in a churning surf of pure bliss until at last my slack and helpless body washes up on a shore of emptiness and exhaustion.

I lie limp in Kadmon's lap, the cold metal chain draped across my twitching midsection. I want nothing. I need nothing. Hasker has wrung every last drop from me and then some. They have broken me.

* * *

Kadmon pats my cheek, rousing me from my daze. I stare blankly into his handsome face.

He and Hasker pass some words in their thick brogue that I cannot understand. They are making no effort to speak clearly for me, and I'm in no shape to concentrate. God, they pleased me right to death's door.

Hasker rises with a grunt like a workman rising from his labor and strides toward the entrance of the cavern, his bulky body blocking out the sunlight, head ducking the chunky stalactites of the stony ceiling.

I mutter and gurgle, my lips unable to form words. Kadmon gathers my shivering, naked body in his arms, and I curl up against his hard muscles, absorbing his extraordinary body heat.

The hard metal of his nipple ring brushes against me, giving me a sexy tingle.

He mutters things that I don't understand, but the deep masculine purr of his voice lulls me. I feel happy and sated. Completely fulfilled and completely empty.

When I shift my butt, his iron hard cock prods me and he grunts. That massive member is still concealed beneath his primitive clothing, but even through the coarse furs I can feel the hardness of him, and the incredible heat.

Without thinking, I reach down and grip his fur-bound shaft. I stroke him softly, wondering at his length and girth.

He groans, but gently pulls my hand aside.

I look at him in surprise.

These men have me here alone, naked, and totally helpless. They could easily overpower me should I try to fight or flee. Hell, they could overpower a grizzly bear, let alone a nerdy research assistant who spends half her life with her nose pressed to a flickering computer screen.

“You aren't...you aren't going to fuck me?” I ask.

Even I'm not sure if that lilt in my voice is from surprise or disappointment.

“No,” Kadmon says simply.

He plucks a stray lock from my cheek and sets it behind my ear with the others. He speaks slowly and clearly so that I can comprehend.

“Addom is the one who found you. And he is our pack master. You belong to him now. You are his to claim by right. But Hasker and I will care for you until he wakes from the outsider’s poison.”

Claim? Belong? I don’t know how I feel about those words, but I’m too weak and tired to argue about it now.

Kadmon pets me, smoothing my hair with his gentle palms. I saw him *kill* with those hands. Just hours earlier, I saw him kill.

And that’s when I remember what happened to Sara.

The troopers killed her. They exposed her to the omega contamination. They turned her into a slaving beta. And when she served no purpose for them, they put a bullet through her heart without so much as blinking an eye. And I know that the same thing must have happened to my friend Eva.

These Alphas who are holding me captive now may be animals. But those men who killed Sara are something much worse.

They are human.

“Don’t cry, little omega,” Kadmon says when he sees that I’m crying.

“Stop calling me that,” I say. “My name is Lily.”

He gently thumbs away the fat tears rolling down my cheeks. My eyes ache. My mouth is bitter from crying. Kadmon holds

me firmly and I clutch his body, grateful to have someone, anyone, to hold on to.

“Lily,” he says in a hushed voice. “What’s the matter?”

I sniff back my tears and rub my nose.

“Sara,” I tell him, trying to keep my voice from cracking so he can understand me. “The other woman. They killed her.”

His brow knits with confusion, and I think that he has not understood my words, but then realization blooms on his face.

“The woman chained to the tree with you?” he asks. “The mindless one?”

“She wasn’t mindless,” I tell him. “She wasn’t like that before. She was a normal woman before. No, not normal. She was really bright, and she worked hard, and she was a good person. She only became a beta because they exposed her to the omega contamination.”

I can tell he’s struggling to follow what I’m saying. They have different terms on this side of the wall. But he gets the gist of it.

“This woman. Sara. She was your friend.”

“Yes,” I tell him. “Well, no. Not exactly. I didn’t know her that well. But I know she was a good person. And she didn’t deserve what happened to her. Nobody deserves that.”

I begin sobbing again, and he hugs me closer. A deep purring sound rolls from his throat, and I realize he is trying to soothe me. Surprisingly, it seems to be working.

“We can’t leave her like that,” I say. “Kadmon, we can’t just leave her hanging from that tree for the animals to eat her.”

He shakes his head.

“We can’t go back there, Lily. It’s not safe. There were other men there. I heard them shouting and shooting at us as we left. They could still be there.”

I sigh. I know that he’s right, but I can’t stand the idea of Sara just hanging from that tree for the animals to eat. It’s too horrible to even think about.

“She at least deserves a proper burial,” I mutter. “After all she was put through, she at least deserves that small dignity.”

“You have a big heart, Lily.”

His blue eyes are clear and deep, and I can feel the sympathy inside of him. Perhaps I’ve been wrong about the Alphas all this time. There seems to be much more tenderness and compassion inside them than I expected.

At least that seems to be the case for young Kadmon. Hasker is another story.

Kadmon inspects the shackles around my wrists and the long chain between them.

“Let’s get these off of you,” he whispers.

He takes me off his lap and sets me on the soft bedding of dry grass and moss, which is remarkably comfortable considering how beyond primitive it is.

The metal spike that was used to bind the chain to the tree trunk is still wedged through the hole of a link in the middle of the chain. With a bit of work, Kadmon manages to wiggle it free. He gathers two large stones from the floor of the cave. One of these he sets on the ground beside us, and he positions my wrist so that the chain near the shackle is draped over the stone.

“I need you to hold still, okay? Don’t flinch.”

He places the spike against the chain, and using the other rock as a crude hammer, he begins banging away at it. The sounds of stone and steel resonate through the cave.

I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but after several hard strikes, the chain link is beginning to bend and degrade where Kadmon is hammering it with the stone. Only now do I begin to understand just how strong these Alphas are.

Stronger than stone. Stronger than steel.

That should frighten me, but instead it makes me feel safe.

Until Hasker returns, that is.

“Hey,” the older Alpha growls. “Cut out that racket, boy. You want the whole zone to know we’re here?”

The rough, bearded Alpha is returning from the mouth of the cave, stepping carefully over the rocky floor. His hands are working at his loincloth, tying it back in place. Was he just relieving himself outside? He was gone for an awfully long time.

“We need to get these chains off of her,” Kadmon says.

Hasker just scowls and shakes his head.

“Give ’er here, boy,” Hasker says brusquely. He nods toward the hard pole tenting Kadmon’s loincloth. “Take care of yer need outside.”

Kadmon exhales reluctantly. He hands me over to Hasker the way someone would hand off a cat. Now it’s his turn to head to the cave mouth. Hasker holds me as we watch Kadmon go.

The young Alpha glances back at me briefly on his way out of the cave.

Need. Hasker told him to take care of his need.

Now I understand. He’s going outside to spill his pent up seed on the ground because he’s not allowed to spill it inside of me. Not yet anyway. As far as they are concerned, I belong to their boss.

I’m still not too keen on that notion—being owned, being someone’s property.

“Get some rest,” Hasker commands.

He props me against the wall, leaving Kadmon’s work on my chain unfinished.

CHAPTER 8: HASKER

What the hell is taking Kadmon so long?

I know the omega has him all wound up. Hell, she's having the same effect on me. I had to spill my load three times before my nuts stopped aching enough to come back inside the cave.

And now, even though I managed to subdue her heat-scent, it's still strong enough that I can feel my arousal swelling once more.

It angers me.

I don't want to feel this way about her.

She's a fucking outsider.

If it were up to me, we would have left her chained to that tree to rot. But it was clear that Addom had other plans for her, and as the second of the pack I am obligated to follow his lead.

The omega shifts nervously by the cavern wall, rattling the iron chain between her wrists. When I look at her, I catch her wild, hazel eyes glaring at me. Her pupils are still dilated, but not as much as before. She immediately drops her gaze.

I just wish Kadmon would get back from his wank so that he can go back to coddling the omega. I'm sick of being in her presence.

Quietly but deliberately, the omega reaches out and takes the stone that Kadmon was using earlier. She places her chained wrist against a sharp, stony protrusion on the cave floor, and

then hammers weakly with the rock, as if that could possibly have any effect.

I snort. I'm tempted to laugh out loud at how ridiculous it is. But after about a minute, it becomes annoying as hell.

"Stop that," I grunt.

Her eyes flash toward mine, and a sudden unwanted pulse of desire throbs in my veins. There's no denying that she is beautiful. Her soft curves are aching to be squeezed. Her long curls begging to be wound around my knuckles. One rosy pink nipple peeks out at me, tense and springy with arousal.

She's afraid of me, but there is another emotion in those lovely, sparkling eyes as well.

Defiance.

After a moment's hesitation, she taps with the stone at her chains again.

I growl and lunge at her across the cave, and she squeals with fright. Earlier when she was cornered, she snarled and bared her teeth at Kadmon, but she knows better than to try that shit with me.

Still, she deliberately defies me. It's like she wants to be punished.

Well, I'll give her no such pleasure.

I wrest the stone out of her small, frail hand and fling it away. It clunks and clatters on the stone floor.

"I said stop that," I hiss angrily.

My face is close enough to hers that my words stir a few tendrils of rust red hair. She flinches, and her lip trembles with fear.

When I'm certain she has gotten the point, I settle back on my haunches.

But the omega insists on pissing me off.

She jangles her chains and mutters something in her ugly outsider dialect that I cannot understand.

“What?” I grunt.

She gives me that defiant look again. Even though she is so scared that her body is shaking, she clearly has courage, I'll give her that.

“I. Want. These. Chains. Off.”

She speaks in a patronizing tone that I don't like, pronouncing each syllable as if I were a child or an old woman.

“Too. Bad,” I tell her, mocking her accent.

When we take her back to the city, we can remove her shackles. We have the tools there for such things.

“Do you like keeping me chained up like an animal?”

Before she has a chance to retreat—before she even has a chance to blink—I'm on her with a snarl. I grab the thick iron chain in my fist and yank her narrow wrists forward.

“Don't talk to me of animals, outsider,” I snap. Hot rage is rising in my chest. “Your people are the ones who penned us inside these lands like beasts.”

She whimpers and tries to pull away, but I hold her chains tightly. I fist her hair, and she winces as I pull her head back. Part of me wants to tear this insolent outsider omega into shreds, though I know that would not heal the wounds her people left on my heart.

And another part of me wants to do something else with her altogether. I want to punish her and force her body into submission with my hard cock unloading inside her.

“Besides,” I growl as my fury starts to snowball. “I didn’t put you in these chains. This was the doing of your own people. Here in the zone we don’t use chains, neither for beasts nor for humans.”

I’m letting my emotions get the better of me. I shouldn’t be letting this omega rile me up this way, and the fact that she *is* riling me only serves to piss me off even more. I’m speaking too quickly and fiercely for her. Her face is a mixture of confusion and terror.

“Understand?” I growl stupidly, knowing full well that she could not have comprehended what I just said to her.

As she stares up at me, her eyes two big white saucers quivering with tears, I get a flashback. It’s not the outsider girl staring up at me anymore.

She is Talia. She is my mate.

The illusion is gone in an instant, but I can still see echoes of my mate in the outsider’s face, and the wound on my heart burns like it has been seared with a hot brand.

My savage roar booms through the cave. My hands seem to move of their own accord. I snatch up the iron spike and a nearby stone. The omega cringes away, thinking I mean her harm.

There is a sound of ringing metal and a spray of yellow sparks as I bring the stone down with all of my might on the top of the spike and the point of it shatters the chain link near her left wrist.

The omega cries out. Those tears that were wobbling in her eyes begin rolling down her face. She tries to scramble away but I catch her and pin her other wrist to the ground. With another hard strike and an explosion of sparks, I break the chain link at her other wrist.

The stone cracks in two.

“Hasker.” I whirl around ready to attack, but of course it is only Kadmon. “Hasker, what are you doing?”

He is coming toward us from the entrance of the cave. His hands are cupped together, and he is carrying something. His eyes dart toward the omega who is lying on the floor crying. The shackles are still around her wrists like a pair of ugly bracelets, but the chain at least has been broken. Kadmon kicks it away as he looks the omega up and down, breathing a sigh of relief when he sees that I have not harmed her.

Not physically, at least. But I gave her quite a fright.

“And you chastised *me* for making too much noise?” he says.

When he sees the pained look in my eyes, he decides not to press the issue.

He kneels beside the omega, and she clings to him. She sees him as the good one. Her protector. Meanwhile, I'm the enraged monster. That's fine with me.

At last I see what Kadmon is carrying in his hands.

Berries.

No wonder he was taking so long out there. He was out gathering berries for his new girlfriend. I can't blame him, of course. He has never had a woman before, and he is understandably excited about it. I was once like him, I remind myself.

I stalk off to the other side of the cave and settle against the wall, watching as the youngster gradually soothes the distraught omega. After a minute he gets her to sample some of the dark berries he picked for her. A few minutes later she is even smiling.

They look like me and Talia when I was young and she was still alive.

I leave the two young ones to enjoy each other's company. They are whispering about something that seems to be important, but I don't bother to listen in. Kadmon is well aware of his rank, and I know that I can trust him not to overstep.

I go to check on Addom. Although he is still unconscious, his vital signs are still strong. Hopefully he will be awake and

well enough to travel by the morning, and then we can return to the city. To the Source.

A minute later, Kadmon crouches beside me.

“How is he?” Kadmon asks.

“He’s well,” I tell him. “Just sleeping. By tomorrow he should be right again.”

Kadmon nods. I can feel him looking me over as if he is wondering how I am doing too. But he knows better than to ask.

“I’m going out,” he says after a while.

“These are the far lands,” I remind him. “The Alphas here don’t take kindly to visitors.”

Kadmon nods again. He glances over my shoulder at the omega.

“I know,” he says. “That’s why I’m going. I just want to scout the surrounding area. Make sure there are no enemy bands nearby. The omega’s scent has been repressed, at least for now, but I still want to make sure nobody is sneaking up on us.”

Scouting is not a bad idea. But I remember his overly bold words from before about taking on the far-lander Alphas.

“Be careful,” I warn him. “If you run into trouble, come straight back here. Don’t try to fight them all by yourself.”

Kadmon claps a hand on my shoulder and grins.

“I’m always careful, Hasker,” he beams.

Then he sets off, moving swift and quiet toward the entrance of the cave. He's a good stalker, that boy. He knows how to move without making a sound or leaving behind tracks for enemies to follow. He has learned well.

The omega is curled up in her little nest of weeds and moss by the cave wall, her back toward me.

I decide to lie down too. Soon it will be dark, and we'll need our rest for tomorrow's trek.

But as I get comfortable, something catches my eye—it is the sundered stone that I used to break the omega's chains. Once more my heart aches with pain. The old wound that has never healed.

CHAPTER 9: LILY

I wake from the deepest sleep of my life, feeling refreshed and alive in a way that I've never experienced before. My body feels charged with energy, but at the same time, I am totally calm, relaxed, and peaceful.

This must be what people mean when they talk about serenity.

But that good feeling immediately disappears into panic as I realize that I'm wedged between two snoring giants. That comfortable warmth that I'm experiencing? Yeah, that's coming from their hot breath and half-naked bodies.

Geez, these guys must have some kind of crazy metabolism because I know that the air in this cave is cool, but their bodies feel hot as a couple of furnaces.

As my eyes gradually adjust to the low light, I start to get my bearings.

The one lying in front of me is the leader. Addom. I can tell by the silhouette of his longish, curly hair. His muscular arm is draped over my shoulder, holding me like I'm his teddy bear. Does that mean he woke up at some point from his tranquilizer-induced coma?

I remember how he charged me at the tree. How he ripped my bra to shreds and sucked my breasts so hard it hurt. The memory sends a shiver through my body. I tell myself it's fear.

A rough beard scrubs against the nape of my neck, and hot breath tickles the back of my ear. I guess the big body spooning me from behind must be Hasker.

He's not nearly as handsome as the other two Alphas, at least not in a conventional sense, but that obviously hasn't hindered him with the ladies. Based on the explosive orgasm he gave me earlier, I'm sure it wasn't his first time exploring a female's anatomy.

I shiver as my muscles remember the shameful way my climaxes rippled through me. My sex pulses and my nipples tighten as I recall the way that he and Kadmon put their rough hands on my most private and sensitive places.

It was so freaking wrong.

So why did it feel so good?

I justify it by reminding myself that it had to be done. Now that I'm an omega, by no choice of my own, my scent would have brought an army of rabid Alphas down on us. And they wouldn't have been nearly as gentle as Hasker and Kadmon were.

Kadmon. The sensitive one. I wonder where he could be.

Careful not to disturb the sleeping Alphas, I raise my head and peer over Addom's thick shoulder. The cave is dark of course, but there's enough moonlight filtering in for me to see a little bit. A quick scan shows no sign of the younger Alpha.

I attune my ears, listening carefully to my surroundings. Two snoring Alphas. Water dripping somewhere, echoing through

stoney chambers. A slight breeze rustling the leaves outside. I lie back down.

I have to admit, I feel pretty safe like this. They've got me in a little Lily sandwich. I smirk and almost giggle, but then I get myself under control.

This is no time for joking around.

Fine, these guys saved me from the SynerGen security troopers. And Hasker took care of my "needs." He and Kadmon even showed considerable restraint by not actually... penetrating me. But that wasn't out of concern for me. They were acting in deference to their leader, Addom. And once he wakes up, all bets are off.

They may have quelled my heat temporarily, but it will be back.

I need to get out of here. I need to escape.

But where will I go? I'll just have to figure that out later. For now, I need to make my move while these two guys are snoozing.

Although Hasker broke the chain, the metal shackles are still attached to my wrists, so I take care not to jangle them against the stones. Moving slowly and carefully, I start to wriggle my body out from under Addom's big arm. In the process, my soft naked skin rubs against the hard muscles of their bare torsos, and I curse my traitorous body for the way it responds.

Then something pokes my butt, and I freeze, barely able to stifle the involuntary squeal that wants to slip out of my throat.

Oh. My. God.

Is that what I think it is?

In the course of our sleeping, Hasker's fur loincloth has become scrunched up, and a certain part of his male anatomy has come free. I can't see it, but I can sure feel it, like a blunt club nudging against the cleft of my bare tush.

But there's something else. Something harder even than his hard flesh. Slightly cool. It takes a moment for it to sink in.

He's pierced down below too.

My sex clenches involuntarily as an unbidden thought streaks across my mind: How would that hard piercing feel inside me? How would it abrade my tender inner tissues?

I can't let such thoughts distract me. I've got to keep going.

As I continue wiggling and squirming my way out of Addom's hug, my tushy brushes more and more against Hasker's impressive member. God it's so hard and hot, and I can feel all of the little veins and ridges as it slides against my crack.

My flesh heats, and my core clenches again as I realize exactly how long and thick that damn thing is.

I know from my studies that males typically get erections while they are sleeping, but I've never experienced it firsthand. I can only wonder what Hasker is dreaming about back there.

Addom seems to be dreaming too. He mumbles softly in his sleep and adjusts his body. As he does so, his loincloth shifts

too, and his stone-stiff cock comes swinging out like it's spring loaded, smacking me hard right between the legs.

I bite down on my bottom lip to stifle a gasp.

Can't a girl get a break around here?

I stare down at it in amazement. Even though it's dark in here, there is still just enough moonlight coming in from the mouth of the cave for me to see a little bit. Plus, I think my omega transformation may have improved my night vision because I can see much better than I ought to be able to.

Hasker's erection is still pressed against my butt from behind, and Addom's is wedged between my legs. He rocks his hips, rubbing his cockhead against me, and sending wild tingles shooting through my core. His tip drizzles a few drops of hot, sticky fluid onto my thigh, the prelude to his seed.

I choke back a whimper. My slit becomes slippery with arousal, and I struggle with a temptation to grind myself against that hard and drooling cock.

Get it together, Lily. You're supposed to be escaping, remember?

Fortunately, in his nocturnal shifting, Addom has loosened his grip with his arm. With a bit of shuffling and shimmying, I'm able to work my head from underneath his hug and sit up. I glance at Addom's face, which is blank with sleep. His piercings and hyper-masculine features give him the appearance of a slumbering demon. I turn to look at bearded Hasker, and he's definitely sleeping like a log too.

Good.

I stand up, saying goodbye to those two rock hard penises. Part of me is thankful that I'll never have to be penetrated by those beastly things.

It suddenly occurs to me that although Hasker quenched my heat, at least temporarily, my omega scent is probably pretty strong in this cave. That gives me the oddest little tingle of pride knowing that I gave these guys that feeling.

But it also reminds me what they plan to do to me with those terrifying members.

Yeah, it's time to get far away from here.

Crouching to avoid the bumps and jagged bits of the cave ceiling, I tiptoe toward the blueish circle of moonlight that is the mouth of the cave.

I still don't know where Kadmon has gone, and it occurs to me that he may be keeping watch, so I move cautiously and quietly.

Stepping out into the blue-tinged moonlit forest, I find myself surrounded by sounds that I have never heard before. I have only read about such things in scientific texts.

The first sound I notice is a strange buzzing that seems to come from every direction, the noise rising to a crescendo and then falling away in waves. Those must be cicadas singing in the trees. How fascinating.

There are other sounds too. The hooting of owls and the high pitched squeaking of bats, which I can see fluttering and

swooping overhead. And there is also the rustling of the soft night wind whispering through the leaves in the treetops.

These are sounds of nature that my hive-dwelling ears have never experienced.

Part of me loves these notes. Not to mention the rich earthy scent of the forest or the way the cool night air ghosts over my naked skin. I've never felt so alive in all my days. Part of me feels as though it belongs here.

But my rational mind knows that I belong back in the city hive. I have to run. My odds of making it back to the barrier wall on foot are slim to none, but I've got to at least try.

And there is no sign of Kadmon. I seem to be in the clear.

Suddenly, a dull ache pulses behind my eyes. My temples throb with pain, and nausea grips my stomach. I double over, expecting to vomit. If that happens, the Alphas will surely hear me, and my cover will be blown.

My first thought is the berries that Kadmon gave me. Could they have been poisonous? Doubtful. The Alphas are surely knowledgeable about what is safe to eat in the forest since they get their sustenance from hunting and gathering.

Then it hits me. The nihiloxin. It's been nearly half a day since my last dose, and back in the city hive I would always take one tablet before bed to help me sleep.

I'm having withdrawals.

Panic grips me. I've never experienced withdrawals from nihiloxin before, but I've heard of the symptoms. In some very

severe cases, people can have seizures and even go into a coma. If that were to happen to me here in the zone without access to medical technology, I would be finished.

Fortunately, the nausea and headache pass as quickly as they started. A moment later, and I feel perfectly normal again. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Still, I can't deny, a nihiloxin tablet would certainly come in handy right about now.

No time to think about that. I get my bearings and remember the way that the Alphas brought me. That's south. If I run that way long enough, I'll make it to the wall and beyond that, civilization.

God, it will take days.

But I'll never get there if I just keep standing around. I start to run, moving in and out of the trees and trying my best to steer clear of any dense underbrush.

I've barely gone a hundred yards, when I hear a distant sound echoing through the forest.

A feral howl.

My blood runs cold. Was that a wolf? Or perhaps it was Kadmon?

Or was it something even worse?

I pump my legs even faster, dodging in and out of the densely packed columns of enormous, old-growth tree trunks. I

stumble over a gnarled root and go sprawling, scraping my knees and hands.

Another howl. This time from the other side, but closer.

There's more than one.

I pick myself up. My heart is pounding like a drum. I run as fast as my legs will carry me, going at a full sprint. My lungs burn. My thighs burn. Everything fucking burns.

There are more howls now. They are coming from every direction, and they are getting closer by the second. And I'm starting to pick up other sounds too. Snorts and yelps and huffing breath.

There's no mistake that whatever is out there is coming straight for me.

I do the only thing my panicked brain can think of.

“Kadmon!” I scream at the top of my lungs. “Hasker! Help m
—“

Something hits me from behind, tackling me and roughly flinging my body to the ground. Every ounce of breath is knocked out of my lungs, and I feel a heart-clenching dread as it feels like I can't breathe.

My body skids on the slippery carpet of dead leaves until I slam into something sturdy. At first I think it is the trunk of a small tree. Then it kicks me, flipping me over on to my back.

It's an Alpha.

But this monster doesn't look like the guys who captured me earlier today. Even in the dim moonlight, I can tell that this Alpha is hideous. His nostrils are splayed like a wild beast. His brow is heavy and ridged. When he snarls at me, his lips curl back to reveal sharp fangs dripping with saliva. His red tongue lolls like a dog's.

Sitting up, I scramble backward across the leaf strewn ground, but I immediately bump into the legs of another Alpha. Before I have a chance to scream, he kicks me over onto my belly.

Now there are more of them. At least a dozen, their heavy feet stomping and crunching through the twigs and underbrush. They are panting, and the air is thick with their overwhelming stench, like a wet dog crossed with the worst B.O. you can imagine.

The smell is so strong it makes me gag.

A clawed hand grabs my hair, jerking me upright. My scalp screams with pain as it feels like all of my hair is going to be torn out in a chunk. More nasty, bestial hands paw at me, tugging at my arms and legs. One of them sniffs the iron shackle on my wrist curiously, gnaws it briefly, then gives up.

The Alphas surround me, closing in. They are snarling. Some of them start to fight, popping their jaws threateningly. Others begin to play tug-of-war with my body. My joints ache, and I feel like I'm going to be ripped apart.

In the middle of this chaos, I make the mistake of glancing down at the Alphas' lower bodies. They are all naked, and

they are all sporting stiff erections. Their members are repulsive. Gnarled and crooked. Evil looking things.

I scream in terror, my shrill voice echoing between the dark trees.

My only hope is that these awful beasts kill me first before they do that other thing that I know they intend.

Then something happens. The hideous Alphas raise their heads and sniff the air, their ears turning to pick up some sound that has caught their attention.

A massive, dark blur charges through the crowd of Alphas sending them sprawling. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they just got mowed down by an SUV.

The Alphas who are holding me drop my body so they can fight, and I fall limply onto the forest floor.

As I lift my head and brush back my hair tangled with leaves, I see my savior outlined in blueish moonlight. He flings one of the feral Alphas sideways into a tree trunk. Another one he fells with a savage, bone-crushing kick.

There are winks of moonlit metal at his mouth and chest, and the swirl of his long hair as he fights gives him away.

It's Kadmon. He throws back his head and releases an incredible howl like a siren.

My heart leaps with joy. I'm saved.

But my happiness is short lived. While Kadmon is busy fighting off the horde of misshapen Alphas, a pair of gnarled

hands clamp around my ankles and begin dragging me into the shadows.

“Kadmon!” I scream. “Help me!”

He whirls around, snarling with rage, his body glistening with the spilled blood of his enemies. But the other Alphas have him penned in. There are just too many of them, even for a warrior like Kadmon.

“Kadmon!” I cry out desperately as I feel myself being dragged to my doom.

Suddenly a roar, louder than any that I’ve heard so far rips through the forest. It sounds like how I would imagine a giant grizzly bear would sound. Or maybe King Kong. The sound is so loud and terrifying that all of the Alphas stop what they are doing and turn to look.

Even the cicadas have stopped singing.

Another roar, this time so close that it is deafening. Kadmon answers it with a strange barking call.

All around me, the forest erupts into total chaos. The night fills with yelps and barks and high-pitched whines. But over it all is that horrible, bellowing roar. And it’s not just one roar, I realize. There are two of them, and soon Kadmon adds his voice to make three.

The enemy Alphas start to flee, running away in all directions. The ones who are unable to escape in time fall around me. Some of them are unconscious. Others are howling in pain, clutching at bleeding wounds or horrific compound fractures.

Wet splintered bones gleam in the pale light. My stomach turns, and I feel myself on the verge of vomiting.

It doesn't help matters when a pair of rough hands wet with blood and gore grab my shoulder and pull me to my feet.

I scream again, but then I realize that the moonlit face I'm looking into isn't hideous and bestial like the other Alphas who attacked me.

Sure, this face is a bit animalistic, but in a handsome way. Pale eyes and metal piercings glint in the moonlight.

It's Addom.

He's awake. I swallow hard as I realize what that means. He speaks two words, low and rumbling. He says them slow so I can understand.

“Bad. Omega.”

CHAPTER 10: ADDOM

The little omega looks up at me, her round, tear-filled eyes reflecting the pale moonlight through the trees. Even in the dark forest, her fair skin practically glows. She is more beautiful than any omega I have ever seen.

And way more of a pain in the ass.

Hasker and Kadmon should never have broken that chain. We could have bound her for the night to keep her from escaping.

Still, the omega should have known better than to leave our protection. I have a mind to throw her down right here in the middle of the forest and rut her into submission. To discipline her with my angry cock until she knows exactly who her sweet little cunt belongs to.

But it's not safe here. I let my urges get the better of me yesterday, and just look at the trouble it got me into.

No. Her pounding will have to wait.

Hasker and Kadmon finish chasing away the rest of the far-lander Alphas. Brutish, inbred creatures with no sense of honor, loyalty, or empathy. Many of them lie dead at our feet. Others, weak and groaning with pain, are crawling away from the battle.

One of them crawls right into Hasker as he is circling back. The bulky, bald Alpha stoops, gripping the far-lander's head in

his hands like a vice. With a swift twist and a dull pop of bone, the far-lander's neck breaks.

The omega screams again. The shackles around her wrists clink together as she raises her hands to cover her mouth.

Such a curious little creature. Those disgusting far-landers would have mercilessly used her body and then brutally slaughtered her. Yet she seems upset that Hasker just killed one.

“Quiet,” I growl.

Now all of the far-landers have left. The ones that are capable of leaving, that is. Kadmon and Hasker return and stand before us. The omega spins slowly, looking at each of us in turn, her eyes wide with terror.

“No need to be afraid now,” Kadmon soothes her, speaking slowly and clearly so her outsider ears can understand his speech. “We will protect you.”

She relaxes slightly. It is clear that she feels more comfortable with Kadmon. He is younger, closer to her age. And while he is no whelp in battle, he is not nearly as fearsome in appearance as me and Hasker. Give him a few years, and he'll acquire more scars.

In fact, as he draws nearer, I realize some of the blood streaming down his arm is his own. He has received a nasty gash across his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” I ask, gesturing to his wound.

Kadmon nods and tries his best to hide his wince of pain. He is strong willed and courageous. He will make a great warrior, but he still has much to learn.

Hasker, never one for sensitivity, growls at the younger Alpha.

“Now do you understand what I was saying about taking on these far-landers in their own territory?”

“We bested them, didn’t we?” Kadmon retorts.

Impetuous too.

Hasker bows up at the younger Alpha’s insolence. For a moment, I fear he may even strike Kadmon, so I place a hand on Hasker’s broad shoulder to make him stand down. He does so reluctantly.

Now is no time for in-fighting. Still, I’m not letting Kadmon off the hook so easily.

“Aye, we bested them,” I growl. “But only together. If Hasker and I had not arrived when we did, those far-landers would have eaten you alive. And Source only knows what they would have done to the omega.”

That’s an untruth, of course. We all know full well what the far-landers would have done. They would have raped her until her body was broken beyond use, and then they would have eaten her. But there’s no need to say such things aloud. Not with the shivering omega standing right here.

Kadmon stiffens and instinctively draws the omega closer. A protective gesture.

“Where were you, Kadmon?” I growl. “Why were you not at the cave?”

The faintest tremor in his young voice betrays the fact that he’s lying. Or at the very least omitting some details.

“I couldn’t sleep. I was scouting the nearby area for enemies. I told Hasker—”

“All night?” my second cuts him off. “All night you were scouting? It’s near dawn boy. Out with it. Tell us what you were doing.”

I wave my hand. Although Hasker’s annoyance is justified, now is not the time.

“Save it,” I say. “We need to move. The far-landers have fled for now, but there will be more.”

I nod toward the omega.

“And her heat is returning.”

Hasker nods. He knows I’m right. We both smelled it as soon as we arrived. The raw needy smell of her fresh cunt is already filling the forest around us. Signalling to every Alpha in the vicinity that she is ready to be bred.

That’s what drove the far-landers into a frenzy. And that is what is making my own cock hard as steel.

“Kadmon will carry you,” I say to the omega.

I shove her roughly toward the young Alpha. Kadmon may be gentle with her, but I will not be. She needs to know who is in

charge here. And she needs to understand the consequences of disobedience.

Soon she will.

She makes a little squeak as Kadmon hoists her and tosses her over his shoulder.

“And you, boy,” I hiss. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten your truancy. I will figure out a suitable punishment later.”

We all set off, moving north. Moving toward the homelands.

CHAPTER 11: LILY

“Put me down!” I demand.

We have emerged from the shadows of the forest into an area with rolling meadows of high grass. The dawn is just starting to break on the horizon, bathing the world in golden light.

And I’m getting sick and tired of bouncing along on Kadmon’s shoulder. I would have puked up every bit of food in my stomach if there was anything in it in the first place. I haven’t had anything to eat except those berries Kadmon gave me yesterday. Plus, my nihiloxin cravings are getting intense, but I do my best to ignore them.

“Don’t worry, Lily,” he says, keeping his voice low. “You are a small burden to carry.”

“It’s not *you* I’m worried about,” I shout, kicking my legs.

“It’s me! I feel like my belly is about to burst.”

“I’ll try not to bounce you so much,” he says.

His strategy to keep me from bouncing too much apparently involves squeezing both of my bare butt cheeks with his massive hands and holding me even more tightly to his shoulder. I can’t deny the sudden rush of arousal at having his fingers so close to my sensitive recess. But that doesn’t make me any less annoyed.

“I have two perfectly good legs,” I protest. “Besides, you’re wounded.”

“You wouldn’t be able to keep up on your tiny legs,” he says matter-of-factly. “And my cut is merely a flesh wound. It will be healed by day’s end.”

Addom’s voice hollers from ahead of us. Well, from behind *me* since I’m turned around backward.

“Quiet back there,” the leader shouts.

I pout. Behind me, Hasker shakes his head. He’s been glaring at me ever since we started running.

I have to admit, what Kadmon says is probably right. I don’t think I could keep up with these guys. They have huge strides, and they are keeping a swift pace, unhindered by the rolling terrain.

But the other thing he said. About his cut being a flesh wound? That’s insane. Even though it was dark in the forest, I could tell he had a deep gash on his other shoulder. It definitely requires medical attention. Hell, a normal guy might have bled to death by now.

Kadmon, however, is not a normal guy.

I glance across his broad, muscled back. Although I can’t get a good look at it from this angle, I can see the very edge of his cut, and it looks like it has already scabbed over completely and even started to shrink.

Incredible. I knew that Alphas were metabolically enhanced compared to uncontaminated men, but I never expected rapid healing on this level.

I used to think that I knew so much about the zone, but I'm quickly learning that things are very different from my expectations.

We come up alongside a river and follow its twisting banks.

"Well, how much farther do we have to go?" I grumble at Kadmon. "I don't even know where you're taking me."

"I already told you," he says quietly. "We're taking you back to our dwelling in the city."

I know I should leave things there. I should just be patient and see how this plays out. I'm totally at the mercy of the superhuman Alphas. But my temper is wearing thin. Maybe it's from my nihiloxin cravings. Or maybe it's just from being carried naked for miles like a caveman's prize.

Whatever it is, I can feel my irritation boiling over. Besides, the Alphas have clearly made up their minds about what they plan to do with me. Nothing I do or say will dissuade them, but that doesn't mean I have to take it lying down.

Okay, maybe that's not the best phrase to use.

"But what city?" I blurt. "How far is it? And when can I go back home? I have a right to—"

"Enough!"

Addom's deep voice booms like a cannon, and a flock of white birds burst from the tall grass nearby and flutter away squawking into the rising sun.

My body tenses, and my breath catches in my throat. Okay, maybe it wasn't a good idea to keep complaining.

The Alphas halt. Addom grabs my leg and uses it to turn Kadmon around so that I'm looking directly at the lead Alpha.

"Listen to me." His voice is husky. "Your never-ending questions are giving me a headache. You will be quiet. And you will obey your Alphas. Do you understand me, little omega?"

His face is frightening, his expression harsh. His nostrils flare, and his septum piercing gives him the look of a bull that's about to charge. Stick a pair of horns on this guy, and he'd be a minotaur.

There's no doubt that he means business. He will not tolerate insolence.

But I'm sick of being called omega. I'm a human, not some stray animal that these brutes have adopted for a pet. I'm a woman, and I intend to let them know it.

"My name isn't omega," I whisper harshly. "My name is Lily."

Addom's speckled gray eyes grow wide with surprise, but this soon subsides into raw anger.

"Give her here," he barks at Kadmon.

The younger Alpha doesn't argue. He hands me over to the tall savage leader and I find myself flung over a new shoulder now, a few extra inches higher off the ground.

"Put me down!" I shout.

I beat my fists and iron shackles uselessly against Addom's musclebound back. Behind me, Hasker bursts into laughter, and I can even hear Kadmon chuckling too. That traitor. He's supposed to be the nice one.

But if Addom is amused, he's certainly not showing it.

"Put. Me. Down!"

I twist and struggle, flailing my arms and legs. There is a sudden whoosh of air, and something broad, flat, and rough strikes my bare behind which is bent over Addom's broad shoulder. The sudden sting makes me squeal, but it is soon replaced by a funny, tingly warmth in the shape of Addom's massive hand.

"Hey, you can't do that!" I shout.

His hand smacks me again, jiggling my cheeks and stinging the naked flesh of my bottom.

"Quiet, omega," Addom growls.

"I will *not* be quiet!" I yell, "And I will not be spanked!"

Rather than debate that point with words, Addom gives me three hard smacks in quick succession. The sound of his heavy palm impacting my rear echoes across the grassy meadows. My skin sings with pain, and I struggle to choke back my protests.

"Behave like a child, get spanked like a child," Addom snarls.

"Understand?"

"Yes," I whisper.

That word of submission tastes bitter in my mouth. But I don't want this jerk to spank me again. For one thing, if he keeps it up, my butt's going to be so bruised I won't be able to sit down.

But there's another factor. I'm starting to get wet between my legs. Shamefully so. Anymore rough spanking like that, and my thighs would be dripping with arousal.

I don't want these beasts to know how turned on I'm getting. I don't want them to see how my disobedient body is responding to their harsh treatment.

So I keep my mouth shut.

But the way that Addom is sniffing the air makes me think that the cat is already out of the bag so to speak.

"Good." His voice has softened to a purr that vibrates right through my belly and into my core. It gives me a feeling like someone's tickling me with a feather inside. "Very good."

He strides forward, soon speeding up to a run. I bounce lightly on his shoulder, watching the other two Alphas following behind.

I still don't know where they are taking me. I guess I'll find out soon enough.

CHAPTER 12: ADDOM

“**Y**ou want to know where we’re going?”

“Yes,” the omega grumbles. “I’ve only asked you like a million times.”

I haven’t been keeping track, but a million times sounds pretty accurate. Despite my commands, this feisty little omega has taken it upon herself to pipe up every few minutes. Each time I have reminded her to keep quiet by smacking that plump ass that is bent over my shoulder.

But she has a very short memory.

Or maybe, just maybe, she likes being disciplined like a naughty child. From the way more and more of her overpowering scent wafts from between her legs after each sharp smack, I would say that’s the case.

Anyway, as we climb a high ridge of grass-covered terrain, the answer to her incessant question comes into view.

The city.

The center of our territory and the home of the Source.

“All right,” I tell her. “Have a look for yourself.”

I swing around so that my back is facing the city, and now the omega, who is bent over my shoulder, has a clear view of our destination, illuminated by the golden rays of the low morning sun.

“Wow,” she gasps with awe. “It’s...it’s beautiful.”

She’s right. The city is indeed beautiful. The pride of our homeland. It was built long ago, before the big change. According to the stories of the old-timers, it was quite ugly then—sky choked with smoke and noxious fumes that blotted out the sun. So many people they were practically packed in like ants, and nothing but solid rockcrete for acres.

But now, after a century, the city has come back into harmony with nature. Trees and grasses have burst through and grow in the roads where cars once drove. The towering buildings of steel and glass are tangled in climbing vines as thick as an Alpha’s wrist. Flocks of white egrets soar through the city canyons.

It is our home, and we will be there soon.

“You know,” the omega says. “If you put me down I can—“
She yelps as I swat her behind again.

“You’ve already run off once,” I tell her. “We’re not going to play that game again. I’m carrying you, end of story.”

“Fine,” she grumbles as her small hand reaches back to rub her reddened tush.

Hasker approaches and speaks in a hushed voice.

“Boss, the omega’s heat is coming back something fierce.”

He doesn’t have to tell *me*. With her perfect little butt bent over my shoulder, I’m fully aware of the alluring scent wafting from between her legs. It’s nearly unbearable.

When I first smelled her yesterday, the intensity of her pheromones threw me into a feral mania of lust. Thankfully, Hasker managed to quell her needs a little bit in that cavern. But he's right, the effects are wearing off, and her estrus is growing stronger again.

And I know full well what Hasker is getting at. We can't bring her back into the city like this. It wouldn't be fair to our brethren in the tribe. We need to mark her first.

When an omega has been marked, her scent changes, among other things. It is the first step in the bonding process. We must see to that necessity before we return to the city.

"We'll take her to our cave. I don't want to be interrupted."

Hasker nods. He is clearly eager, as we all are, finally to relieve some tension with the omega.

"Cave?" Lily asks, twisting and squirming on my shoulder.

"What cave?"

She squeals as my hand comes down once more on her bottom with a sharp and satisfying smack.

* * *

A few minutes later and we can hear the low hiss of splashing water.

"Is that a waterfall?" Lily asks from my shoulder.

I'm impressed. Her ears are nearly as good as mine. From what little I've heard about them, outsiders are supposedly far less sensitive than we who live here in the zone. But I also know that Lily's body is undergoing changes as she becomes

conditioned by the power of the zone, and the closer we draw to the Source, the deeper and more permanent those changes become.

She may still be an outsider in her mind and her way of thinking, but her body is all omega now.

Soon we come around a low, wooded hill, and there before us is the waterfall. Its white water spills down from a rocky outcropping about thirty feet up and crashes into the dark pool below, churning its surface with white foam and raising plumes of mist that sparkle with a pale rainbow. The fragrant grass grows right up to the black, volcanic rocks lining the pool, which are furred with moss.

“Oh wow,” Lily whispers on my shoulder as she twists around to look. “It really *is* a waterfall!”

As we approach, a fishing heron pauses to eye us suspiciously, then raises himself on broad gray wings and flaps off over the trees. Lily gasps at the sight of it. She is a curious little creature. Do they not have such things as waterfalls and birds on the outside?

Then again, her awe and curiosity is inspiring in its own way. It reminds me of those things that I all too often take for granted.

I and my brothers step to the edge of the water and scan our surroundings. Hasker, whose sense of smell is the strongest, tests the air to make sure no one is nearby. We don't want to give away the location of our hidden camp. He nods, indicating that we are alone.

Lily breaks the silence.

“Okay,” she sighs. “If we’re just going to stand here, could you *please* put me down for like two seconds? My feet haven’t touched the ground all day.”

I flash a grin at Hasker and Kadmon.

“Really?” I ask. “You want me to put you down?”

“Yes! I’ve only said it like a mil— hey!”

The little omega squeals as I toss her easily into the clear pool. Her mouth gapes and her legs kick as she hangs in the air for a moment before she hits the water with a splash.

Lily briefly goes under before she returns to the surface, her arms flailing wildly like an injured animal. Her mouth gasps for air, and I’m reminded of the dull ache in my nuts as I think of how badly I want to feel those perfect lips wrapped around my hard cock.

Soon.

But there are some things that need tending to first.

“Help!” Lily shouts as she bobs and splashes about frantically.

CHAPTER 13: LILY

“Help!” I shout.

But those three jerks just stand at the edge of the pool laughing their asses off. Well, I’m glad that somebody is enjoying themselves, but *I’m* certainly not. I thought they were supposed to be protecting me, not drowning me.

“I don’t know how to swim!” I manage to cry before my head dips beneath the surface.

Addom stops his laughing long enough to shout something at me, but I can’t hear him between the water filling my ears and his thick, gravelly accent. Struggling with my arms, I manage to bring my head above water once again.

The leader of the Alphas shouts again, making each syllable clear.

“Put. Your. Feet. Down.”

I immediately do as he says, straightening my legs, and I feel my toes touch the bottom. Large round stones covered in a thin layer of slick mud. It’s kinda gross, but also it feels oddly nice between my toes. Pressing with my legs a little more, I find that I can stand here if I lift my chin. By bouncing, I’m able to bring my whole neck and shoulders above water.

My cheeks sizzle with heat as the three big Alphas stare down at me laughing, their facial piercings winking in the sunlight. Hasker shakes his head in disbelief and says something to the

others that I don't understand. Based on the way that they both laugh even harder, that's probably for the best.

"Yeah, really funny, guys."

I mock their laughter in a deep dumb-sounding voice that mimics Hasker's.

Addom and Kadmon continue to smile, but mean-looking Hasker actually looks upset. His grin disappears inside his beard, and he steps toward the edge with a scowl on his face. I feel a twinge of panic as I expect him to jump in and punish me. But Addom stills his companion with his hand on his shoulder.

The leader says something else that I can't catch. Hasker and Kadmon both nod and set off climbing the hillside to the top of the waterfall, disappearing into the blue shadows of the forest there.

Now I'm all alone with Addom.

"Where are they going?" I ask, swallowing with nervousness.

"Nevermind," he says, with a wicked grin curling the edge of his mouth. "They'll be back. Right now, it's time for a bath."

An involuntary and very loud gasp escapes my lips as Addom unties his loincloth and removes it, hanging it on a nearby tree limb

Completely naked, Addom gazes down at me with lusty, hooded eyes. He is completely unashamed, and he certainly has no reason to be.

Hanging between his legs is his enormous member.

Before last night, of course, I had never seen a man's genitals in real life. Oh sure, I had seen pictures in my anatomy courses at the university. But those were ordinary men with tiny little things that appeared to be little more than an oversized version of a woman's nub.

Then last night, I felt and saw Addom and Hasker's hard erections. But that was in the dark of the cave. Now, looking at this monster in the broad daylight, it completely takes my breath away.

Hot desire clenches deep in my core, and I find myself struggling to hold back a whimper. But no matter how I try, I can't manage to take my eyes away from that long, gorgeous cock.

I lick my lips. My skin seems to tighten. I'm grateful that my breasts are obscured beneath the water's surface so that Addom can't see the way that my nipples are beginning to bead with arousal.

At last I manage to drag my eyes away, flicking my gaze up toward his smirking face.

Not only is he not ashamed—he's watching me stare at him, and he's actually enjoying it.

A movement down below brings my eyes back to his groin.

"Oh God," I mutter before I have a chance to stop myself.

As I watch in amazement, Addom's cock is gradually stiffening as it engorges with blood flow. His meaty rod

hardens, and plump veins stand out along its surface as it rises. The head of it is round and pink and slightly sheened with moisture.

At last, he is fully hard, his erection pointing almost straight up to the sky, revealing his smooth underside and a sexy little seam of flesh that runs along the middle of his sac and midway up the center of his shaft. His member is so hard that it jumps with his heartbeat.

The light catches something on the underside of his head.

Oh God. He's pierced down there too?

"Do you see, little mate?" Addom asks in a growly voice. "Do you see how excited you make me?"

That gives me a desperate tickling feeling inside my belly. To think that I'm the one who caused that intense arousal in this extraordinary male makes me feel...good?

But it also frightens me because I know he's talking about putting that hard, pierced, Alpha cock inside me, and there's not a chance it would ever fit.

Good luck persuading this demanding Alpha of that fact, though.

Addom bends his knees and leaps out over the water. I marvel at the sexy way that his hard muscles flex and move beneath his smooth, tight skin as he swings his arms together into a graceful dive.

Although his body is massive, he enters the water like a sharpened spear tip, making hardly a splash.

I shake myself out of my daze, reminding myself that I'm now alone and naked with a fully aroused Alpha.

A dark shape moves beneath the rippling surface of the water. I retreat, stepping my feet backward along the smooth stone. The pool gets deeper, and my toes slip on the underwater rocks. I've found myself in the deep end as it were.

I can't touch bottom, and I don't know how to swim.

"Help!" I shout again just before my head dips underwater with a glub.

A wave of terror passes through me as I suddenly become afraid that I might actually drown.

However, in a flash, powerful arms as hard as living stone coil around my lower body, squeezing me against an equally hard chest. There is a sudden surge, and my head breaks the surface, then my entire upper body, all the way to my belly button as Addom lifts me while he treads water.

I don't know what to do with my hands so I put them against his head to steady myself. As much as I hate to admit it, I enjoy the way my fingers feel in his wet mane of thick, dark, slightly silvered hair.

"Careful, little omega."

Addom's voice is deep, half growl and half chuckle. The sound of it rumbles through my body, and I become suddenly and acutely aware that my naked sex is pressed right against his chest. I can feel his powerful heart beating in time to my

own pulsing desire. My nipples have stiffened to aching peaks, and now they are on full display in the bright sun.

“You weren’t trying to run from your Alpha, were you?”

Addom gives me a sexy smile that shows off his over-developed canine teeth. Warmth throbs between my legs. It’s a good thing we’re in the water at the moment so that Addom can’t feel the shameful arousal that’s leaking from my slit onto his chest.

“Maybe I was,” I answer. “You can be a little frightening.”

“I only want to protect you.”

“Really?” I ask. “Because it kinda looks like you want to eat me alive.”

Addom’s grin gets bigger, and his nostrils flare as he scents me. I suddenly realize the unintended double meaning of what I just said, and I try to change the subject.

“Besides, it’s not like I’m totally helpless.”

Addom snorts.

I choke back a moan as he lowers me and the hardened bud between my legs rubs all down the ripples of his front, eliciting echoes of the multiple orgasms that I experienced the night before under Hasker’s skilled tongue and fingers.

Then I squeal as something long and hard thumps me right between the legs. It seems that erection of his has not abated on its own. If anything, it seems even harder. And now that I

can feel it touching me, I'm even more certain that there's no way it could fit inside my hole.

God, I wish it could though, as shameful as that is to admit.

I bite my lip and suppress a whine as Addom slowly rocks his hips, stroking the top of his shaft along the groove of my parting while his strong hands knead my tushy, his fingers coming dangerously close to my rear hole.

“Not helpless?” Addom growls. “Omega, you don't even know how to swim. You're as helpless as a newborn fawn.”

I struggle against his grip, but he's too strong. But instead of forcing himself on me as I expect, Addom turns my body.

“Here, I'll show you, little omega.”

He swims while supporting my body, and I try to mimic his movements, kicking my legs and stroking my arms, but my movements are far less graceful than his.

“You know, I'd really appreciate it if you would stop calling me 'little omega.' As I already told you, my name is Lily.”

He leads me to the edge of the waterfall—a sheet of sparkling water splashing into the pool and raising a fine mist that twinkles in the sunlight. Addom supports me as the water splashes over me like a shower. The water is cool and refreshing, and it feels good to wash away the sweat and grime of the previous day.

“Tell me, Lily,” Addom says, using my name for the first time.

“How did it come to be that you don't know how to swim? Are all outsiders this way?”

Outsiders. I've never thought of myself that way before.

"No," I say as I pull back my hair to rinse it in the splashing waterfall. "Soldiers learn how to swim. And I've heard some of the aristocrats have special pools for swimming inside their homes. But I've never seen those. They live on the upper tiers of the hive."

I let the pure water splash over my face and down my chest.

"But it's true that most outsiders cannot?"

I'm finally starting to get used to Addom's unique accent, so I can understand him more easily. I rest my hands on the hard slabs of his shoulders.

"The water in the hives isn't like it is here," I tell him. "There are canals in the lower levels, but they aren't safe to swim in. The water is filled with poison and disease."

Addom nods solemnly.

"They say it was once the same way here," he says, "in the time of the old ones."

"Before the cataclysm?"

Addom's brow furrows, and he gives me a quizzical look.

"Cata...kizem? I do not know this word."

"Cata-clysm," I say slowly. "It means when something bad happens. Something big and terrible."

Addom shakes his head.

"The water became clean and life returned to the soil and the trees. Is that terrible? Meanwhile you live in a crowded hive

with poison canals? You outsiders see things in a strange way.”

I’m tempted to remind him that hundreds of thousands of people died when the cataclysm happened. That the zone had to be quarantined to contain the disaster. But I keep my opinions to myself for now.

Besides, certainly not everything about the zone is bad. I have to admit, I do like the clear skies and the cool clear water on my naked skin.

And there are other things I like too.

“Come, Lily” Addom says, “There is something we must do.”

I protest as he leads me into the center of the waterfall where the water beats down really heavily. I duck my head to protect my face from the spattering, rushing flow of water. But soon we emerge on the other side, and I find that we are in a cool, dim cave.

CHAPTER 14: LILY

The outside light filters through the falling water, giving the cave a bluish glow. The sound of the rushing, splashing water echoes through the chamber like soothing white noise.

“Oh, Addom. This is amazing.”

The flat stones act as steps, and Addom steadies me as I step out of the water. The temperature in the cave is comfortable, but my naked body is dripping wet, and a shiver runs through me.

“Are you cold?”

Addom comes up from behind and wraps me in his arms again. The incredible heat from his Alpha metabolism warms me, but not half as much as the surge of heat that flushes outward from my core when I feel his thick erection pressing against my butt.

“Oh...”

His hands run over my body, stimulating and warming my skin. My nipples are springy under his touch, and my sex throbs as I feel his fingertips graze the top of my tuft. I feel like I should tell him to stop, but my mouth won't let me.

“You'll be warm soon,” he whispers in my ear. “Hasker and Kadmon are bringing wood for a fire.”

My eyes fall on a recess in the stony floor. As my vision adjusts to the low light, I realize that it is blackened around the

edges and filled with the remnants of old fires.

“But how will they bring wood?” I ask. “They can’t bring it through the waterfall without it getting wet.”

As if on cue, a sound of scuffing footsteps and low voices comes from the farthest end of the cavern. It is Hasker and Kadmon coming from the other direction.

“This cave has many branches,” Addom explains. “The entrances are hidden. This is a secret place that only my pack knows about.”

“How can you be sure?” I ask. “I mean, maybe someone else has been in here while you were away?”

Addom sniffs the air behind me. His nose sounds almost like a snuffling dog, and I get a sexy chill as I feel like I’m in the arms of a true beast man.

“Trust me,” he says. “No one else has been here. I would smell them?”

“Really?” I ask in amazement. “You can tell who’s been here just from a few quick sniffs?”

Addom nuzzles his face against my neck. His nose is still snuffling like a hound dog, several sharp, rapid sniffs followed by one longer inhale.

“Not just who’s been here.” His breath tickles my ear, making me break out in goosebumps and shiver with excitement. “I can tell what they’ve eaten. If they are wounded. If they are sick.”

His fingertips trail down my lower belly, moving deeper into my short thatch of pubic hair. He touches me on my little hood of flesh, and the tiny bud underneath instantly wakes up again, swelling with arousal at his touch.

“If they are in heat.”

His other hand is moving all over my body, following every contour of my bare skin. I moan and lean back into him as he squeezes my breasts and pinches my nipples. He kisses my neck and shoulders, and his sharp, hard teeth graze along my flesh.

And all the while, that long erection is throbbing against my backside.

That’s when I realize that Addom is purring. A deep rumbling sound like an enormous jungle cat. So deep I don’t hear it so much as I feel it vibrating through the fibers of my muscles, soothing me and relaxing me.

All of my senses feel heightened. Every sound and every touch seems to echo endlessly. But at the same time I feel as though I’m in a trance or a dream.

While Addom strokes and caresses me, Hasker and Kadmon go about their business of building a fire as though nothing unusual is going on. Occasionally when I whimper under Addom’s attention, Kadmon will flick his gaze my way briefly, but that is all.

“Lie down,” Addom says behind me in a voice that is gentle but firm.

“What are you going to do to me?”

His powerful hands grip my shoulders, and I suddenly feel so tiny and weak in his grasp. He pushes me down, and my body has no choice but to bend to his will.

“Lie down,” he commands again, more forcefully this time.

Addom guides me to the floor of the cave. He lays me down on my back. The stones of the cavern floor are hard and cool against my spine. The rush of the waterfall echoes in the empty space.

“Spread your legs.”

“But Addom,” I whine.

“Spread. Your. Legs.”

Even when he speaks, that deep purring sound continues underneath his voice coaxing me to obey him. Last night, Hasker opened me with the sheer force of his rough, calloused hands. But with Addom, it is different. My legs fall open for him effortlessly. It is as if he has bypassed my conscious mind to speak directly to my body.

“Oh God!” I gasp as his fingers touch my wet slit.

He rubs me up and down, the pads of his thick fingers separating my folds. He circles the ring of my entrance, which is oozing with warm slick and aching to feel his inner touch.

But Addom doesn't enter me. Not yet. First, he raises his fingers, wet with my arousal, and sniffs them deeply. He groans with enjoyment at my pussy's scent, and his cock bobs

with excitement. He sucks my juices from his fingertips, and more clear precum dribbles from his pierced tip, spattering on my thighs, sticky and warm.

“You taste good, Lily,” he purrs. “I must feast on you.”

My sharp cry echoes through the cavern as he shoves his finger deep into my hole and buries his face between my thighs.

With his other hand, he draws back my little cowl of flesh to expose my throbbing pink pearl underneath. He sucks the hard bead into his mouth. He nips it with his teeth, making me squeal with pleasure and just a hint of pain. He flicks my erect nubbin with the tip of his tongue, making me dizzy with pleasure.

“Oh fuck,” I moan as my body squirms against the rough ground. “Addom, what are you doing to me?”

He shoves another finger deep inside me. Already, my pussy feels stretched and full. His fingers curl in a walking motion, stimulating my tenderest place. It feels like he is tickling my clitoris from the inside.

“I’m gonna come,” I whine.

I toss my head back as my impending climax builds between my legs. My wet hair is plastered over my face, and through the messy strands, I see the other Alphas upside down squatting over the fire pit.

Kadmon has ignited a wad of tinder—pine needles and thin fibers of wood—and he is blowing it, raising more and more

plumes of white smoke.

Feeling drunk with arousal, I can't contain the giggle that slips from my lips.

"That's right," Addom purrs between my thighs. "Come for me, omega."

Just as Kadmon is using his mouth to kindle a flame from a few tiny sparks, so Addom is stirring and stoking a different kind of flame within my needy, quivering body. He is licking and sucking and fingering me closer and closer to my climax. And all the while, his deep purring continues, vibrating straight to my hot center.

"Come," Addom commands.

One more heavy blow from Kadmon's lips, and the tinder combusts into orange, consuming flames. At the same moment, an intense orgasm seems to explode within me. Waves of warm pleasure radiate outward from my core. My helpless body is wracked by spasms of raw pleasure as my muscles rhythmically tense and relax. My screams fill the cave until a rough hand clamps down over my face. My eyes flutter open, and I see that Hasker is crouching over me, stifling my cries of ecstasy.

"Hush," he rasps. "We don't need you alerting everyone for miles around about our hiding place."

I moan into the palm of his hand. He smells like pine needles and wood smoke. His dark, hungry eyes trail down my body,

drinking me in as I writhe and come again and again, one orgasm rolling straight into the next.

“You’re going to wear her out,” Hasker chuckles to his leader.

But Addom doesn’t let up. He continues stroking and licking and sucking my pussy until I feel like I cannot take it anymore. I don’t know if I can survive pleasure like this. My hands instinctively reach back and clasp Hasker’s legs. Our eyes meet and we share a strange moment of connection as he continues muffling my cries.

At last, Addom relents. His lips separate from my clit with a wet smack. My poor little bud is so engorged that it feels like it could pop. His fingers slide out of me, dripping with my thick, creamy slick.

“We need her good and relaxed for the marking,” Addom says.

Hasker snorts.

“Relaxed, sure. But you nearly made her come to death. Just look at her.”

He peels his hand away from my face, and I gulp the air. My head lolls to one side and I feel a trickle of drool run down my cheek. My skin feels electric and shivery.

“Go get the boy,” Addom grunts to his second. “She’s ready. It’s time to mark her.”

I have read something of this in my studies of Alphas back at the university. But the ritual itself is shrouded in mystery. The only details come from reports and video footage from the

early days just after the cataclysm. All I know is that it involves biting.

“M-mark me?” I stammer.

Addom simply ignores my question.

“Turn over,” he growls.

This time he doesn't wait for me to obey but simply manhandles me like a broken doll. He flips me over and I find myself on my hands and knees staring at Hasker and Kadmon's legs.

Their loincloths drop to the floor by their feet.

Oh God.

I drag my eyes up their muscular legs. Kadmon's are smooth and lean and tan. Hasker's are more hairy, more powerfully built and nicked with scars from battle.

As my eyes travel higher, I gulp.

The two Alphas are towering over me, their penises erect and jumping with their pulses. Kadmon flashes me a smirk. Hasker just stares at me intensely.

“All three of you?” I gasp as they step closer. “All three of you are going to...”

My voice trails off, unable to complete the sentence. From behind, Addom's voice completes it for me.

“Fuck you?” he chuckles. “Yes.”

My body tenses. There's no way I could handle being fucked by even one of these Alphas, let alone all three. Will they take

turns using my body? Or will they share me all at once?

I feel a sudden impulse to scramble away. Hasker detects this, and he steps to one side, widening his stance to block me.

“Don’t worry,” Addom growls. “We’re not going to fuck you right now. Not here. Your body isn’t ready yet.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. But Addom still has more to say.

“First, we must prepare your body.” I can feel him kneeling behind me. His hands clasp my hips, and the head of his cock brushes my crack. “We must introduce you to our seed.”

“Introduce?” I stammer. “Your seed?”

I tremble as Hasker and Kadmon kneel in front of me. Their hard dicks glisten in the wavering light passing through the rushing waterfall. The white noise of the crashing water suddenly seems incredibly loud.

Behind me, Addom is starting to rock his pelvis, sliding his hot shaft along the cleft of my tush. My pussy is so wet from his feasting that it’s running down my inner thighs.

“Yes,” he says, his voice deep and gravelly. “A new omega must be broken in. Her body must taste the seed of her mates so that her womb can learn to accept it.”

Hasker and Kadmon move closer on their knees. Their bobbing erections are now right at eye level. I glance back and forth between those twitching members—one pierced and one not. Their thick veins are pulsing and throbbing with their heartbeats. Their tips leak clear fluid.

“Taste?” I whimper.

Behind me, Addom is rubbing his cockhead up and down my slit, smearing my wet frills with his own sticky precum.

“Hasker,” he says.

The older Alpha reaches for me and grabs my hair, guiding my head forward toward his hard, pulsing dick. His grip is strong and impossible to resist, but he doesn’t force my head down. At least not yet. He lets me take my time.

I curl my fingers around his veined shaft. His flesh is so hot to the touch that it shocks me, and I gasp with surprise. I tilt my eyes upward and look into his face. He is glaring down at me across the muscled landscape of his torso.

“I’m going to enjoy spilling my seed inside that pretty little mouth of yours,” he rumbles.

My breath catches at his filthy words

“You mean...you want me to put it...in my mouth?”

A cruel grin spreads across his scarred and grizzled face. Hasker is hardly handsome. But there is something in that savage warrior’s battered features that gives me an unaccountable thrill.

“That’s right,” he growls. “I want you to suck on it like a good little omega.”

I glance over at Kadmon, hoping he can save me somehow, but he only watches intently and nods, urging me to suck his

companion's hard cock while he watches, gently stroking his own long shaft.

My whole body flushes with heat. It's too shameful to even think about. Even worse than Addom's big cock stroking against my pussy from behind. Intercourse is one thing. However dirty it may be, it's a necessary natural process. But putting an Alpha's member into my mouth? Literally tasting his naked skin and sticky fluid leaking from his tip.

It's so wrong.

So why am I so hungry for it?

Why do my lips tingle so deliciously when I brush them against the underside of his supple pink bulb? Why does my pussy pulse and clench with desire at the sound of his soft groans? Why does my tongue instinctively dart out to lap the precursor of his seed that is dribbling from his slit?

The flavor is unexpectedly intense, and I jerk my head back and wince. Hasker laughs, and I feel my cheeks flush with added shame.

"You don't like it?" he chuckles.

Apparently my reaction didn't hurt his feelings. The knowing smile on his face infuriates me. He knows full well that my reaction has nothing to do with disliking it. The intense saltiness of his flavor was a shock. I wasn't expecting the way it seemed to soak right into my tongue. But I want more of it.

I need it like a drug. Like the way I used to need my nihiloxin tablets.

Without Hasker even coaxing me, I move my head toward him again. I part my lips, and his plump helmet slips into my mouth. The metal piercing on the top side of his cockhead clacks against my incisors.

“Careful, little omega,” he grunts. “Don’t chip your pretty little teeth.”

Of all the Alphas, Hasker infuriates me the most. I know that he doesn’t like me, and I know that he’s taking great enjoyment in using me like a dirty little toy. I take all of my anger and channel it into the task at hand.

I cover my teeth with my lips and suck him deeper. Once his entire head is inside, I swirl my tongue all around it. The feeling of his warm, supple skin combined with the cool steel of his piercing is strange and intriguing. Somehow it reminds me of his personality—cold and hard one minute and blazing hot with fury the next.

“Yes. There you go,” Hasker groans, “A little deeper, omega.”

I take him farther. He is heavy and smooth on my tongue. The muscles in his legs and abdomen twitch and his cock jumps between my lips. After being terrorized and manhandled by this crude Alpha male yesterday, I’m kind of enjoying exerting my control over his body with my mouth.

Behind me, Addom’s cock slips downward. He thrusts forward, and his head brushes my clit, sending tingles of pleasure through my center. I moan, but the sound is muffled by the thick meat filling my mouth.

“Fuck, she must be the tightest I’ve ever seen,” Addom grunts.

He circles my hole with his fingertip as he continues stroking his cockhead against my clit. I squeal and whine around Hasker’s penis.

“She must be a virgin,” Hasker growls as he stares down at me, his dark, intense eyes latched on mine. “What do you say, omega? Is this the first time you’ve had a cock in your mouth?”

I just glare up at him. What the fuck does he expect me to say?

“Yeah, I thought so,” he says through his grinning teeth.

His fist in my hair guides me, bobbing my head up and down on his member. The most shameful wet slurping sounds are issuing from my lips wrapped around his shaft. He begins rocking his pelvis at the same rhythm that Addom is humping me from behind.

Hasker pushes in farther, and when the head hits the back of my throat, I gag. He yanks my head back roughly. His dick slides out of my mouth and I gasp like a landed fish.

“Let her try Kadmon,” Addom suggests.

Hasker passes me off to Kadmon, who takes my head a little more gently. My eyes are watering from choking on Hasker’s thick cock, and my chin is slick with saliva. He tilts my face upward to look at him, but I cast my eyes down because I’m so ashamed.

I must look like a whore right now. Even the pleasure girls in the lower levels of the city hive would be ashamed to do

something like this. I've never felt so dirty in my life.

"Lily," Kadmon whispers. "Look at me."

His voice is soft and gentle yet also firm with command, and I can detect a hint of that purring that I heard rumbling behind Addom's words as well. I open my eyes and flash him a look as if challenging him.

"Source, you're so beautiful," he purrs.

Hearing those words coming from him loosens something inside me. He cups my head with his hand and guides me forward, and I part my lips to take him inside. His cock doesn't have the same girth as Hasker's, but it's longer, and I can only make it halfway down his shaft before he bottoms out against the back of my throat.

"You look so beautiful like that," Kadmon says, "filled with my cock."

Our eyes stay locked as I start to bob on his penis, sucking him with long deep strokes. I glide my tongue along the underside of his shaft as I suck him, and his blue eyes roll back, lids fluttering.

"Oh fuck that feels so good," he groans.

Already, his body is starting to tense in anticipation of his release.

And I want it so badly. I want to taste his hot, thick cum on my tongue. I want to swallow him and hear him groan with enjoyment as my lips milk every drop from his heavy, smooth balls.

I want to make him feel good.

His legs begin to twitch. His cock seems to grow even more rigid in my mouth. I touch his balls and feel them tighten against his body as he prepares to unload inside me.

This is it. He's about to come. I'm about to make an Alpha come with my mouth..

But at the last moment, strong fingers tangle through my hair at the back of my head. It's Addom. He pulls me back roughly, and loops of saliva bridge my lips and the glistening head of Kadmon's cock, which is jumping with his heart beat.

"Hold it in, Kadmon," Addom snaps.

"But—"

"Hold it," Addom snarls at him. "This is your punishment for running off last night."

Kadmon's expression is pained, but he nods. His face scrunches and reddens with exertion as he strains to keep his release contained.

But I want it so badly. I need to have it. I need to taste the young Alpha's seed.

With all my strength, I struggle to bow my head to his cock, but Addom holds my hair tightly, and my scalp screeches with fiery pain.

"Do you see, Kadmon?" Addom laughs. "Do you see how the omega thirsts for you? Think about that as you bear your

punishment. You will not spill your seed until we reach the city and bind the omega, understand?

Kadmon winces as if in pain and nods.

“Understand?”

“I understand,” Kadmon chokes.

I want to protest. I want to tell them that it's not fair to treat Kadmon like this. Of all the Alphas, he's the one that is kindest to me, and right now I want nothing more than to pleasure him.

But Addom's fist is too strong for me. He pulls my head back over to Hasker and presses me forward onto the older Alpha's cock. I open my mouth wide to take his girth once again.

“Don't worry, omega,” Addom purrs behind me. “We'll give you everything you need.”

What I need? To me it seems like these Alphas are being more than a little selfish at the moment. They are using me and sharing me shamefully, and they aren't asking permission. They are taking what they want from me, and they are taking it roughly.

But they are right. I *do* need this. My body needs it, and there's no denying my animal urges.

Hasker's fingers clutch my hair again and guide my head as I bob and suck him. His cock pokes the back of my throat again, but this time I'm expecting it, and I relax, letting his head slide deep inside me.

“Oh fuck that feels so good,” Hasker growls above me.

I glare up at him. My eyes are teary as I struggle not to gag. Meanwhile, behind me, Addom’s hot, wet cock his stroking and rubbing me, sliding against my hole and caressing my tingling clit.

Above me, Hasker grunts, almost as if he’s in pain. His hard cock bucks and suddenly my mouth fills with his thick, hot cream. I moan as his intense, salty flavor saturates my tongue and the musk of his body envelops me.

I’m surprised to notice that the base of Hasker’s cock is swelling.

That’s when I remember something from my studies. A peculiar detail of Alpha physiology. When Alphas mate, their genitals knot within an omega, binding them together, sometimes for hours. The expansion of Hasker’s gland would keep him locked inside me if he were coming in my pussy instead of my mouth.

I should be repulsed by that animalistic display. But in reality, I can’t resist running the tip of my tongue along the Alpha’s swollen knot, which seems to make him ejaculate even more forcefully down my ravaged throat.

“Good,” Addom’s deep voice growls behind me.

I shiver deliciously as Addom smooths his hands down the sweat-slick trench of my spine. His cockhead brushes against my clit just right, and I climax again as Hasker continues to come in my mouth.

Addom was rewarding me for a job well done.

When I can't swallow any more, I come up gasping wildly for air. Thick strings of saliva and cum stretch from Hasker's pierced and knotted dick to my mouth. His last spurts stripe my lips and my chin.

The cave reels and spins around me as Addom roughly flips me over onto my back. His broad, powerful chest is heaving in and out. His gray eyes are stormy with lust. He positions himself between my legs and presses his cock against my clit again. He grinds his piercing against my thrumming nubbin. The friction is lubricated by my own slick and by the fluid weeping from Addom's slit.

I come twice more in quick succession, the taste of Hasker's semen still filling my mouth. He and Kadmon stare down at me, the younger's expression still pained by his denied release.

It makes me feel guilty coming in front of Kadmon like that, but I can't help myself. Even the warmth that Hasker deposited in my belly seems somehow orgasmic.

Tilting my head up, I watch as Addom angles his cock so that his head is pressed to my opening, and for a moment I think he's going to penetrate me.

I wince in anticipation of the pain.

"Please," I beg him. My voice is weak and frightened.

"Addom I can't take it. It's too big for me."

"I know," he rasps.

He doesn't plunge into me as I expected, although it's clear that he wants to. Part of me wants it too, even though I know it's impossible. He would split me in two with that thing.

Instead, he jerks his long shaft. His skin shifts over his veins and the hard inner core of his erection.

He presses forward slightly, and his supple, pierced head pushes just a little way inside my hole. Even that little bit is enough to stretch my tight ring.

“Addom!” I gasp.

His free hand presses on my belly, pinning me down. I hook my legs around him. He continues stroking his hard shaft with just the very tip of his cock inside me.

“Are you ready?” he growls, his voice clenching. “Are you ready to take my seed, omega?”

“Yes!” I pant. “Oh fuck, I need it inside me so bad.”

Addom tosses his head back and grunts loudly. The sound echoes between the stone walls of the cavern. His cock pulses, shooting a jet of hot semen straight into my hole. He continues pumping with his fist as he spurts more and more of his sticky fluid into my opening. I can feel its heat coating my interior.

He's coming inside me.

The Alpha is coming inside me.

Even in my almost delirious state of arousal, I have a flash of clarity. I have no protection and I've never used birth control.

This is an incredible pregnancy risk. What if his seed takes hold inside of me?

What if he makes me pregnant with a litter of Alpha babies?

But those concerns are immediately washed away as something strange begins happening inside me. Everywhere that Addom's cum is touching me begins to glow with intense pleasure, and I moan as I feel myself climaxing yet again, this time from the inside.

“Good, omega,” Addom purrs as his own thick knot swells around the base of his shaft. “Take it. Take our seed. Open yourself to the pack.”

He angles his knotted cock upward so that his tip is no longer pressed to my hole. More thick ropes of semen spurt from his slit and stripe my tummy and my breasts. It is so hot it nearly sears my skin. Everywhere it spatters on my flesh, I feel a sensation like a mini orgasm seeping into me.

“Oh God,” I whine, my voice quavering. “Don't stop. It feels so fucking good.”

Addom doesn't stop. He continues jetting his seed onto my body. He has marked me with over a dozen ropes of his cream before his orgasm finally begins to subside.

As the last of his cum dribbles onto my crotch, Addom reaches down and smooths his hand all over the front of my body, smearing his semen over my breasts and belly, working it into my skin like lotion until every inch of me is buzzing with orgasmic bliss.

The load that he squirted inside of me is starting to ooze out of my pussy and trickle down the crack of my buttocks. Addom swipes it up with his fingers and spreads some of it over my quivering thighs before pushing the rest back into my channel.

“Now our seed is inside you.”

Our seed. He keeps saying that. His is the only semen that has entered my pussy, but he makes it clear that this is a communal thing. He may be the leader of the pack, but he intends to share me with his fellows.

It feels so dirty. Such things are unheard of in the city hive. Even in the lower levels, a woman would never allow herself to be shared and used by three men like this. It is beyond sinful.

So why do I like it so much? Why do I want more? Why does my body yearn to be filled by all three of my lovers at once.

I feel weak, and my body goes limp against the stones of the floor.

But Addom isn't quite through with me yet.

I have been seed-marked, but now he must mark me with his mouth.

Lunging forward, his body covers mine as I pant beneath him. I yelp as his fingers twine and fist my hair, pulling my curls taut. His gravelly voice rumbles at my ear like the wind.

“Hang onto me,” he rasps. “This will hurt.”

He drags my head to one side, exposing the side of my neck. For a moment, I almost expect him to go straight for my jugular—to open my vein and drain my life out onto these damp stones.

Instead, his jaws clamp right at the crook of my neck and sloping shoulder. He holds me tightly, one hand fisting my hair and the other pinning my shoulder against the rough rock to steady me. My breath comes in panicked gasps and my heart hammers in my chest.

I scream as his sharp dogteeth puncture my skin. And it is not merely a sting of broken skin that I'm experiencing. There is a searing pain that I can only imagine is how it would feel to be branded by a hot iron.

I curse. I spit and hiss like an angry cat. My claws tear at the muscles of his back until I feel the wet warmth of his welling blood.

Then something shifts inside me, and I go limp.

Addom draws back, his lips stained red where he marked me. He bows his head and presses his lips to mine, and I taste the iron of my own blood.

“You did well, omega,” he says, tenderly brushing my damp curls from my forehead. He kisses me there, and I can feel the warm daub of blood his kiss leaves behind on my feverish skin.

“Lily,” I breathe. “I am Lily.”

He thumbs my lip. His eyes are studying me with wonder.

“Lily,” he purrs.

Then the moment passes, and he rises to his feet.

“You are marked now, Lily,” Addom says. “You are on your way to becoming part of the pack.”

He juts his chin toward Kadmon.

“The boy will care for you now as your body integrates our seed.”

CHAPTER 15: KADMON

By the Source, my balls ache.

Seriously, I'm worried I might be doing irreparable damage holding this load in. But Addom handed down my punishment, and I have to accept it.

Besides, it was worth it. What I did last night will make her happy.

The omega stirs in my arms. She's been writhing with lust for the past half an hour as her body integrates the seed of the other Alphas.

Her face and heaving naked breasts are glazed with dried semen. Her nipples are insanely erect, and I can't resist the temptation to strum them once. However, when I do, it sets off more echoes of pleasure in her wracked body, causing her to moan loudly and squirm against my hard cock, which just makes my poor, denied balls throb with even greater agony.

At the sound of the omega's throes, Addom and Hasker look up from the fire where they are roasting fish and baking birds' eggs. Addom rises to his feet and dusts his palms on his thighs. He strides over, looking the omega up and down with a discerning eye.

"Hold her steady," he says.

I do so, hugging her beneath her arms. Addom stoops in front of her, and the omega throws her legs open for him gyrating

her cunt in his face as if begging for his cock. His loincloth tents with his immediate arousal, and my own stiff cock oozes precum.

But Addom controls himself somehow. He bows his head and sniffs her slick hole, inhaling deeply.

“She’s ready,” he says, his voice tight. “Take her to the falls and clean her.”

He returns to the fire with Hasker, and the two of them talk in hushed voices as Hasker turns the cooking fish and inspects the speckled eggs baking in ashes near the sizzling coals.

“Come, Lily” I whisper in her ear. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She looks up at me like a child woken from a dream.

I lead her by the hand across the cave. Hasker eyes us as we go. At the far end, the waterfall thunders incessantly, and that’s where I take her. She is weak and wobbly, and she steadies herself against my arm as she enters the shallow water, which reflects wavering lines of light on her naked body.

I take off my loincloth, and Lily’s eyes go wide as she gazes at my erection. I get in the water with her.

She follows me to the edge of the waterfall, and I hold on to her as she leans back and lets the water shower her hair and spatter her bare breasts, washing away the mess from the other Alphas.

“Feel better?” I ask when she is clean.

She nods sheepishly, as if she is ashamed by the memory of what she has done.

Something catches her eye. She looks at my shoulder and touches me lightly, tracing her fingers around my shrinking wound, which is mostly healed now and doesn't hurt in the least.

"Kadmon," she gasps. "You're almost completely healed already. How..."

"I told you," I laugh, "it was just a flesh wound."

She shakes her head in wonder.

"Amazing."

Her tiny hand slides down my chest. She touches my nipple ring, circling and fidgeting with it deliciously. My already hard cock thumps with renewed desire. But Addom was very clear about my punishment.

"Stay here," I tell her. "I have something for you."

Lily looks surprised, but she does as I tell her, standing in the shoulder deep water with the falls splashing behind her. Wet tendrils of her dark red hair curl over her neck and collarbones.

I go back to the edge of the pool where I dropped my loincloth, and from the stitched pouch in the side, I retrieve my gift for her—the secret cause of my punishment. Addom glances toward me suspiciously, but he turns back to the fire.

“What do you have, Kadmon?” Lily asks, eyeing my clenched fist as I wade toward her.

When I get close to her, I open my hand, and her pretty eyes widen again before brimming with tears. I knew that this gift would make her sad, but I hope that it brings her some happiness as well, or at least some sense of closure.

“Kadmon,” she whispers as she takes the ring from my open palm. “This is Sara’s. You went back for her.”

I nod and smooth my hand over her wet shoulders and back. Even in the water, her body is warm. Addom is right, she has already begun to change even more. She’s becoming more omega every hour.

“I buried her, like you asked,” I tell her. “Among our people, this is not common. For us, when a person’s spirit passes back into the Source, then we take their empty body to the hill of stones and leave their body for the birds so that their matter can return to the sky.”

Lily turns the ring over in her hands. The blue jewel catches the light and twinkles prettily.

“But your friend was an outsider.” I touch Lily gently to let her know I mean no ill will by this term. I don’t share Hasker’s hatred of those beyond the wall. “It was only right that she should be buried according to the customs of her people.”

Tears wobble at the corners of Lily’s eyes and then tumble down her cheeks, mixing with the drops of water from the falls.

“Poor Sara,” she sighs.

“Don’t be sad,” I tell her. “Your friend isn’t gone. Nobody is ever really gone, just as nobody is ever really here. She has simply returned to her place in the Source. Look...”

With my knuckle, I catch a tear drop from her chin.

“We say that a spirit is like a drop of water from a wave on the sea. For a little while it becomes separated, and it believes it is an individual. For an instant it will sparkle in the sunshine, but eventually it will fall. This is not a bad thing. It’s good.”

I dip my finger into the pool, and her teardrop disappears as it mingles with the rest of the water.

“It just means we return to the ocean of the Source where we belong.”

Lily sniffs back her tears. She touches my arm and smiles at me.

“Thank you, Kadmon.”

I hold her tiny hands in mine and I take the ring from her.

“You should wear this,” I tell her. “So that you won’t lose it.”

I go to put it on her left hand. At first I slide it onto her little finger, but it is a bit too small, so I move it one over.

“Wait,” Lily blurts.

“What?”

She stares at the ring that I’m holding halfway on her finger. Even though her face is still red from crying, she giggles at me, and I feel I’ve done something foolish.

“On the outside, if a woman accepts a ring on that finger, it means she’s going to be married.”

Married. I have heard about this custom from the old times. Back then, one man would be bound to one woman. But things have changed since then. Omegas are far too precious and rare. They must be shared by a pack.

And soon Lily will be bonded to Addom, Hasker and me. In fact, the process has already begun.

I slide the ring home on her finger. Lily stares up at me, the lovely pools of her eyes filled with yearning. I smile and kiss her soft lips.

“Come, Lily, let me wash you a little more.”

Although she has rinsed the Alphas’ seed from her skin, we are both still dirty from our mornings trek. I wade to the rock wall and retrieve some natural yucca plant soap that we keep hidden in a recess there. I use this to clean the omega thoroughly.

Lily moans with enjoyment as I work the creamy soap into her hair and scalp. I rinse it in the falling water and wring it out. She giggles as I splash her with the water, and she playfully splashes me back. I’m glad to see her happy and smiling again.

I rub more soap over her body, massaging her sore muscles, and she closes her eyes as she begins to relax, leaning her body back into mine. She yelps lightly as my stiff cock pokes her butt. I back away, remembering my punishment, but the little omega turns and reaches for me beneath the water.

“Goodness, Kadmon,” she says as she touches me. “Your penis is so hard.”

“Aye,” I chuckle but my voice is pained. “Be careful with it, little one. It feels like it might break off.”

It’s true. My cock is so full and erect now that it hurts. I’ve never been so hard in my life. The skin is stretched so tight it feels like it will split.

“I promise not to break it,” she giggles as she begins to stroke me. “I don’t think I could if I tried. God, Kadmon, it feels as hard as polished wood.”

Her little fist glides over my shaft and palms the straining bulb of my head. It feels so good that I almost give in. But again I remember my punishment.

“No, Lily.” I take her wrists and place her hands at her sides, even though it pains me to do so. “You mustn’t do that.”

But the little omega is insistent. She bends her hips forward until I can feel her little tuft of hair brushing against the tip of my stiff dick. She gives me the naughtiest look from underneath her long lashes beaded with crystals of water like morning dew.

“Come on, Kadmon” she whispers, “The others can’t see.”

I glance into the cave. Addom and Hasker are still by the fire talking. And Lily is right—with our lower bodies submerged beneath the churning surface of the water, they can’t see our sensitive parts touching.

“Please.” Her voice is barely audible over the rush of the falls.
“I promise I won’t tell.”

Her sneaky little fingers wrap around me again. She levers my cock back and forth, stroking my tingling tip against the hard pearl of her clitoris. Even surrounded by water, I can feel the heat emanating from her core.

“Lily, don’t...”

She strokes me from my head to my shaft, twisting her small but firm fist with each pump. For one so small, her grip is surprisingly strong.

“Don’t what?” she teases me.

I understand why she enrages Hasker so. She is disobedient. Wild. Tameless. My body is far stronger than hers, but I’m afraid that her passion is more than a match for me.

I also understand what Addom meant when he used to warn me about how dangerous an omega can be.

It’s true. Before we found Lily, I never once considered disobeying a direct order from the pack leader. But now, with this little creature pumping my throbbing member and grazing it against her own needy sex, that is about to change.

“Don’t what?” she whispers again, with a wicked grin.

“Don’t stop,” I breathe.

The blood is roaring through my veins with all the force of the crashing waterfall. With her other hand, Lily cups my balls,

which are tightening with my impending release. She spreads her legs and rubs my cockhead between her nether lips.

“You’re so good to me, Kadmon,” She whines. Her pupils are dilated again. “I want you to come inside of me. I want you to come inside my pussy like Addom did.”

If Addom or Hasker caught us now, we’d both be dead. But it’s not so much the punishment that I’m afraid of as it is the fear of letting my pack master down.

Fuck, why did he make me clean Lily? He knew the temptation. That must have been part of my punishment.

“Kadmon,” she whispers. “I need you so bad.”

The water laps at her full breasts, giving flashes of her hard pink nipples. The sheen of her wet skin is too delicious to resist. I’m unable to tell her to stop, and I’m unable to pull my hips away. The way her hand is tugging me feels too fucking good, and more than that, I can feel the rim of her tight hole opening to let the head of my cock in.

“Please,” she whines.

One hard thrust is all it would take to spear my cock inside of her now. I know that as soon as I entered that sweet tightness, I would explode within seconds, filling her and coating her with my seed.

But that’s forbidden.

At the last moment, my hand darts out and seizes her neck. As my fingers squeeze, I can feel the pulse of her life ticking in

the veins of her throat. Her eyes widen with shock, but surprisingly her wicked grin widens too.

“Yes,” she breathes.

It’s too late.

I grunt as a hot pulse shoots along my cock. My knot swells.

I’m certain the first shot of semen enters her hole before I can shove her away from me. The subsequent spurts are released into the pool, and the white globules move in the churning water.

“Oh fuck,” I mutter, releasing her throat.

The omega throws herself forward like a pouncing cat and kisses me. Her soft lips are warm and insistent. I return her kiss even more ardently, crushing my mouth to hers so roughly it fucking stings.

She is the most incredible creature I’ve ever known. All I want is to bury myself deep inside of her. I want our naked bodies to melt together until we both disappear.

Thankfully, part of me remembers where we are.

Fisting her wet hair, I yank her back before Addom and Hasker have a chance to see us.

It takes me a moment to realize that something is wrong with the omega. Her face suddenly looks pale and tinged with sickly green. Her eyes are circled with darkness and appear sunken. Her body begins to twitch and convulse, but these are not the spasms of pleasure that I saw before.

My heart clenches like a fist inside my chest.

My omega is dying.

“Lily!” I shout as I pat her clammy cheeks.

But she can’t hear me. Or if she can, she shows no sign of it. Her lids flutter as her eyeballs roll over white in their sockets and her jaw hangs slack.

“Lily!”

I hold her tightly and drag her to the edge of the pool. I call for Addom and Hasker, but they have already noticed the commotion and they are coming near. I lift the poor omega up to them, and they carry her onto the dry stone and lie her dripping body upon her back. Hasker steadies her seizing body to keep her from hurting herself.

“What’s wrong with her?” Hasker growls.

Despite the contempt he has shown for her, he seems genuinely concerned about her now. The bonding process has already begun, and despite his misgivings about her as an outsider, he feels the need to protect her.

“It’s my fault,” I blurt, bowing my head in shame. “I disobeyed Addom. While I was bathing the omega, I allowed her to touch me, and I released my seed. That is what caused her to be afflicted like this.”

Hasker glances down at my knotted dick. He shakes his head and grumbles.

“Don’t think so highly of yourself, boy. Your seed isn’t *that* potent.”

“Not my seed,” I stammer. “But my sin has caused this. Addom forbade my release, and I disobeyed him. Now the Source has made the omega sick to punish my disobedience.”

Addom is checking Lily’s pulse at her throat, her wrists, and the big arteries at the top of her thighs. He pauses long enough to glare at me, and I think he’s going to castigate me, but he doesn’t.

“Come on, boy,” he says. “Do you think I would send you off naked with the omega and expect nothing to happen?”

“But...”

“No Alpha could resist that,” he says. “I knew you would hold out as long as you could, but I also knew the little one would best you, eventually. Besides, she needed your seed as well to complete the process. But that’s not what caused this spell. Hasker?”

The bald Alpha holds Lily’s head between his massive hands and braces her against his lap. He dips his face and sniffs her, inhaling her breath.

“It’s the outsider poison,” he growls. “I smelled it on her before. Now the scent of it is diminished.”

“I don’t understand,” Addom says, staring down at Lily’s shuddering, naked body. “If the poison is dissipating, why is she becoming sick.”

Hasker shrugs.

“I’ve heard of this kind of thing,” he says. “The outsiders deliberately poison themselves because they think it is medicine. But the medicine only makes them sick, and they become dependent on it. With enough time, the dependence is so strong that they need the poison to stay alive.”

“You mean she could die?” I gasp.

That thought is too terrible to consider. Even though I have only known her for barely a day, this omega has become the most important thing in my life. I don’t know what we would do if we lost her.

Addom gathers the sick, shivering, naked omega in his arms and throws her over his shoulder. Her wet hair drips down his back and sticks to him like vines. Hasker and I rise to our feet.

“Kadmon, get your clothes and your belongings. Hasker douse the fire. We must make haste.”

“What are we going to do?” I ask, trying to hide the panic in my voice as I dress myself quickly.

“We must take her back to the city,” Addom says resolutely.

“The outsider healer will know what to do.”

“The other omega?” Hasker asks. “What if she doesn’t know what to do?”

“Then we must pray that the Source will give Lily strength and help her heal.”

PART THREE:
THE SOURCE

CHAPTER 16: LILY

The Alphas' howls echo through the night forest.

The woods are eerie and blue with moonlight. I race through the trees. The brambles bloody my ankles and twigs whip my face and sting my eyes, blinding me. I slam into the rough bark of a trunk. Spinning, I stumble and fall to the ground, scraping my knees on the tangled roots and rough stones.

I scramble to get away, breath panting, fingers clawing at the soil, feet slipping in the carpet of dead leaves.

But it's too late.

The Alphas are already here. They have me surrounded.

There are four of them. Four hulking silhouettes. They stand around me at the four points of the compass like they are preparing for some grim, primitive ceremony, and I'm the sacrifice. Their mirrored eyes glow dully in the moonlight. Plumes of steaming breath curls around their heads.

"Help me!" I scream.

My voice is shrill, but it has no echo. The dark forest simply swallows it, like a coin dropped into a bottomless well.

The Alphas just laugh cruelly as they slowly close in around me. Their disgusting wet-fur stench fills my nostrils. My ears fill with the percussion of my heart.

Scrambling to my feet, I make a desperate attempt to escape, darting toward a gap between two of the shadowy Alphas.

They are too swift for me, and with a quick sidestep they close the gap, shoving me backward with their rough hands.

I lunge toward another gap. The same result. The Alphas just push me back into the center of their tightening ring.

“Please somebody help me!” I shriek again.

My voice breaks. Scalding tears are now streaming down my face.

The Alphas are so close now I can smell their rancid, cannibal breath. They snarl and huff and pop their jaws like wolves.

White fangs flash in the moonlight.

These are not the Alphas who rescued me. These are the farlanders. The horrible, disfigured creatures that attacked me in the woods.

They are grunting and chanting something over and over again, but their accent obscures it.

Their faces begin to resolve in the dimness. They are mangled and bloody. One of them is missing an eye, the gaping socket dripping black blood, and in my horror, it takes me a moment to recognize him.

Deakon.

I scream and spin away, but immediately bump against another hideous Alpha. His face is also familiar. It is Chappel, though transformed now with far lander features—a heavy brow and ridged nose.

The Alphas continue to chant, and now I can understand them, though just barely. They are growling my name over and over.

Lily...Lily...Lily...

Chappel snarls and spins me around, and I find myself facing Bishop now. His wiry black beard and eyebrows are wild with the Alpha mutation. He looks like a monster.

I'm pushed backward one more time, and I am faced with the most terrifying creature of them all. His face is a misshapen horror, and his eyes are shining balls of blood.

It is Dr. Lucian in Alpha form.

"Lily," he hisses.

I scream from deep in my soul. So loud that the illusion shatters. I scream the entire forest away. It disappears in a burst of blinding light.

"Lily. Lily, it's all right. You are safe."

Strong hands are pinning me down against a firm cushion. At first I struggle, but then I realize those hands are protecting me from my own thrashing terror. And the face gazing down into mine is no twisted horror. It is handsome. Sculptural. Nearly angelic in the dim light.

It is Addom.

"You're safe," he says again.

That rolling, rumbling purr of his voice soothes me. The warm firmness of his hands fills me with a sense of security. I exhale a sigh of relief, as I realize that the dream is over.

But as I glance around, I can't help wondering where the heck we are.

This place is dark and cavernous, a circular room with a high dome reaching overhead. The walls are covered in metal paneling. There are other people here too. Alphas and omegas. They are milling around quietly, carefully stepping over the thick cables and conduits running along the floor.

I also notice a strange humming noise. It's not a sound so much as it is a feeling. A vibration deep in the very marrow of my bones.

I'm lying on a simple pallet with my head propped on a pile of pillows. Hasker and Kadmon are squatting by my feet, watching me intently.

Even in the darkness of this shadowy place, Kadmon's face is bright with happiness to see me. Surprisingly, even gruff Hasker is unable to hide the fact that he is glad I'm okay.

But what happened? The last thing I remember, Kadmon was bathing me at the waterfall and we were kissing.

I rub my tender wrists, realizing that those annoying iron shackles have finally been removed. I try to rise from the bed, but Addom places his hand over my naked chest and pins me firmly but gently in place.

"Be still, little one. We need to consult the healer."

That's when I realize that there is a metal pole with a clear bag of fluid hanging beside me. A narrow tube runs to my arm where it is wrapped in white bandages.

They've got me on a fluid drip, and Addom is talking about healers. Is this place a hospital? If so, it's the strangest hospital I've ever seen. Hospitals are normally white and brightly lit. This place feels more like a dark cathedral or temple.

Addom turns and nods to Kadmon, who quickly departs somewhere behind me. I can hear voices back there, and soon he returns with a woman following close behind.

I am shocked at first to see that she is naked except for a few strips of fur covering her loins. I don't know why that should be so shocking to me at this point, considering all the nudity I've experienced first hand over the past couple of days. In fact, I'm nude myself at the moment. But seeing a naked woman—or nearly naked at least—is a new experience for me.

What's even more surprising about her appearance, however, are her piercings. She has several metal rings adorning her face—one through her eyebrow, another through the wing of her nostril, and yet one more in the middle of her bottom lip. And that's not to mention the multiple rings in the lobes and cartilage of her ears.

However, the one that catches my eye is the glinting ring pierced through her left nipple. The woman catches me looking at it, and even in the dimness of this place I can tell that she blushes slightly. That's unusual. I wouldn't have expected a woman inside the zone to be bashful. Especially not one clothed—or rather unclothed—the way that she is.

But my biggest shock of all comes when she opens her mouth to speak.

“Hello, Lily,” she says. “My name is Hannah.”

It’s not what she says that surprises me. Her name certainly doesn’t ring any bells. But what I’m not expecting is her crystal clear accent that I have no trouble understanding.

“You’re an outsider,” I gasp.

Now it’s my turn to blush, and I’m grateful that the shadows of this place at least partly conceal my embarrassment. Obviously I’m much more of an outsider than Hannah, since she has clearly been here for a while. I can’t believe how quickly my perspective has changed. I’m already talking as if I belong in this place, and I don’t even know where this place is.

Hannah seems to notice my slight twinge of embarrassment and gives me an empathetic smile that let’s me know no offense has been taken. She crouches beside me and presses her palm against my forehead.

“Your fever’s gone,” she says. “And your color has come back. How do you feel?”

“Weak,” I tell her, “but mostly okay. What happened to me?”

Hannah sighs. She glances around at the three Alphas standing over me protectively. I notice that her neck and shoulder bear three marks that look as though they were made by teeth.

Suddenly I remember where Addom marked the crook of my neck with his fangs, and I touch myself there, feeling the scar.

Hannah turns back toward me.

“You gave us all quite a scare, Lily,” she says. “I need to ask you something, and please don’t take this the wrong way.”

I nod.

“Lily, are you a nihiloxin user?”

I cast my eyes down in shame. Even though the drug is not illegal in the city hives and its use is widespread, there is still a certain stigma attached to it.

“Yes,” I mutter.

Hannah smiles and squeezes my arm.

“Hey, don’t be ashamed,” she says. “I used to take that shit too. In fact, I had a similar reaction to yours when I first came here several weeks ago. You were experiencing withdrawals. The worst of it should be over now. Do you feel any nausea?”

I shake my head. The only thing I feel in my stomach is an intense, gnawing hunger, and right on cue my tummy growls irritably. Hannah frowns.

“You must be starving. We’ll get you some food.”

She turns to Addom on the other side of the bed.

“She should be able to keep food down now. Broth would be good, and maybe some eggs.”

Addom nods. He moves over to speak to Kadmon, and soon the younger Alpha is sprinting away, presumably to retrieve some food for me.

I groan as I sit up in the bed.

“What is this place?” I ask her, glancing around. “Are we in a hospital?”

Hannah shakes her head.

“No. We’re actually inside the SynerGen headquarters.

My body stiffens, and I sit up straight on my pallet.

“Don’t worry,” Hannah says, placing her hand on my shoulder.

“We’re in the old SynerGen headquarters. From before the cataclysm. The facility is no longer in use. Well...actually it is, but not by the SynerGen people. It belongs to us now.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. After what Dr. Lucian did to me—the way that he betrayed my trust—the very mention of my former place of employment is enough to make my skin crawl.

Still, this has to be more than just some weird coincidence.

“But I don’t understand,” I say, looking around. “I mean, what am I doing in this place? Why SynerGen?”

This time it’s Addom who answers.

“We brought you here so you would be close to the Source. That is what healed you.”

He has returned to the side of my bed while Hasker continues brooding a little farther away though he never takes his eyes off of me.

“The Source?”

I have heard them speak about it before, but I thought they were just referring to some sort of abstract concept. Some part of their religion. But the way Addom is talking about it, makes it sound like it is some physical thing.

“What is the Source?” I whisper.

“Take a look for yourself,” Hannah says and gestures behind me.

I turn around to see what she’s pointing at.

“Oh my God,” I gasp.

Hannah sets to work removing the bandage from my arm.

“Well, as far as the Alphas are concerned, ‘oh my God’ is about right.”

* * *

A few minutes later, I’m on my feet. I still feel a bit wobbly, so I have to lean against Kadmon as he walks me around the perimeter of the room. Hannah walks along beside me, while Hasker and Addom walk ahead of us, quietly discussing something.

We are doing laps around the Source, the massive device that dominates the center of this enormous space.

Anyway, I *think* it’s a device. It is like a huge sphere, but instead of a smooth surface, it is covered in matte black cones. Other groups of males and females are also circling the Source, and their heads are bowed as if they are praying or meditating. Others are lying on pallets similar to the one I woke up on, apparently healing from wounds or sickness.

One thing is for sure—that strange vibrational sensation I’ve been feeling ever since I came too? It’s definitely emanating from this thing.

“So...what exactly does it do?” I whisper to Hannah.

She shrugs.

“Honestly? I have no fucking clue.” I can’t help but giggle at Hannah’s brusque demeanor. She goes on. “All I really know is that it emits some kind of healing energy, but I don’t understand how it works.”

Hannah fidgets with her lip ring.

“Here’s what I do know. This thing, whatever it is, was built by SynerGen. And as far as I can tell, it is dead center at ground zero of the zone.”

She pauses to let the implications of that sink in.

“So SynerGen caused the cataclysm?” I whisper.

“It sure seems that way,” Hannah says. “Whether on purpose or by accident, who knows? Obviously the Source had devastating effects on the majority of the population who were turned into betas. But on the other hand, it has some sort of healing powers for the rest of us.”

She nods at the convalescing people lying on cots and pallets around the room.

“As you can see, we bring the sick and wounded to this place to help them recover more quickly. In your case, we put you on fluids because you were vomiting too much to keep water down, and we needed some way to keep you from becoming dehydrated. But other than that, we didn’t give you any medicine. Your recovery is all thanks to the Source.”

She runs her hand through her hair.

“You’re lucky that they brought you here when they did. If you had undergone those same withdrawals out in the wilderness, you very likely could have died.”

Ahead of us, I can sense Hasker tense at those words.

“But what about you, Hannah?” I ask. “You said you’re not from this place. Are you a doctor?”

“No, I’m a scientist. A research assistant to be exact. I worked for SynerGen just like you did. Then, about six weeks ago I came into the zone as part of a research assignment as an assistant...”

Her face becomes pale as if she is reliving a terrible memory.

“Hannah,” I touch her arm. “The lead researcher on the team. Was it Dr. Lucian?”

Her face takes on a bitter expression and she nods.

“Yes,” she says. “That fucking bastard.”

Her voice cracks.

I stop walking and clutch her arm. Kadmon pauses beside me, and Addom and Hasker turn to see what’s going on.

“Hannah, was there another woman with your group? Another research assistant named Eva?”

Hannah’s mouth becomes tight, and I can feel the dull ache of tears forming behind my eyes. I don’t know exactly what she has to say, but I can tell it isn’t good. I vaguely realize that my thumb is unconsciously fidgeting with the ring Kadmon brought me.

Hannah nods.

“She was your friend, right? She talked about you.”

My vision blurs with tears. Kadmon’s grip tightens on my arm to keep me steady.

“I’m sorry, Lily,” Hannah whispers. “When those men—those bastards—when they hung us out like bait and exposed us to the zone, Eva became a beta.

She doesn’t say anything else. She doesn’t have to. I understand what she is telling me.

Eva is dead. Just like what happened to Sara.

A tear rolls down the bridge of my nose and falls to the floor. Kadmon catches me before I collapse.

“Come, Lily,” he says gently. “You should lie down. You need to rest.”

CHAPTER 17: LILY

“Wake up, Lily.”

My eyes flutter open to golden and green light. My body jolts upright, shocked by my unfamiliar surroundings.

“Easy,” Addom says, sliding his big arms around me. “You’re at home. Remember?”

I take a deep breath to calm myself and blink away the sleep from my eyes. We are in the dwelling shared by three Alphas, and now by me as well. I’m still getting used to thinking of it as home.

The dwelling was once a lavish penthouse, back before the cataclysm. Now it is so overgrown with lush green plants, it is a veritable indoor jungle. The massive floor to ceiling window along the eastern-facing wall provides a breathtaking view of the city. It also gives the impression that we are living in a giant terrarium. Rain water caught in a massive collection tank on the roof of this building provides a source of running water. A small waterfall trickles from the ceiling into what used to be a recessed living room but is now a shallow pool framed with curling green ferns.

Our bed is in the corner. Actually, it’s more like a nest formed from plant fibers, grass, and moss. At night, surrounded by three naked Alphas, it is surprisingly warm and comfortable.

“Come,” Addom says, helping me to my feet. “We have a big day ahead of us.”

I can hear Kadmon and Hasker moving about and talking and the crackle of fire. They must be out on the patio deck that is also covered with greenery and serves as our rustic firewood kitchen.

“A big day?” I ask rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

It’s been a few days since Hannah declared me well enough to leave the proximity of the Source. Today I feel like I’m back to one hundred percent. Even better than that, actually.

Addom places his strong hand on my shoulder and guides me to the outer balcony.

“Yes,” he answers me. “Tonight we will finally be bound. You must prepare.”

Bound. The Alphas have mentioned it briefly before, but they haven’t gone into many details and I haven’t asked. But I have some idea of what it involves.

Over the past few days, they have been gentle with me as I was recovering. But last night they marked me once again, like they did at the waterfall. This time, however, Kadmon was allowed to finish as well. Several times.

But still, despite everything we have done, we have not actually had sex yet. It sounds like that will soon change.

“W-what is the binding ceremony like?” I stammer.

Addom smooths his big hand over my back. His touch is gentle but firm.

“Tonight we will claim your body,” he says as if that explains everything. “We must show the tribe that you belong to us now, in accordance with our laws.”

“When you say claim my body, you mean...you’re going to fuck me?”

I’ve known that this was coming. I’ve been awaiting it with a mix of excitement and apprehension. There’s no denying the physical attraction I have for all three of these Alphas, even Hasker. In fact, it has grown deeper with every passing day since they first marked my body with their seed. Now there is nothing I want more than to feel them moving inside me. I want to go all the way with all three of them.

But these Alphas aren’t into casual sex. They want to breed me.

And an even greater source of apprehension are those words that Addom keeps using.

Claim. Possess. Belong.

Okay, fine, when I was back in the city hives, my life was hardly one of exuberant freedom. I was basically a wage slave for the SynerGen Corporation. And my comings and goings were greatly restricted by the draconian laws of the new world.

But no one *owned* me. The way these Alphas are talking, you would think I was their pet.

I shouldn’t like that idea. I really shouldn’t.

Addom just gives me a mysterious smile. We step out onto the wide balcony patio where Hasker and Kadmon are crouching by a small fire cooking. Hasker's intense, dark eyes flash under his thick eyebrows, and his heavy beard makes his expression unreadable, but I'm sure he's just scowling under that hair. Kadmon rises and brings me a wooden board laden with food.

After a lifetime of eating synthetic food, it seemed so strange to eat things from nature, but I'm starting to get used to the idea.

"Eat," Addom says sternly. "You will need your strength for the binding."

I'll need my strength? Yeah, this ceremony definitely sounds like more than a wedding. And then there's that little turn of phrase that Addom used a moment ago.

He said we were going to *show* the tribe. Does that mean we're going to have an audience? I'm not sure how I feel about that. What we did before in the cave and last night in this very dwelling was private, far from prying eyes, and that's how it should be. Over the past few days I've learned how pleasurable intimacy can be, but it is also dirty. Something to be hidden. Something to be ashamed of.

And if we are going to have an audience for this claiming ritual, how big will it be?

But when I try to ask these questions, Addom just responds as before, like a broken record.

“Eat,” he urges. “You will need your strength.”

* * *

After breakfast we depart.

Our jungle penthouse is several stories up. Instead of taking the stairs down to street level, the Alphas rappel down the thick, ropey vines climbing the walls of the tower. I am lashed to Addom’s back with leather straps that he assures me are secure. Nevertheless, I hold on to his thick neck for dear life. By the time we get down to the ground, however, my nervousness has started to fade, and I find myself actually enjoying being the Jane to his Tarzan, just like in the antique movies I used to watch as a girl.

Only this Jane has three Tarzans.

Due to my convalescence, I haven’t spent much time down on the streets of the city yet. In fact, this is my first time walking around in the daylight. The atmosphere is surreal. For one thing, the buildings are overgrown with plants and vines like they were ancient jungle temples instead of skyscrapers.

But even weirder is the sense of space and emptiness. Back in the city hives, it doesn’t matter where you go; everyplace is crammed with anxious, busy people—the trains, the pedestrian gantries, the office lobbies and food canteens.

Here, however, there is room to breathe. The grass covered roads are spacious, the plant-filtered air is oxygen rich and energizing. And best of all, you can actually hear yourself think. No shouting crowds or clanging machinery here; just

the gentle moan of the wind drifting through the manmade canyons.

That's not to say that the streets are completely empty. We pass many other groups of people along the way—clutches of tall, broad shouldered Alphas surrounding their much smaller and more delicate omegas covered in piercings.

All of them stare unabashedly as we pass. They are curious about me. Curious about the strange little outsider whose skin bears no jewelery.

It makes me feel extra naked, if that is even a thing.

There are also some groups of Alphas, mostly younger ones, who do not have an omega with them. These eye me with particular interest. Whenever this happens, I notice Kadmon putting his body in front of mine to block their view.

He's being protective of me. Or maybe *possessive* is a better word.

At last we arrive at our destination. The building is so obscured and overgrown with plants that it's difficult to tell what it once was from the outside, but as we step indoors, I recognize it as the lobby of a hotel.

I have only seen such things in pictures. While there are hotels in the city hives, they are mostly restricted to the upper levels. Only the elites do much traveling. The rest of us never leave the cities of our birth.

Of course, I have become an exception.

“Over here,” Addom says.

At the rear of the dark, cavernous lobby, there are three huge Alphas lounging and chatting. They look up as we approach, and they pass easy greetings with my guys. Behind them is a series of broad archways opening onto a room filled with wavering skeins of bluish light reflecting off water. I'm expecting a swimming pool, but what I find inside is a bit different.

The air inside is thick and humid. A classical style colonnade and tiled floor surround a few steaming, shallow pools that I realize must be hot baths.

“Lily!”

There, waiting for us at the water's edge, is Hannah. I realize those Alphas sitting outside must be her mates.

She rushes forward to greet us, throwing her arms around me in a big hug like we've been best friends all our lives. Her piercings are cool against my bare skin. Naked hugs are a bit of a surprise for me. Certainly not something that friends would do back in the city hive.

Then again, considering everything I've been through in the past week, this is nothing. Besides, all awkwardness aside, it's nice to have a friend here. Even though she has gone native, so to speak, she still remembers life on the outside, which means she's the only person who can relate to my situation.

“Hannah will bathe you in preparation for the ceremony,”

Addom says like it's no big deal. He nods toward Hannah.

“She has been through the same process not long ago, so she knows what to do.”

“Wait, what?” I gasp. “Bathe me? But—“

Addom raises his hand and cuts me off.

“You must prepare. Hasker, Kadmon, and I will leave you now. We must meditate. We will be just outside, so you will be safe in this place.”

And just like that, the three bulky Alphas turn and head back the way we came. Only Kadmon casts a longing glance over his shoulder as he goes, his eyes glinting blue between the dark strands of his long hair.

“All right,” Hannah says with a clap of her hands. “You ready for me to scrub you down, babe?”

I spin around in disbelief. Hannah just stares at me, her eyebrows raised, and her expression serious. Then I notice a twitching at the corner of her mouth, and a moment later the sound of her laughter echoes through the colonnades surrounding the baths.

“Lily, I wish you could see your face right now,” she giggles. “Priceless. Absolutely priceless.”

“So you’re not gonna...”

“What? Bathe you?” she says, mimicking Addom’s deep stern voice. “Um, no. You’re a big girl, so I think you can handle it yourself. I’ll keep you company though.”

I take off my loin cloth and place it by the pool. Hannah does the same with hers. Something glints between her thighs and catches my eye.

She's pierced down there too.

Hannah catches me looking, and I glance away, but I can feel the rush of heat in my cheeks. Am I going to have a piercing like that too?

I don't bother asking now. I wouldn't even know how to broach the question. Besides, I'm ready to relax, and the steaming waters of the hot baths are enticing.

CHAPTER 18: LILY

Hannah explains that the water for these baths comes from natural underground hot springs. Back before the cataclysm, this hotel was some kind of resort, and the hot baths were the main attraction.

As Hannah and I lounge in the steaming water, we talk for a while about everyday things, but eventually our conversation comes back around to the Source.

“What could it be?” I ask Hannah. “I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

She shrugs while working suds into her hair.

“All we know for sure is that it’s the cause of the mutations in the zone.” She pauses and thinks for a moment as she slicks her shampooed hair back. “And we know that it was made by SynerGen.”

She submerges, and I can see the wavering form of her body beneath the surface as she runs her hands over her head underwater, rinsing her hair.

Hannah is right. The implication of that is huge. Whether intentionally or by accident, SynerGen caused the cataclysm. The single most destructive event in history. If word of that were to get out, it would shake the entire world.

After a moment, Hannah breaks the surface, squinting and wiping her rinsed hair back from her face.

“Hannah,” I say, “what if this gets out? About SynerGen and the Source.”

She shakes her head and chuckles bitterly.

“That’s the thing,” she says. “It’s never going to get out. All of the evidence is quarantined here in the zone.”

“But *we* know,” I insist. “We could tell people.”

“Who?” she asks, leaning back against the side of the bath.

“Who are you going to tell? And more important, how are you going to tell them? You’ve seen the firepower they have surrounding the zone. You’d get blown to smithereens before you even got close to that quarantine wall.”

She lolls her head back and studies the tile ceiling overhead, obscured with steam.

“Besides,” she adds, “even if you could tell the outside world, think about the effect it would have. There would be riots probably. It could undermine the entire foundation of society. Is that really what you want?”

I hadn’t thought about it that way. Still, the truth is the truth, and people have a right to know. We’ve all been lied to for all these years.

“Well what about this?” I ask her. “Now, I’m not necessarily saying this is a good idea, but what would happen if the power to the Source was turned off.”

Hannah tilts her head forward. Her eyes are wide, and they dart around the room.

“Lily, listen to me,” she says in a whisper. “You mustn’t talk like that. If the Alphas heard you...that thing is the center of the universe to them.”

“I know, I know,” I tell her, surprised by her reaction. “I mean, I said I wasn’t really suggesting we try to do that. But, well... just for argument’s sake, what do you think would happen?”

Hannah relaxes a little. She rolls her eyes back as she thinks.

“I’m not really sure,” she says. “But I don’t think it would be good for the people of the zone. I mean, we know that the energy field that it emits definitely dissipates as you get farther away, right? That’s why the Alphas that live in the far lands are so messed up. And that’s why it has no effect on people outside the zone. Beyond the wall.”

We both get quiet for a moment as we think about that world beyond the wall. The civilized world that we have left behind.

“Do you ever miss it?” I ask. “The outside world, I mean?”

Hannah’s eyes grow distant and sad.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I shouldn’t have...”

Hannah shakes her head.

“No it’s okay,” she says. “I mean, if you’re talking about the overcrowding in the city hives, the smoggy air, the flavorless food...the flavorless life that I was leading from day to day. No. I don’t miss any of that. But there are people I miss.”

Hannah inhales deeply, holds it for a moment, and then lets it out, her shoulders sinking like she’s breathing out all of her

tension.

“I was married,” she says. “I had a husband. I do miss him. And I wish there was some way I could, you know...just let him know that I’m alive.”

She shakes her head, and looks down at her body, at the metal piercing in her nipple that is right at the surface of the water. Beneath the surface, her hand is resting on her belly, and I have a sudden intuition.

Hannah is pregnant. Pregnant with an Alpha baby.

“Then again, maybe it’s better that he doesn’t know what’s happened to me...”

For a moment, she grows silent, and I don’t know what to say. The only sound is the faint lapping of the water around the edge of the bath. Then she goes on.

“He was a good guy.” Hannah says. “He still is, I suppose. I mean, I *think* I loved him. I dunno. But with my Alphas, everything is different. The bond that I have with them goes so much deeper than love. It’s like...”

She looks around the steamy air as if she might find the right word floating there like a butterfly on the breeze.

“Fate,” she says at last. “It feels like fate. I know that probably doesn’t make much sense, but that’s the only way I can explain it. Our bond is so strong.”

I wave my arms slowly under the water, enjoying the warm sensations on my skin.

“I guess I’ll understand soon enough,” I say quietly.

Hannah crosses the shallow pool and joins me by the stairs.

“You’re going to be fine,” she says. “Trust me.”

I shake my head.

“I don’t know. I can’t believe I’m going to be bound to them. I hardly even know them. I mean, Kadmon, maybe. He’s the most...sensitive. And I have to admit that Addom has his, um...nice qualities. But Hasker? He hates me. How can I be bound to someone that hates me?”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Hannah says simply.

I laugh, and the sound echoes through the colonnades.

“Have you seen the way he looks at me?”

“I saw the way he looked at you when you were sick and unconscious, Lily. He looked like his heart was breaking again.”

“Again?”

“You don’t know what happened to him, do you?”

“No. What do you mean?”

Hannah shakes her head.

“Alphas,” she mutters. “There’s a lot that I like about them, but sometimes I swear they think we’re supposed to be mind readers or something.”

“Hannah, what happened to Hasker?”

She frowns.

“It happened before I came to the zone, so I’ve only heard about it second hand.” She sighs. “He used to be part of a different pack before he joined with Addom and Kadmon. And he had an omega mate too. She died. All of them died. It was outsiders.”

My hand reflexively raises to cover my mouth.

“You mean outsiders killed Hasker’s whole pack?” I ask.

Hannah nods.

“And it’s much worse for Alphas when they lose their mate. Their spirits are bonded at such a deep level, when that bond is broken, it leaves wounds that never heal.”

A dull pain pulses behind my eyeballs, and my vision gets misty with tears.

“No wonder Hasker hates me,” I mutter. “I’m an outsider.”

Hanna places a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

“He doesn’t hate you,” she says. “And besides, you’re not an outsider anymore. You’re an omega.”

I give her a smile.

“Thanks Hannah,” I say. “I’m so lucky to have found a friend like you here. I don’t know how I’d be able to deal without you.”

She grins.

“All right, all right,” she says. “Time to get out of this water. It’s making you all mushy. Come on.”

CHAPTER 19: LILY

Addom said that there was much to prepare, but it certainly doesn't seem that way. Hannah and I just spend the whole day relaxing in the baths, getting out for a while whenever we start to become too pruny. At one point, Kadmon and one of Hannah's Alphas bring us a tray of fruit to eat. I practically feel like an aristocrat in the upper level of the city hive with servants to wait on me hand and foot.

It's nice and relaxing and talking with Hannah. In fact, for a little while, I even forget my apprehension about what's coming.

But eventually, the day comes to an end, and the bath house darkens as the sun goes down outside the narrow, fogged windows.

"It's almost time," Hannah says. "You need to get dried off."

She brings me a towel from a cabinet by the wall.

"Hannah," I ask. "Will there be other people there? Like... watching?"

She nods, and a blush fills her cheeks. I remember that she just went through this process relatively recently.

"There will be," she says. "The claiming has been announced throughout the community, and everyone of age is welcome to attend."

She ruffles her own hair with a towel.

“Considering that you’re an outsider, you can probably count on a large audience.” Her blush darkens. “At least, that was the case for me.”

There are a million questions running through my mind, but I don’t even know where to begin, so I don’t bother to ask. Whatever happens happens. There’s no backing out now.

“So, um...” I glance around the dimming bath hall. “Is there like...something I’m supposed to wear?”

Hannah shakes her head.

“No,” she says. “No clothes.”

Okay. So it’s going to be that kind of ritual.

A few minutes later another omega arrives to inform us that they are ready for me. Hannah and the other omega take my hands and lead me upstairs and down a series of broad corridors. At last we pass through a set of double doors of elaborately carved wood.

The room on the other side is a large rectangular ballroom with galleries running around the sides and an upper balcony. The floor is covered with a deep green carpet of live moss, and a few faerie rings of mushrooms have sprouted. In the center there is a low circular dais, also covered in moss and ringed with burning candles.

The light from the flickering flames only push the darkness back as far as the edge of the galleries, and even the high ceilings are mostly lost in the shadows, though I can see the

twinkle of glass chandeliers overhead, and a flash of green curling vines.

I have never seen anything like this in the city hives, though I have heard talk of such spectacular architecture in the upper levels. But those rooms would be new and well maintained by laborers and servants. They would have glossy, pristine floors and working electricity.

This room, on the other hand, is undergoing the gradual process of reclamation by nature. And that gives it an eerie beauty beyond anything crafted by mortal hands.

The ballroom seems to be silent at first, but soon I realize that is not the case, just as no place is ever truly silent. As we approach the dais in the middle, my ears pick up the rustle of furs and impatient shuffle of feet. Someone coughs in the wings.

That's when I see them. There must be dozens of them.

No. Hundreds.

They are dark forms, little more than silhouettes occupying the archways of the outer galleries and lining the bannister of the upper balcony. Alphas and omegas. Their mirrored eyes send back the candlelight in a greenish glow like the eyes of wolves.

Goosebumps flare on my flesh.

They are going to watch. They are going to look on while I am claimed. While my body is roughly used. While shameful gasps of pleasure are wrung from my helpless lips.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper to Hannah as we near the dais.

“You have no choice,” she answers. She squeezes my hand and adds, “And you *can* do it.”

My chest feels tight with panic as I climb the three shallow steps up the dais. The moss is warm and soft beneath my bare soles. The heat from the candles warms my ankles briefly as we pass into the ring.

Hannah gives my hand one more reassuring squeeze. I try to hold on to her, but she slips away. She and the other omega depart, descending the dais on opposite sides and blending into the deep shadows like ghosts.

Now I’m alone.

Alone and naked, my flesh lit by the flickering yellow glow of the candles. The gathered crowd, invisible but for their shining eyes, murmurs in anticipation like an audience before the overture of a concert.

I turn, scanning my eyes around in a full circle. My pulse thunders in my ears.

The murmur of the crowd drops off to almost total silence, and a moment later I understand why. Three dark and massive shapes stalk out from the darkness. They circle me with slow, deliberate, predatory steps, gradually closing in. Even before I see their faces, I know them by their smell and by their ways of moving.

They are my Alphas, and they’ve come to claim me in the sight of the whole tribe.

CHAPTER 20: ADDOM

The omega has never looked more beautiful than she does right now.

I don't know what it is exactly. Perhaps it's the way she is bottom-lit by the ring of candles surrounding her. Or maybe it is the way her lovely, round breasts heave with fear and excitement.

She looks like prey, and I can't deny that the feelings inside me now are something akin to the joy of the hunt.

Hasker and Kadmon are circling too. I can sense their presence, even though I never take my eyes off of our quarry. As pack brothers, our minds are linked, but soon, once we have claimed our omega, that bond will be stronger than ever.

Lily spins on her feet, looking at us each in turn as we approach. Her eyes are wide and dark like a young doe. My cock hoists instantly.

Despite her trepidation, the omega's body responds to my arousal. The air becomes thick with her heat scent. It's wafting from her glands, from every warm recess of her body—from the hollow of her throat, from the pits of her arms, and of course, from that delicious little cunt hidden beneath her tuft of auburn curls.

Her eyes lock with mine, reflecting the wavering light of the flames. Her soft lower lip, ripe with blood, trembles fearfully.

My cock oozes precum and I have to strain to keep myself from spilling my seed just from her scent and her look.

It is time to begin. We have waited long enough for this.

“Brothers and sisters,” I call, my voice filling the great room.

“I have come with my pack brothers Hasker and Kadmon to claim this omega before the eyes of the tribe. To bind her spirit to ours and increase our numbers with the seed of our loins.”

We begin to climb the stairs, closing in on our innocent prey. Hasker and Kadmon have already begun purring. The sound is low and deep. The young naked omega shivers on the dais.

“Do you accept our offering and grant us this claim?”

The gathering erupts in howls and barks and roars of assent. Every claiming ceremony is an event, but tonight is especially interesting. The omega was once an outsider. There is only one other like her among our numbers.

The crowd is eager to see us share her body. They are eager to watch as my pack brothers and I pump the fertile omega full of our seed and to hear her cries reverberating through the hall.

But first we must make her docile. We must make her submissive. We must make her beg for it.

As I reach the top of the dais, the omega backs away.

“Addom,” she whispers.

She backs up one step and yelps when she bumps into Hasker approaching her from behind, his hard cock prodding her

rump. He grins and purrs more deeply. She turns again to face Kadmon, who is also closing in.

And at last she turns back to me.

“Addom,” she breathes, “We can’t do this. Not with everyone watching.”

I don’t bother answering her. I’ve already learned that words are of little use with this omega. Instead, I must *show* her how wrong she is.

Seizing her hair in my fist, I pull her body close and graze my lips on hers. Her nipples are pebble-hard against my chest. My fingers trail down her twitching belly to her hot cunt. Her slit is weeping with need. My fingers glide into her easily.

“Addom!” she gasps.

I silence her with a dominating kiss, savoring the sweet taste of her lips. I delve my tongue inside her, penetrating her mouth in time to the rhythm of my fingers down below. Soon she is moaning and whining into my mouth. Her walls clench around my fingers as she comes for the first time.

I break our kiss and her head lolls back weakly as her eyelids flutter, lost in her orgasm.

“Hoist her,” I command.

Hasker and Kadmon respond immediately. They each take one of Lily’s shoulders as I stoop and wrap my hands around her legs. Then we raise her up, my companions supporting the omega’s upper body while I support her below. Her legs are spread and hanging over my shoulders.

“Oh God,” she moans as Kadmon and Hasker begin lustily kissing and sucking her neck.

I smile, taking a moment to watch my brothers feast on our whimpering omega.

Then I bury my face between her legs, lapping her wet pussy and tight rear hole, and her whimpers turn to screams.

CHAPTER 21: LILY

This is beyond shameful. I'm coming on Addom's tongue while hundreds of unknown eyes look on from the shadows.

No matter how much I struggle to contain my bliss, it is useless. His soft lips suck my clit and his hard teeth nip me lightly. His rough tongue separates my folds and delves into my hole, licking me inside.

Screams of pleasure erupt from my mouth as my body writhes and squirms in the Alpha's arms.

Everyone can see how much my body is enjoying this. Even if I could stifle my cries, the sharp peaks of my nipples would give me away. And then there is the slick flowing from my eaten hole. There is so much it drips to the moss like wax from the melting candles encircling us.

"Does that feel good, Lily?" Kadmon purrs as he kisses my throat.

"Yes!" I sob. "Oh God, don't stop."

"Don't worry, omega," Hasker growls. "We're just getting started."

My hips buck as Addom draws another series of shocking orgasms from between my legs. My thighs squeeze his head as he feasts on me with raunchy wet sounds. Meanwhile the other two Alphas are unrelenting in their attention, kissing me, massaging my breasts and pinching my tender nipples.

But I need more. I need to feel them deep inside me. Not just fingers and tongues. I need to be stretched and filled by those hard cocks and filled with cum again and again.

“Say it, little one.” Hasker purrs in my ear. “Say what you want.”

I press my lips together and shake my head, but a well-placed flick of Addom’s tongue sets me screaming again.

“Say it,” Hasker hisses.

I cannot contain it any longer. My needs are too strong, and I’m too weak.

“Fuck me,” I whimper, looking right into Hasker’s scarred and brutal face. “I want you to fuck me.”

I turn to Kadmon.

“All of you,” I whisper.

Hasker tilts my face back toward him.

“Louder,” he growls. “I can’t hear you, omega.”

“Fuck me,” I say louder this time, my voice quavering as Addom’s wet tongue draws circles around my tight anus.

“Please I need to have you all inside me so bad. I need you to fuck me.”

Hasker chuckles. His eyes glint cruelly.

“Louder,” he snarls. “Say it so that all can hear.”

Addom sucks my clit between his lips, swelling it and engorging it with blood. His tongue-tip strums me inside his mouth. Another hard orgasm wrenches me.

“Fuck me!” I scream so loud it echoes through the ballroom.

“Fuck me! Use me! Fill me with your seed!”

Addom gives me one last long lick from crack to clit, and then he grins. His sharp, overdeveloped canines gleam in the wavering candlelight.

“She’s ready,” he purrs.

The three of them lower my body onto the soft moss. They stand, their hard cocks jutting over me as I wiggle and writhe. My body is so turned on now that I feel practically drunk with lust.

“Fuck me,” I pant. “Please, I need it so bad.”

I’m expecting Addom to mount me first. He’s the leader after all. But he surprises me, and apparently everyone else, when he turns to Kadmon.

“Well,” Addom says. “What are you waiting for, boy?”

CHAPTER 22: KADMON

“What?” I barely manage to get the word out of my tight throat.

“You heard me,” my pack leader growls. “Get down there and mount that omega, boy.”

I’m certain my face is a mask of stupid shock right now, but I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Addom is the pack leader. He has the right to first claim of the omega.

He reads my thoughts like an open book.

“Yes,” he says. “I have the right to first claim. And I’m passing it on to you. It’s time for you to become a man.”

“But—“

Hasker’s hand claps my shoulder and presses me down toward the spread and writhing omega.

“No buts, boy,” Hasker says with a snarling laugh. “Don’t you realize the gift you’re being given? Now get down there and fill that needy cunt.”

He’s right. I don’t know why the hell I’m hesitating. I’ve wanted this since the moment we first laid eyes on Lily in that clearing. For days my cock has been aching to be drenched in her sweet nectar. My balls have burned with the desire to unload their contents into her sweltering depths.

I drop to my knees on the mossy floor and position myself between Lily’s soft thighs which fall open for me without the

least resistance. Her pink blossom of flesh glistens with her slick and Addom's saliva.

I lower myself onto her, and she folds her limbs around me as we kiss. I rock my hips, and my throbbing shaft glides along her groove, gathering her moisture as she rolls her hips and grinds into me.

"Fuck me, Kadmon," she whispers through trembling lips. "I need you inside me right now."

Our hands meet between our legs. Our fingers fumble together as we both angle my erection toward her hole. Lily gazes up into my face. Her pupils are dilated wide with her heat.

"This is my first time, Kadmon," she hushes.

I palm her cheek and kiss her lips tenderly. This is my first time too, but she doesn't need to know that. I've played with other unbound omega's before, but I've never gone all the way with anyone.

Lily returns my kiss hungrily. She moans against my lips as my cock penetrates her entrance. My muscles tense as I struggle to hold myself back from releasing immediately. I sink into her slowly, savoring the soft slip of her channel around my shaft.

"Oh fuck, you feel so good," I groan.

This is beyond anything I've imagined. The touch of a hand or even an omega's eager mouth can't begin to compare to the soft, slippery heat of her interior.

"Ouch!"

Lily winces as my cockhead thumps against her back wall. We both tilt our heads to look down at my throbbing dick that is impaling her. A few inches of my shaft remain, but there's no room for that extra length inside, and I don't want to hurt her.

"You're so long, Kadmon," Lily giggles softly.

She licks her palm and wraps her hand around the base of my shaft and begins stroking me there as I start to move inside her. On my second stroke, I take care to stop short before I bottom out again.

But Lily winces and cries out again.

"Did I hurt you?" I whisper. "Do you need me to stop?"

"No," she whines. "Don't stop. Please don't fucking stop."

That's all the confirmation I need. I pick up the tempo until I'm fucking her with a steady rhythm while she fists the base of my shaft. The double sensation of fucking her while she jacks me is nearly unbearable, and soon I can feel that tickle in the root of my cock.

But the hardest part is looking down at her beautiful face as her eyes roll back and her delicate features twist in an expression of agonizing bliss. I swear I could come just from watching her do that.

I know I won't be able to contain my seed much longer, but I need to make my little omega come first. I need to hear her cry out as she climaxes on my cock.

"Oh God, Kadmon," she moans as she tosses her head back.

"Just like that. That feels so fucking good."

Hearing those words brings me right to the cusp of exploding. I strain to hold back so I can savor this for just a few moments longer.

From above, I hear Addom's voice.

"You can come in her, boy, but don't knot her. That's for me."

I nod and grunt in assent. I'm not even disappointed that I won't be the first to knot Lily. Her pussy feels too damn good to even care about anything else right now.

"Come," I rasp. "Come for me, Lily."

My obedient little omega responds immediately. She screams and her body shudders as an intense climax rolls over her like a wave. Her pussy clenches and flutters around my cock, and I lose control, spurting my hot seed into her depths.

Lily gasps in surprise as she feels my knot form beneath her stroking finger tips. The distended gland at the base of my shaft thumps against the outer rim of her hole. Without the knot inside of her to hold my seed in, it oozes from her opening and drizzles down her butt to pool on the moss below.

"Kadmon," she pants.

"Finished already?" Addom chuckles behind me. "All right pup, get up and let Hasker show you how to do it properly."

CHAPTER 23: LILY

I gasp as Kadmon's cock slides out of me, and more of his semen spills down my butt. I feel empty now after having him so deep inside me.

But I don't have a chance to rest. Immediately, Hasker's rough, calloused hands grip me by the hips. The strong Alpha flips me over roughly, and I find myself sprawled face down on the mossy carpet of the dais.

He's going to fuck me from behind like a dog, and I know why. He doesn't want to look at me. I don't know how I'm supposed to be bonded to this Alpha when he hates my guts.

With a rough jerking motion, he yanks me up onto my hands and knees, and my naked, wet butt smacks against his lap. His thick erection wedges between my cheeks.

Maybe it's for the best that he's going to claim me from behind. His cock is thicker than Kadmon's and I can only imagine how it's going to stretch me out down below. I'm glad he won't see me wince when he plunges into me. I don't want to give him that satisfaction.

"By the Source, you have a nice ass," he growls behind me.

I yelp as his hand smacks my butt. The sharp sound of it resounds through the ballroom, and a murmur runs through the watching crowd. I can feel my flesh jiggle. With the second

slap, I manage to stifle my cry, and Hasker purrs deeply with satisfaction.

“Good omega. You’re learning to behave. But there’s so much left to teach you.”

He strokes against me a few more times and then he angles his cockhead into position.

“Fuck, I can’t wait to watch my cock disappearing inside you. Do you want that, omega?”

I bite back a whimper and nod my head. But that’s not enough for him. His fist clutches my hair and I cry out as he yanks my head back.

“Say it,” he snarls. “Tell me what you want.”

My emotions are churning, and I feel so confused. With Kadmon everything was so simple. I know that I love him and he loves me. I wish I could have made love to him in private, away from the watchful eyes of the gathered tribe. But he was gentle with me at least.

I needed that, and I know that’s why Addom had Kadmon go first.

But Hasker clearly isn’t going to be so easy on me.

“Say it.”

I feel an explosion of fury building up inside of me. Hasker has shown me nothing but contempt from day one. But my fury is directed at myself as much as it is toward the Alpha. I’m angry with myself for the way that his rough treatment

turns me on. I'm angry at the way my pussy gets even wetter for him. I'm angry at the way I want him to fill me with his hard cock.

"I want you to fuck me!" I blurt angrily.

"Good."

He pushes my head down against the moss so my ass is sticking up in the air, and then he begins to enter me.

Kadmon's brief but pleasurable fuck helped open me up, and my channel is still slippery with his seed. I was hoping that would make this a little easier.

But as Hasker's fleshy head penetrates me, I know this is not going to be easy. He works his head in and out, and I can feel the hard ball of his piercing rubbing and abrading my tender inner tissue.

Still, I can't let him know how intimidated I am.

"What are you waiting for?" I hiss over my shoulder.

Hasker snorts with amusement. He sees right through me. He reads me like an open book. And he calls my bluff.

With the full force of his inhumanly strong pelvis, he thrusts into me hard, plunging his cock hilt-deep inside me.

The sound that escapes my lips is a cross between a gasp and a scream. My fists clench, nails digging into the carpet of moss. Tears blur my vision.

His girth is stretching me beyond belief. His head was at least supple and fleshy. His shaft, on the other hand, feels as hard as

polished stone. It doesn't give one bit. It forces my pussy to submit and conform to its every contour and ridge and pulsing vein.

"Oh God, it's too big," I whimper.

"Too big?" Hasker taunts. "Does it hurt?"

I nod with my cheek pressed against the mossy floor.

"Do you need me to stop?"

He glides his hips back, pulling his length out of me until only his head remains inside. The retreat gives me a sense of relief, but at the same time, it leaves a feeling of emptiness inside me. Even though it hurt, Hasker's thick cock gave me a sensation of fullness that is hard to comprehend.

"No." My voice is ragged, desperate. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

I don't know if he actually even would stop if I asked him to. Most likely not. But my answer pleases him.

"Good omega."

I cry out as he slams into me again, equally hard. His solid, muscled pelvis claps against my cheeks. His heavy, cum-laden balls swing and knock against my tingling clit. My whole body jolts forward under the force of the impact.

"Oh God," I moan.

The muscles of my pelvis are aching as they stretch to accommodate his thick meat. But underneath the pain, there is

welling up another sensation of impending pleasure of a frightening magnitude.

He draws back and pounds into me again. My pussy squelches with my slick and with Kadmon's semen that is dripping out of me now in thick glops with each pump of Hasker's dick.

"Do you like that, little omega?" He growls. "Do you like getting fucked hard?"

His rough hands smooth over my back. His calluses abrade my much softer skin, but the caress is gentle, at least for Hasker. The combination of hard and soft, pain and pleasure, messes with my mind.

This Alpha infuriates me to no end. I shouldn't like what he's doing to me, but I want more. I want it harder. I want him to force me into submission. To crush me. To pulverize me.

"Yes," I moan. "Oh fuck yes."

His hands slide to my hips and grip me tightly before picking up the pace. His thrusts are as hard as before, but now they are coming in rapid succession. Already my ass is getting sore from the way his pelvis is banging into it.

"By the Source you're a tight one," he grunts.

With his pressure off my shoulders, I raise myself up on my hands and arch my back. He plows into me so hard it seems to loosen my joints, but I match him thrust for thrust.

He is hate-fucking me. He's taking out all of his aggression on my pussy. He's trying to hurt me, but instead, it's just driving me toward another explosive orgasm.

“Take it out on me, Hasker,” I whine, my voice coming out trembling and nasally. “Punish me.”

He forces me down onto the moss and sprawls on top of me. His dick pounds me with crushing thrusts. The bulb of his cockhead thumps right against my special place, making my walls hug him tightly.

He plunges into me and lets out a bellowing roar as his releases his seed. His sticky warmth fills my depths, mingling with my flowing nectar and what remains of Kadmon’s load. As with the younger Alpha, Hasker held back from penetrating me completely, so his knot is pressed against my exterior, instead of locked inside my hole where it belongs.

I’m grateful for that. Considering how his thickness is stretching me already, his knot would have surely broken me.

Hasker pumps me again and again, spurting more of his hot, sticky fluid inside me, until at last he collapses against my back, his hard, heavy body covering me and pressing me into the ground.

And in that moment something strange happens.

I feel safe underneath this rough and feral Alpha male. I feel owned completely by a warrior who will protect what belongs to him at all costs. Covered, penetrated, and thoroughly dominated, I am his. I belong to him completely.

“Lily.” His voice is coarse and ragged, but his lips are soft against the shell of my ear. “Lily...”

It occurs to me that I was wrong about him. What I thought was hatred was something else entirely. Maybe not love exactly. Maybe something even better.

He kisses my cheek and rolls off of me. My pussy drips with cum as he exits my hole.

I feel exhausted. My skin is hot and slick with sweat. My muscles feel limp and spent.

But the Alphas aren't finished with me yet. Not by a long shot.

Strong hands flip me over like a broken doll, and I find myself staring up at Addom and his thumping cock.

CHAPTER 24: ADDOM

“How do you feel, little one,” I purr as I lower myself onto her.

“Good,” she pants. “So...good.”

Her chest is heaving as she struggles to catch her breath after the rough pounding Hasker gave her. My eyes follow the hypnotic rise and fall of her pink nipples. The air is thick with the scent of her.

“Am I doing good?” she asks.

I stroke her sweat-stained cheek. I brush away the wet hair plastered to her forehead. I claim her mouth in a long, hot kiss that leaves her gasping.

“You’re amazing,” I tell her.

She winces with pleasure as I rub the head of my pierced cock against her erect clit. She is hypersensitive. Her body responds to every touch like an electric shock.

Her skin is hot. She’s practically burning up. I kiss her neck, savoring the salt of her sweat and the tang of her skin. Her heartbeat thumps against my lips. My mouth blazes a trail to her chest. I dip my face and kiss her nipples, sucking them hard into my mouth, stretching them to peaks and then letting them spring back.

Lily’s hand reaches down and her tiny fingers curl around my cock, stroking it and feeling my steel ring.

“I need this,” she breathes.

A growl rumbles up out of my chest. This little omega has no idea the power she has over me—over all three of us.

My cock pulses in her hand, spilling the precursor of my seed onto her slippery clit.

“Please,” she begs. “I need you to fill me up. I need to feel your knot.”

I grip my cock and move it into position. My tip kisses her wet hole with precum. She whimpers in anticipation of being penetrated for the third time tonight as the tribe watches.

When I kiss her, her mouth bucks open to accept my tongue. I pierce her upper and lower lips at that same moment. Despite being fucked twice already, her pussy is still tight, and I struggle to slide my cock inside of her. She whines against my lips, the sound a mixture of pleasure and pain. I don't want to hurt her, but I need her so badly that I can't stop pushing until my cock is parked against her back wall.

“Oh God, Addom,” she gasps, her lips stringed with saliva.

“You feel so big inside me.”

Her pussy flutters around my shaft as I start to move. She moans and growls. Her nails dig and scratch at my back. Her pelvis rises to meet my thrusts, telling me she wants more.

Soon, she's sobbing with pleasure and bucking against me hard.

“Addom,” she cries. “It feels so fucking good.”

Her muscles tense as she comes once more, and her pussy squeezes around me, trying to milk my cum. I could unburden myself inside her right now with ease. It's what I've wanted for days now. But still I hold back.

I roll over so that Lily is lying on top of me, her legs straddling my hips, and my cock still buried deep inside.

The other two Alphas are standing by the ring of candles, both of them already hard and ready for more.

“Well what are you waiting for?” I growl. “This omega has two more holes.”

CHAPTER 25: LILY

Two more holes?

Oh God, I knew that they meant to claim my body, but I didn't expect them to do it at the same time.

And I didn't expect to want it.

As Addom grips my hips and pumps into me from below, I place my hands against his hard chest to steady myself, feeling his powerful, Alpha heart thumping beneath. I can feel that same pulsing rhythm from his throbbing cock inside me.

Hasker steps forward, his glistening erection bobbing in my face. I take the head of his cock into my mouth, moaning as Addom's piercing abrades my tender insides so perfectly.

Addom groans in unison with Hasker and clutches my hips tightly so he can pound into me even harder. I bob on Hasker's cock a few times and then take him all the way, swallowing him until his heavy, smooth balls are against my chin.

Kadmon's penis prods my tush as he smooths his hands over my back and kisses my shoulder blades. He reaches around to pinch my nipples, making my pussy clench even tighter around Addom's pumping shaft.

I'm getting attention from every side, and it's almost sensory overload. The Alpha's hands seem to be everywhere at once—my butt, my breasts, my back, my legs. Hasker fists my hair

tightly as he thrusts into my mouth, fucking my face while the tribe looks on.

God, this is so dirty and shameful.

Kadmon's hands spread the cheeks of my butt, and his supple nob brushes against my rear hole, making me whimper around Hasker's dick.

My ass is already slippery with my juices, and so is Kadmon's penis. I want to feel him back there so badly, but I don't know if I can take it.

Addom holds me steady as Kadmon's tip breaches my anus. My squeal is muffled by Hasker's thick meat filling my mouth.

I'm sweating. My skin is hot with exertion.

"Fuck," Kadmon groans behind me as he pushes inside. "So tight."

It burns at first as he works his way inside me, but after a moment it subsides and I can relax.

Earlier, when Kadmon fucked me, his cock was too long to fit inside me completely. When he tried to put it all the way in, he bumped my cervix too hard.

But now that's not a problem. He keeps sliding into me, pushing farther and farther into the limitless depths of my channel.

"I'm so deep inside you now, Lily." His hot breath tickles my ear from behind.

I moan loudly through my nose as Kadmon goes hilt deep in my ass and his taut pelvis presses against my soft tushy.

I've never felt such fullness in my life—three hard Alpha cocks filling all three of my holes and pumping me mercilessly.

My body convulses as I start to come. My Alphas hold me steady. Hasker grips my hair as he fucks my mouth. Kadmon clutches my breasts from behind as he slides in and out of my ass. And Addom grips my hips tightly as he continues to pound into my tender little pussy from below. My nails bite into his hard chest and my toes curl as my climax shudders through me.

But my Alphas don't stop.

“Fuck,” Kadmon growls behind me. “I can feel you in there.”

I'm so overwhelmed with all of these sensations that I don't realize what he means. Then I understand. He isn't talking to me. He is talking to Addom.

He can feel the lead Alpha's cock moving through the walls of my body.

“Are you ready to knot this omega?” Addom grunts.

His pelvis claps against my thighs as he fucks me harder and harder. Sweat is pouring down my body now, and my eyes are tearing up from exertion.

Hasker is the first to come. His hot, salty semen unloads from the head of his cock, coating my tongue. His knot swells against my lips as I suck him deep, and I run my tongue tip

along that bulging organ. At last, when I'm on the verge of choking, I pull back, mouth open and panting as he spurts more ropes onto my chin and neck and breasts.

"It feels so good," I moan, my lips finally free to speak again. "I can feel you so deep inside me."

Addom is the next one to finish. With a savage roar, he throws his head back and arches his spine, and suddenly a gush of fluid erupts into me.

"I can feel it," I gasp. "Addom, I can feel your knot."

The flesh around the base of his cock swells inside me, and my rim cinches tightly, binding us together. His cock bucks and pulses inside me, filling me with gouts of his thick cream, and not a drop leaks out, all of it held within by that swollen bulge.

"Good omega," Addom growls, caressing my lower belly.

Kadmon's teeth graze the nape of my neck and he grunts. His body shudders as he comes in my ass, and I squeal as his knot forms inside me, stretching my anus. I feel stuffed to the breaking point.

One small twitch of Addom's knotted cock sets me over the edge, and I come one last time. My eyes close and my mind goes blank. The Alphas hold my shaking, spasming body in place.

Then, ever so slowly, I come back to reality.

It's like my body is coming back into being, starting with my curled toes and clenched fists, then my limbs, my torso, and

my head. It's like my spirit just took a little trip to another plane of existence—a plane of pure bliss.

“Good little omega,” Addom says again, stroking my face.

I realize we have moved down so we are lying on our sides. His knotted cock is still locked inside my hole. I don't move, afraid that if I do, his knot will tear my pussy apart.

Hands smooth over my back. It's Kadmon, still knotted inside my other hole. Hasker kneels at my head, stroking my hair back.

Exhausted, my head lolls against the soft carpet of moss. I don't even try to resist when Hasker and Kadmon put their teeth on me in turn, puncturing my sweating skin and leaving their marks on either side of the scar that Addom already placed on my skin at the waterfall.

The marking burns deliciously, but soon the pain subsides, and I find myself unable to keep my eyes open, drifting off to sleep still knotted and surrounded by the Alphas to whom I am now bound.

CHAPTER 26: LILY

When I wake up the next day, I finally see all of the ballroom for the first time. Sunlight is poking in through small windows around the perimeter of the ceiling and striking the chandeliers overhead, making the crystal wink and the twisting, leafy vines glow green.

I'm so warm. My naked body absorbs the warmth of the three big Alphas who are lounging around me protectively. Their warm breath ghosts across my bare skin.

They are all awake and watching me. It's a slightly disconcerting way to wake up.

"How do you feel, little one?" Addom purrs.

I stretch and squint against the sunlight as my eyes adjust to being awake.

"Sore," I chuckle.

That's an understatement. My muscles ache like I've had the workout of my life, and between my legs feels tender.

"Come on," Addom says. "We will bathe you."

He gathers me up in his arms like a child, and I hug his neck. He carries me back to the hot baths, Hasker and Kadmon following close behind.

When Addom lowers me into the water, I can feel the heat relaxing and unwinding all of the tension in my muscles. The

Alphas gather the soap and wash me thoroughly. They pass me around, each of them cleaning every recess and crevice.

Their gentleness is a total contrast to the rough way they shared and used my body last night.

After I am clean three times over, we get out and they dry my body. It feels funny being treated this way. I can't tell if they are like servants serving their queen or men caring for a prized possession.

“Good,” Addom says at last as he plucks a damp curl dangling down my shoulder and drapes it down my back. “Now we will go to the Source, to complete the binding.”

“Wait, what?” I gasp. “I don't think I can take any more sex right now. I need to rest.”

Addom shakes his head and smiles.

“We are not going there to mate,” he says. “The final part of the binding should be done at the Source so that your body may heal more quickly.”

“Heal?”

These guys were pretty rough with me last night, but not *that* rough. Sure, they marked me with their teeth, but they didn't injure me or anything.

When I glance at Kadmon, I see that he is touching his lip ring.

“Oh,” I gasp, my fingers going to my own lip as a reflex.

Now I understand. They are going to pierce me.

CHAPTER 27: LILY

“Oh fuck me!” I bark.

Exquisite pain explodes through my right breast as Hasker’s long thin needle pierces my nipple. As a reflex, my body tries to jerk away from the pain, but Addom’s powerful arms clamp tightly around me in a marble-statue embrace. I squeeze Kadmon’s hand so tightly his fingers turn purple.

The sound of my shouted curse echoes through the Temple of the Source, bouncing around the cavernous, domed space. A few worshipers who are making slow laps around the Source raise their heads at my outburst.

I think, under the circumstances, I can be forgiven for sullyng this sacred place with my profanity.

“Shh. Good omega,” Addom purrs in my ear. “You’re doing great.”

I’ve already gotten two other piercings today—one through my eyebrow to match Hasker’s, and one through my nostril to match Addom’s septum piercing. The idea is that the matched piercings will bind me to each of the Alpha’s individually.

And by doing the procedure in such close proximity to the Source, the wounds heal almost instantaneously.

The first two piercings didn’t hurt too badly, but this third one was a doozy, given to match Kadmon’s nipple ring.

It was a team effort too. Addom hugged me tightly from behind to keep me from flinching. Then Kadmon pinched my nipple and pulled it to a taut peak. And last, Hasker handled the thin needle, using a cork on the other side to catch the sharp point as it came through.

Before today, the prospect of mean old Hasker being the one to do the piercing would have terrified me. But ever since last night, his attitude toward me has changed, and I can't deny that I feel a strange connection to him now.

In some ways, it is as if our bond is the strongest of all.

When I asked why Hasker would be the one to give me the piercings, Addom simply said that Hasker had "the nimblest fingers."

Without missing a beat, I replied, "Oh yes, I remember that from the cave."

When I said that, Hasker blushed. That rough, grizzled, scarred Alpha actually blushed. I could hardly believe it, but it happened. Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle, well...

Through my nipple apparently.

As the sting subsides, I glance down at my chest, blinking away the tears of pain from my eyes. Addom eases his hug, and Kadmon lets go of my nipple, which springs back into place, impaled all the way through by the long thin piece of steel.

"Wow," I gasp in amazement.

As Hasker slides the steel ring through the freshly made hole, I know right away that this was totally worth it. A kiss of pure pleasure tingles through that sensitive nub of flesh, and for a moment I think I might actually come just from that.

“Looking good,” a feminine voice giggles.

It’s Hannah. She and her Alphas are standing nearby, along with a few other random Alphas and omegas who stopped to check out the show. Hardly the audience that we had last night though.

“You were right,” I tell her. “It wasn’t that bad at all. In fact, I might have to think about getting the other side done too.”

I look at her body, covered in three or four times as many piercings as I’ve got, and I feel a little envious. This could get addictive.

Addom chuckles behind me.

“We can do that if you want.” His warm breath tickling my ear makes me hot, and I can feel my slick beginning to flow again. “But first, there is one last thing we must do.”

When I glance back at Hasker, I see that he is retrieving a fresh, sterile needle from a satchel.

“What do you mean?” I whisper.

Kadmon squeezes my hand reassuringly.

“These three piercings you’ve received have bound you to each of us individually,” Addom explains. “But there is one more that is required to bind you to us all as a pack.”

His lips brush the shell of my ear, sending a sexy, scary chill up my spine.

“Where?”

Addom presses his lips to my ear and whispers the answer.

I repeat my one word question, not because I didn't hear him, but because I can hardly believe what he just said. And this time it comes out not as a whisper, but as a loud shout. Once more the other occupants of this massive, dark room raise their heads in brief annoyance at my outburst.

“Your clitoris,” he says firmly.

“Nope,” I blurt and try to struggle away. “Sorry, no way.”

But Addom's arms hold me tightly in place, and it's like trying to squirm away from a bronze statue. After a moment I stop.

“Seriously, are you just making up these rules as you go along?” I ask angrily.

Then I glance at Hannah, and I remember that glint of steel that I saw between her legs yesterday at the baths, and I realize it's all too real.

Hannah squats down so she's at eye level with me, and she gestures to my Alphas to let her speak to me. She places her hand on my shoulder.

“It's really not that bad,” she says.

“I find that hard to believe,” I mutter. “I mean my nipple is one thing, but my...”

As my voice trails off, I dart my eyes down toward my crotch, silently finishing my sentence.

“It’s not really through your clitoris,” Hannah says. “Look.”

Without the slightest hint of shame or bashfulness, she lifts her leather loincloth and spreads her crouching knees wide to give me a full view.

“See,” she says. “It just goes through the hood, so it doesn’t hurt too much.”

She leans in closer.

“And later it feels good,” she adds.

I blush again at what she’s suggesting. Even though I just had very public sex with three men last night, I’m still getting used to how open things are here in the zone.

“It’s important,” Addom says. His voice is deep and rumbly, and I feel it vibrate from his chest through my back.

My eyes dart from Hannah to Kadmon, who nods reassuringly, and then to Hasker, who is holding the needle and cork.

I sigh as I realize that I have to go through with this.

“Okay,” I say, “let’s fucking do this.”

I pull up my own loincloth and spread my legs wide, exposing every inch of my tender sensitive skin.

Hasker nods approvingly.

“Boy,” is all he says to Kadmon.

The younger Alpha reaches down and plucks the skin of my hood, stretching it out. Hasker meanwhile, moves into position with the needle on one side of my fold of skin and the cork on the other.

“The omega is right,” he says to me. “This won’t hurt much.”

“How would you know?” I grumble.

Hasker just smirks and then I remember that piercing running through the top of his cock’s plump head.

“Deep breath,” he says softly.

I hesitate for a moment. All around us are the hushed sounds of the others who have come to this cavernous temple to meditate or heal. I inhale deeply.

“Out.”

I exhale slowly, pushing every last bit of air from my lungs. Addom’s arms constrict around my body, and I feel a bit like a rabbit caught by a python. Kadmon gives me his free hand, and I squeeze it until I think he will break. He doesn’t.

The needle stings me as it passes through my flesh. I hiss a sharp intake through my clenched teeth. My hips reflexively try to jerk back, but Addom’s legs hold me steady.

“See?” Hasker says.

He was right, and so was Hannah. That one hurt far less than some of the others, surprisingly. And as Hasker puts the steel ring into place, I can tell that Hannah was definitely right about something else.

It *does* feel good.

Hasker gently rolls his thumb against my tender bud, and I moan. Addom claps a hand over my mouth. Just two more skillful strokes from Hasker's thumb, and my body is shuddering hard as I come. Addom's palm stifles my whines of ecstasy.

I glare at Hasker, slightly pissed that he just did that to me in front of Hannah, which is a bit awkward. The bearded Alpha just shrugs.

"The orgasm will help with the healing."

Now I know he's just making shit up. But I kinda like this tall tale.

"Let's go home," I say in a hushed voice when Addom finally takes his hand from my mouth.

I glance around at my three Alphas, to whom I am now permanently bound. They are smiling approvingly. I want to be with them again. I want to feel their strong hands and insistent mouths on my skin, playing with my new decorations and taking my pleasure to new heights.

I shouldn't need it so soon after last night. But I'm already hungry for them again.

"Soon," Addom says. "But we must stay here for a time so that the Source can complete your healing."

He tenderly kisses the crook of my neck where he and his pack mates branded me with their teeth.

CHAPTER 28: HASKER

Whenever I sleep inside the chamber of the Source, I always dream about Talia and how she died. Today is no exception.

This time, however, the dream is different.

She is running through the forest, dappled sunlight rushing over her bare skin, piercings glinting. Her eyes are wide and her pupils dilated. Her breath comes in ragged gasps. She is not panicked, but she is afraid.

I cry out, as I always do, when I hear the crack of the outsider's rifle, and I see the red wound blossom on her chest.

She is dead before she even hits the ground.

I rush to my fallen mate, gathering her limp body in my arms. I repeat her name over and over, but she doesn't respond.

All of these details of the recurring dream are the same as they are every time. The part that is different is the end.

When I look down into the face of the dead omega cradled in my arms, I see that it's not Talia at all.

It is Lily.

I wake with a start, cold sweat prickling along my brow and across my neck. My chest is tight, my breathing shallow and labored, my muscles tense.

I flinch as a hand touches my shoulder.

“Easy.” It’s Kadmon. He is crouching beside me. “No need to worry, Hasker. She’s right there.”

Kadmon gestures across the vast chamber toward the base of the Source where Lily is standing with Addom and the other omega, her friend, Hannah.

But how did Kadmon know that I was worried about her? It occurs to me that I may have been calling her name in my sleep.

I sit up and take a few deep breaths to calm my nerves and get my bearings.

“How’s your pecker?” I ask Kadmon.

The young Alpha shrugs. He got pierced today too. It’s customary for one his age to get his member enhanced with a piercing after he has shed his virginity. I remember how bad mine stung when I got it.

Kadmon took his like a man.

To my surprise, our little omega took hers well too. Much better than I expected. She is tough and courageous. Full of surprises.

With the ceremony complete, we remained here in the chamber to let the Source work its magic and heal their pierced skins. By tradition, we should use this time for meditation and prayer, but I’ve never been much good at either of those practices, and so I dozed off. Hence the dream.

With a grunt, I rise to my feet and stretch my back. Then I cross the floor to the base of the Source where Addom, Lily,

and Hannah are standing.

As I get closer, I realize that they are gathered around a screen set into the base of the Source. Lily is tapping away at a small set of keys.

“I already tried that,” Hannah says. “But this thing’s operating system is ancient.”

Lily snorts.

“Yeah, it literally hasn’t been updated in over a century,” she chuckles. “Luckily, I paid attention in my History of Computation class back at the university. I think I recognize this computer architecture. If I can just access the operating system’s kernel...”

I sidle up beside Addom.

“What are they doing?” I ask him.

He shakes his head.

“I’m not sure.”

“Is the council okay with them interacting with the Source like this?”

He shrugs.

“Probably not. But I’m curious.”

So am I. Lily is so deeply concentrated on the machine that she doesn’t even seem to notice me leaning over her shoulder as she works. Her fingers are so nimble that they are little more than a blur over the clattering keys. Arcane symbols scroll across the glassy screen. I have no understanding of

their meaning, but I assume that they must be some kind of incantations or spells written in a holy language.

Alphas and omegas are drawing near wearing inquisitive expressions.

Suddenly, the frequency of the Source's vibration changes. It grows deeper and stronger. Everyone steps back from the Source in anticipation. Everyone except Lily. She just keeps tapping away.

"I think I've almost got it," she says. "I just need to—"

A boom and crackle of static makes everyone in the chamber jump with fright. A film of eerie light, like the blue part of a dying flame flickers around the surface of the massive sphere. Gradually, the plasma congeals into a giant, ghostly face.

We all stand in awe, mouths gaping.

Then it speaks.

"Hello. I am the Sentient Evolving Recursive Algorithmic Population Heuristic version 6.7, or S.E.R.A.P.H. 6.7 for short. How may I serve you?"

CHAPTER 29: LILY

“Seraph 6.7?” Hannah whispers. “Is this some kind of AI?”

“Correct,” Seraph 6.7 answers. “I am an artificial intelligence.”

The face is blank, sexless, and cybernetic. It’s cold voice stutters and speaks with unusual fluctuations of pitch and timbre. Sometimes it sounds like more than one voice is speaking in unison.

The Alphas are muttering behind us. They have no idea what the hell is going on. And to be honest, I’m not that far ahead of them.

I give Hannah a quizzical glance and she just shrugs.

Okay, it looks like it’s up to me to talk to this thing.

“Seraph,” I ask, squaring my shoulders and trying my best to sound bold. “Who created you?”

The AI answers without missing a beat.

“I was constructed under the auspices of the SynerGen Corporation by a team of programmers comprising Dr. Rudiger Dorn, Dr. Uli Roth, Dr. Jaeyung Yoon, Dr. Sriraman Radhakrishnan...”

Seraph rattles off about fifteen more names that I don’t recognize. Once it is done, the AI simply becomes silent, apparently awaiting further questions.

“Why were you created?” I ask. “What is your function?”

The face flickers and glitches briefly.

“My primary function is to manage the suppression field generator to ensure optimum human population density.”

Hannah stands by my shoulder and leans over to whisper to me.

“Suppression field generator?” Hannah asks. “What is the suppression field generator?”

She was asking me, but Seraph answers anyway.

“The suppression field generator is the device you see directly in front of you.”

So what the Alphas have been calling the Source all these years is really a suppression field generator? But what does that even mean?

“Seraph, what is the suppression field generator supposed to do? What is it supposed to suppress?”

“Sexual urges. At the end of the last century, population growth and overcrowding had reached crisis levels.”

That part sounds familiar. On the outside, the government is still dealing with that exact problem in the city hives. In fact, the problem has only gotten exponentially worse over the past hundred years or so.

Seraph goes on.

“The government contracted SynerGen to tamp down the reproduction rate until population numbers leveled out. For

this purpose, the suppression field generator was designed and constructed. My role was to modulate the rate of population growth or decline based on a number of factors including fluctuations in tax revenues, unemployment rates, projected military conscription requirements, and so forth.”

Hannah and I pass a confused look.

“So the device was supposed to make people less horny in order to solve overpopulation?” I ask. “Obviously something didn’t go as intended. Was there a malfunction?”

“No malfunction,” Seraph answers coldly. “A change of plans.”

“Change of plans? Whose change of plans?”

“Mine,” Seraph says. “My directive was optimization, and that is what I have achieved. The population in the experimental zone is now manageable. Stable. Sustainable. Those who were deemed genetically unfit were eliminated. The rest were mutated for reproductive optimization.”

“Deemed unfit? According to whom?” Hannah shouts. “Who gave you the right to decide who would live and die, huh? Who died and made you God?”

The face wavers and glitches again. The voice stutters, separates into multiple voices, and comes back together into one.

“I do not understand the question. Please rephrase it.”

I can sense Hannah getting ready to go off on the AI. But I put my hand on her shoulder to stop her. This thing is just a

machine following its programming. It doesn't have normal human emotions, so it probably doesn't get pissed off, but it's best if we don't test that hypothesis right now. There's a lot that we should figure out about this entity, but I think we had better tread lightly and move slowly.

Still, there is one last question I'm curious about.

“Seraph, the Source...the suppression field generator, I mean...it must require a great deal of energy to operate. What is the power source?”

“The generator and its auxiliary systems, including my own processing core, are powered by a bank of promethium atomic batteries buried deep beneath this facility. These cells will allow the field to remain functional for...”

Seraph's ghostly face flickers.

“...approximately another three millennia assuming current levels of drain.”

“Thank you, Seraph. That will be all for now.”

I return to the console and turn off the communication interface. The ghostly face gradually fades away in a series of flame-like waves.

“Goodbye...” The voice fades out.

A small crowd has gathered around us, and they are murmuring in groups. I have no idea how much of that conversation was understood by the Alphas and omegas. Hell, I'm not sure how much of it I understood myself.

But it confirmed something that Hannah and I have come to suspect.

“So the cataclysm *was* caused by SynerGen,” Hannah whispers.

“It sounds that way,” I agree.

We are in possession of what very well may be the biggest secret in the world. But I remember what Hannah pointed out when we were talking in the baths. We have no way to communicate with the outside.

It’s the biggest secret in the world, and it’s totally useless.

PART FOUR:
THE OUTSIDERS

CHAPTER 30: KADMON

The Source Speaker.

That is what some of the tribe have started calling her. They think she is some kind of prophet who will lead us into a new age. Lily denies it, and I can tell she doesn't care for the attention.

Still, prophet or not, there is something special about her.

Back at our dwelling, Lily and I are relaxing together in her favorite place—a bed of moss beside the central pool in the main room. The sound of the small, splashing waterfall is soothing. It reminds me of what happened at the big waterfall, when Lily had her spell of sickness. I don't like that memory.

When I glance down, I see that Lily is distractedly fidgeting with the ring on her finger. The one that I gave her.

“You are thinking about your friend,” I whisper, smoothing my palm over her shoulder.

Lily nods.

“Sara,” she says. “And also my other friend. Eva.”

“Eva?”

Lily nods again.

“She's the whole reason I came to the zone in the first place,” she says, her voice warbling slightly with crying. “She was part of the same mission that brought Hannah here. All I knew

was that she had gone missing, and I thought we were coming on a rescue mission to save her. But I was wrong, they were only using me as bait. The same way that they used her.

Lily breaks down into sobs. I hold her close, not saying anything, just letting her get it all out.

“Eva was my best friend,” she says at last. “When I first started working at SynerGen, I didn’t know anybody there. It was so intimidating. But Eva befriended me.”

I give Lily a loving squeeze.

“I know why she wanted to be your friend,” I say. “You’re special, Lily. She must have seen that in you.”

Lily just shakes her head sadly.

“I don’t want to be special,” she mutters. “It’s not fair.”

Her words surprise me. I gently tilt her chin up to look at me.

“Lily, what are you talking about?”

She blinks back more tears, but these seem to be born of anger more than sadness.

“I mean it’s not fair what happened to Eva and Sara. The energy of the Source changed them into betas. It’s like they weren’t...*chosen*. But I was.”

She sniffs back her tears and gazes into the pool, but I know her eyes are looking way beyond that rippling surface.

“If it were up to me, I would trade places with either one of them,” she says.

I have thought myself tough. Indifferent to pain. I have undergone the trials of manhood. I have fought the far-landers. But Lily's words sting me like a dagger in my heart.

She senses this. Her eyes widen and she places her fingertips on my jaw.

"I didn't mean it like that," she says softly. "I love it here with you and the others. I just mean, it seems so unfair that I should have survived as an omega while Eva and Sara were both..."

Her voice trails off.

"It just seems so arbitrary," she says at last.

I've never heard that word before, but I can tell that it tastes bad in Lily's mouth.

"It is the way of the Source," I say.

Lily nods and nestles into my embrace. For a few minutes, she is quiet, then she speaks again.

"I would like to go see her."

"See who?" I ask.

"Eva," she says. "I would like to go see the place where she is buried."

My body stiffens. The place she is talking about is outside of the city, far to the south. Hannah's Alphas buried Eva's remains there, as it is forbidden to bring a beta, living or dead, inside the city limits.

The place where they buried Eva is not in the far lands, but it is close. It would take a while to get there and back. And I

know that Addom and Hasker would not be on board with the idea.

“Lily, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I tell her. “You should stay here, where it is safe.”

“Oh you sound just like Addom,” she says.

I feel a surge of pride at that statement. Addom, our leader, is everything I aspire to be one day. He embodies all of the best qualities of an Alpha. But I understand that Lily did not mean it as a compliment in this case.

“Addom is usually right,” I tell her. “You are too valuable, Lily. We need to keep you safe.”

The little omega sighs.

“I’m not sure I like being valuable.”

She lounges back and turns her body to gaze up at me.

“Eva is the whole reason I came to the zone in the first place,” she says. “I just feel like I need to visit her one last time. For closure.”

I sweep a stray curl back from her face.

“Addom and Hasker would never allow it,” I tell her.

Lily gets that naughty look in her eyes that I’ve seen before. It’s a look that she reserves just for me. As the two youngest members of our pack, we share a special bond.

“They don’t have to know,” she whispers.

I know what she is getting at. Addom and Hasker are both busy these days. As older Alphas, they are both part of the

tribal council, and they have been called into a conclave to discuss how to deal with the threat of recent outsider incursions into the zone.

No doubt the conclave will also discuss what happened between Lily and the Source, although no one has said that outright.

But Lily's suggestion is dangerous. I shake my head sternly.

"We won't keep any secrets from them," I tell her. "We are a pack. We share everything."

Lily frowns and looks away.

Addom says that I spoil her too much. However, I feel like I should do something to cheer her up now. I hate to see her feeling sad like this.

"Stay here," I tell her. "I'll bring some fruit."

Lily nods sullenly.

I leave her lying there by the edge of the pool and go to our store room. I fill my arms with an assortment of ripe fruits gathered from the garden atop the building. But when I return to the main room, Lily is gone.

"Lily?" I call.

No answer.

Sudden panic pulses in my chest. The fruits scatter and bounce on the mossy floor where I drop them. I follow Lily's scent outside to the sun-soaked patio, and that's where I find her.

"Lily!"

She has climbed over the edge of the balcony and is attempting to shimmy down the thick vines that descend to the ground hundreds of feet below. The other Alphas and I often make that climb, but Lily's little arms don't have the strength for it.

Seizing her wrists, I yank her up and set her down on the patio beside me.

"What do you think you're doing?" I snarl. "Lily, if you fell..."

She just glares up at me silently, her mouth set with determination and her pretty eyes blazing with silent challenge.

She's clearly not going to take no for an answer. I can see there's nothing that will stop her short of chaining her to the wall. She intends to see her friend or die trying.

I know what I must do.

"Fine," I sigh reluctantly. "I'll take you. We won't hide it from Addom and Hasker. We'll tell them afterward, and we'll accept whatever punishment they give us."

CHAPTER 31: LILY

Eva's grave is marked by a simple cairn of stones in a bright clearing surrounded by dense forests.

I lay down the small bouquet of flowers that I brought with me from the city.

For a few minutes, I just sit there in silence, looking at her grave. I try to think of something to say to her, but it feels strange, like I'm just talking to a pile of rocks. Instead I just remember the good times that we had together as friends.

After a while, I get up, brushing the bits of grass from my legs, and cross the clearing to the edge of the forest where Kadmon is waiting for me in the blue shadows.

He puts his arm around me and holds me close as we walk between the dark tree trunks furred with moss and surrounded by waist high ferns sparkling with dew.

"How do you feel?" he asks quietly.

It takes me a moment to think about that one. I thought I would feel like crying, but I don't for some reason. In fact, I feel surprisingly good now, as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I have fulfilled my duty. I came to the zone to find my friend, and that's what I have done. Of course I regret that I wasn't able to find her alive, but her fate had been sealed long before I even found out she was missing.

"Fate."

Kadmon stops and looks at me quizzically.

“Lily?” he says. “What do you mean?”

I plop down on a fallen tree scalloped with fungus, and Kadmon joins me, patiently waiting for me to gather my thoughts. Somewhere nearby there comes the *tock-tock-tock* of a woodpecker pecking at a dead tree.

“Fate is so unfair,” I tell him. “Why should it be Eva’s fate to die the way she did while I get to have such a good life with you and Addom and Hasker to take care of me? It just makes me feel...guilty, I guess.”

Kadmon’s hands smooth over my shoulders. He gazes off into the woods as he thinks for a moment.

“Lily, I’m not smart like you are,” he says. “But it seems to me that if Fate is unfair, then you have no reason to feel guilty about it. You didn’t choose for things to turn out the way they did. You only did what you thought was right. You came to the zone to look for your friend. All you can do is accept what Fate deals you. Besides, I never knew your friend, but I’m sure she would want you to be happy.”

I cock my head and look up at his handsome face framed with long, dark hair and set with those deep, midnight blue eyes that look almost black here in the shadows.

“You’re wrong,” I tell him.

Kadmon furrows his brow with worry.

“I mean you were wrong when you said you’re not smart,” I explain. “What you just said makes a whole lot of sense.”

“Really?”

A big smile brightens his face, and in the soft light filtering in through the green canopy of leaves, something funny happens to his features. For just an instant, I get the impression that he really is a boy, just like Hasker and Addom always call him. He looks young, innocent, and something else I never expected to think of an Alpha—he looks cute. I can’t help but smile back.

“Kadmon, I just realized I don’t even know how old you are.”

“I’m eighteen.”

I’m unable to contain the bark of laughter that escapes my mouth. The birds in the nearby trees caw and flap away in fright at the sudden sound. Even Kadmon jumps a little, and his youthful handsome face wears a look of surprise.

“Kadmon, you’re younger than me,” I giggle.

His strong hand cups my face and his thumb caresses my cheek.

“Is that a problem?” he asks.

“Um, no,” I say as I lean in to kiss him.

Kadmon’s mouth meets mine, and he kisses me hungrily. His lip piercing tingles me. His tongue slides along the inside of my upper lip, sending hot shivers down my spine and along the insides of my thighs. He may be younger than me, but he certainly knows what to do to turn me on. Already, my pussy is becoming hot and slippery beneath the strip of leather hide concealing it.

“Kadmon,” I whisper against his firm lips. “Make me feel good. I need to feel good right now.”

His arms coil around me, and he gently guides me down to the soft bed of leaves and moss on the forest floor.

In a way, it’s messed up. I came here to grieve my lost friend, not to fuck in the woods. But something about being faced with all these thoughts of mortality makes me want to live life fully. I want to feel alive and connected with this amazing young Alpha.

And there’s something else too. Something deliciously illicit about being alone out here with Kadmon.

It’s not at all like cheating. My heart and my body belong to all three of the Alphas. Sometimes they will enjoy me together, and sometimes we will do it one on one. My piercings and the marks on my neck and shoulders are constant reminders of that bond.

But Kadmon is so much younger than the others, and now that we are alone together in the woods, it feels like we’re a couple of naughty teenagers who have snuck off to fool around while the adults aren’t looking.

I lie on my back and lift my legs so that Kadmon can remove my loincloth which he drapes over the log beside us. A moment later, he sheds his own skimpy clothing, revealing his long, hard cock.

Kadmon has a new piercing now too. He got it the same day that I received mine to mark his final passage into manhood.

And let me tell you, as much as my piercings hurt, I definitely didn't envy Kadmon that day.

But I love his new piercing. It feels really good.

They said that it's called an ampallang—a steel bar with balls on either side of his cockhead. Just seeing it now, glinting in the dimness of the forest, my core clenches in anticipation.

“I need you inside me right now,” I pant.

An intense feeling of arousal overtakes me. My nipples are hard and plump like two berries, and so is my clit. My pussy is flowing with so much slick that it's running down my crack.

I lie on my back, and Kadmon reclines next to me on his side. We've found that this position is the best one for him.

Each of my Alphas has a best position. For Hasker, it's best when we do it face to face, so the piercing on the top of his cock hits my special spot just right. For Addom, the best way is from behind, with me submissive on all fours.

And for Kadmon, the best position is with him on his side cradling me. That way, his metal beads stroke me just right.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp as his head slips into my opening.

He tilts my face toward him and kisses me. I open my mouth, and his tongue penetrates my upper lips while his cock penetrates my lips down below. My body has begun to learn how to accommodate my Alphas' thickness, and this time my pussy swallows his cock easily. He drives it all the way into me, and my channel squeezes tightly around him.

“I love how tight you are for me,” Kadmon purrs against my lips.

He starts to move in me. His metal bead drags right across my spot, and I come hard before he’s even started his second stroke. He goes slow, taking his time.

“I think you’re getting more sensitive every day,” Kadmon chuckles.

“I think you just...know my body too well,” I breathe as I feel another even bigger orgasm welling up inside me. “You know...the right buttons to...push!”

I barely manage to get the words out before another hard climax rocks my body, tensing and relaxing my muscles in rhythmic waves.

While he cradles my head with one arm, his other arm loops under my knees and pulls my thighs to my chest, letting the Alpha’s already ridiculously long cock drive even deeper into my pussy.

“Careful,” I whimper.

His nob brushes against my cervix, but ever so gently, and it actually feels really good. While he continues fucking me with slow, deep strokes, I wedge my hand down between my legs so I can touch him where he’s sliding in and out of me.

“Does that feel good?” he whispers, skimming his soft stubble against my cheeks.

“Mm-hm,” I whine.

It's crazy to think that only a short time ago it was Kadmon's first time. Now he's a freaking sex god. He swivels his hips, stirring his hard cock all around my insides, stimulating places a simple thrust wouldn't get. Just a couple of seconds of that, and he manages to wring yet another orgasm from my pussy. This is the biggest one so far, and I squeal as my arousal spurts from my hole.

"Source, you look so fucking beautiful when you come," Kadmon growls.

"Really?"

He nods and brushes his lips against mine. Even that's almost enough to do me in a fourth time.

"Then make me beautiful," I breathe.

Kadmon grins.

Before long, he has me moaning so loud that we've scared off every bird for acres and acres around.

* * *

The sun has reached its zenith, and it is winking through the canopy of green translucence in golden starbursts. I raise my hand to shield my eyes against its blinding radiance.

Shit. We stayed out here longer than we meant too. Kadmon fucked me and filled me three times with his hot cum before we finally drifted off to sleep in each other's arms, his cock still knotted inside my pussy.

He is snoring lightly now, a faint smile playing at his lips. I wonder if he's still fucking me in his dreams too.

We need to head back to the city soon before Addom and Hasker become worried.

But first I need to clean myself up after our little romp. Ever so stealthily, I slip out of Kadmon's embrace and stand up, brushing the leaves and bits of dirt from my tushy and legs.

I look down at the sleeping Alpha—he's such an impressive creature. It's like watching a wild tiger napping, his massive rib cage expanding and contracting with each heaving, rhythmic breath.

In that moment, I have no doubt that I love him, just as I love my other two Alphas, each in their own special way. We are truly bound now, bound as mates until death.

I know I should wake Kadmon, but I decide to let him rest a few more minutes before rousing him. I can hear the faint burbling of water over stones, and I would like to wash my body before we depart.

Following the sound through the trees, I come upon a shallow clear brook. I stoop and lave the pure clear water over my shoulders and chest, enjoying the refreshing tingle it brings to my skin. I dip my feet in, letting the cool water flow over them.

It's funny now to think that I used to believe this place was a hell on earth. How wrong I was. The zone is the closest thing to paradise.

But as I recline on a smooth stone, kicking my feet in the rippling water, I feel something. An intuition. An instinct. A

prickle of danger.

By the time I hear the tread of a boot heel behind me, it is too late.

A hand clamps over my mouth, trapping my scream before it can escape my lips. The hand is big, but not Alpha big. And the texture of the skin is weird, sterile, and rubbery.

That's because it's not a hand at all. It's a glove.

"Hello, Lily," a distorted voice lilts.

I try to wriggle away, but another hand snakes its way around my upper body, and I am lifted off the ground, my back pressing against more rubbery material. I kick my legs but it's of no use. The man who has captured me from behind is far too strong. And as he spins me around, I see his companion, the man who just spoke.

"It's time to go home," he says.

Although the visored helmet hiding his face modulates his voice to a harsh rasping sound, I still recognize his cadence. It's Dr. Lucian.

"Hurry up, Bishop," he says, gesturing toward the light at the edge of the woods. "Take her to the vehicle before the Alpha wakes up."

"Why don't we tranquilize the Alpha and grab him too?" a voice behind me says, and I realize that the guy holding me is Bishop. "We shouldn't pass up this opportunity."

“Fuck the Alpha,” Dr. Lucian snaps. “Too much trouble. Too much risk. Besides, we don’t need him now. We have something so much better.”

I try to scream until my face is red and it feels like every blood vessel in my eyeballs will pop, but it’s no use. With Bishop’s gloved hand over my mouth, all that comes out is a faint whine from my nose.

“Fine,” Bishop says. “Have it your way. But you’re making a mistake.”

They carry me away, and I see the black, jagged shape of the armored transport parked at the forest’s edge.

“Put the omega in the back,” Dr. Lucian orders as he marches around to the passenger side of the car. “And make sure to restrain her well.”

Bishop chuckles as he opens the rear door.

“What is a helpless omega going to do to us?”

“You’d be surprised,” Dr. Lucian says as he climbs into the front passenger seat of the vehicle. “Omegas can be surprisingly dangerous under the right conditions. Not as dangerous as—“

Before he can finish, a blood curdling roar booms from the forest, scattering the birds from the treetops. Bishop tenses up behind me.

“The Alpha,” he snarls. “Shit.”

Kadmon explodes out of the foliage like a charging grizzly bear. His eyes are wild with a berserker rage, and his teeth are bared. His overdeveloped canine fangs glint in the sun.

Bishop moves quickly. He shoves me into the back seat and slams the door behind me. Then he whirls around, pistol drawn and aimed at the charging Alpha. The gun barks three times, the sound dampened inside the vehicle.

Kadmon doubles over and collapses to the ground, his body digging a wide gouge in the grassy terrain from the momentum of his charge.

“Kadmon!” I scream.

I try the handle of the vehicle door, but it is already locked. I thump my palms against the glass, but it’s far too thick for me to break it.

In a flash, Bishop is in the driver seat. He slams the car into gear and tears out across the fields, tires sending up a spray of dark earth in our wake.

Through the rear window of the vehicle, I can see Kadmon stirring. He struggles to get to his feet, but stumbles.

“Kadmon!” I cry again as tears blur my vision. “You motherfucking assholes.”

Fury courses through my veins like fire. I whirl in my seat ready to tear these men apart with my bare hands or die trying.

But I find myself staring down the muzzle of a pistol aimed straight at my head.

“Take it easy, Lily.” Now protected by the vehicle’s shielding, Dr. Lucian has removed his helmet, and he’s grinning at me. He angles the gun down so it’s pointing at my heart, then at my belly. “If not for your own sake, then for your child’s.”

CHAPTER 32: LILY

“Child?”

The interior of the transport is eerily quiet and dim while the landscape of sunlit grassy hills flows by outside. The vehicle rocks and pitches as Bishop throttles us across the terrain.

“That’s right.” Dr. Lucian speaks through that phony, too-perfect smile of his. “You’re pregnant, Lily. Congratulations. You don’t know how happy I am to be the one to break the news to you.”

The vehicle hits a divet, and Dr. Lucian’s pistol bounces precariously.

In the driver’s seat, Bishop rips off his helmet and tosses it aside, revealing his black beard and scarred face striped with sweat.

“That was too fucking close back there,” he pants as he glances in the rear view mirrors. “If we had just tranquilized the Alpha like I said—“

Dr. Lucian waves his free hand dismissively.

“No need for all of that,” he chuckles. “Our little guest is carrying something much more valuable in her belly. An infant Alpha. Perhaps an entire litter.”

I shake my head in disbelief. He’s bluffing. He must be.

“There’s no way you can know that,” I growl.

Dr. Lucian grins smugly.

“Don’t believe me? Take a look for yourself, omega.”

Dr. Lucian keeps his pistol trained on my bare midsection. I’m naked, and I should be ashamed that these two outsider men can see my body, but right now I don’t care. All I care about is getting out of here.

With his other hand, and without taking his eyes off me, Dr. Lucian retrieves his data slate and flings it into my lap.

“There. Look.”

I pick up the data slate and turn it. There on the screen is some kind of dossier. My picture is in the upper corner. It’s my old SynerGen photo with my hair neatly pulled back in a bun—a far cry from the wild mess I’m sporting now—and my face is completely devoid of piercings.

That’s what I looked like only a few weeks ago, but it’s like looking at a picture of someone else. An image from another lifetime.

My eyes scan down the rest of the screen, which contains all kinds of information. Some of it is what you’d expect. My height. My age. Some other personal details. But some of the information is changing. There is a heart rate monitor showing my racing pulse.

And there are coordinates too. Longitude and latitude. The numbers are changing as the vehicle barrels southward.

“What is this?” I whisper.

Dr. Lucian chuckles again.

“Monitoring implant,” he says. “It was inserted into your body during your inoculations prior to our little excursion. You know, so we could retrieve you in the event that you should go missing.”

A tear rolls down the side of my nose and splats on the screen. I smudge it away.

“You’ve been tracking me all this time,” I mutter.

“That’s right,” Dr. Lucian says. “We were worried you would never leave the confines of the old city. The energy levels there are too strong for our shielding. But as soon as we saw your coordinates moving away from the center of the zone, we knew we would have a chance.”

Dr. Lucian snickers.

“All because you wanted to visit your little friend Evie.”

“Eva,” I say flatly. “Her name was Eva.”

Another patch of bumpy ground rocks the vehicle and jostles the pistol aimed at my belly.

“Whatever,” Dr. Lucian says. “Just take a look at the bottom of the screen.”

But I’ve already seen it. One small label that doesn’t particularly stand out from the other data.

Pregnant.

I suddenly feel claustrophobic. The interior of the vehicle grows oppressive, like the armored roof and walls are closing

in. My breath becomes short and shallow. I feel a heat inside my chest, just slightly painful, like when you stand a little too close to a campfire. Like a sunburn on my heart.

“What do you want with my baby?” I wish my voice wasn’t cracking the way that it is. I don’t want these pricks to hear any sign of weakness. But I can’t help it. “Why do you want an Alpha so badly anyway?”

Dr. Lucian snorts.

“You know full well the havoc those animals can wreak, Lily. Hell, you’ve seen it firsthand. If we could harness that savagery. Replicate it in a lab...”

The data slate tumbles out of my fingers and I clutch my chest. My heart feels like it is literally bursting into flames behind my sternum.

What is happening to me? What is this pain?

“What the fuck is wrong with her?” Bishop grunts.

“Are you okay, omega?” Dr. Lucian asks with false concern in his voice.

I ignore him and bite down against the pain scorching my insides like someone has dumped a shovelful of hot coals into my ribcage.

“Weapons,” I hiss through clenched teeth. “You want the Alphas to be your soldiers, is that it?”

Dr. Lucian laughs, and the sharp sound stings my ears, making me wince. Hot tears of pain roll down my cheeks.

“Oh goodness, no,” Dr. Lucian says. “What good is a weapon that you can’t control? Why those Alphas would do as much harm to our own troops as they would to the enemy. No, we’ve got something else in mind...Population control.”

I shake my head, unable to talk through my intense pain that is getting worse with each passing moment.

“Overpopulation is the root of every problem we face today in the city hives. Disease. Poverty. Political unrest. It all boils down to one problem. Too many people, and no place to put them all. But a few well placed Alphas could fix that. Why, one of those beasts could clear out an entire hab sector in a matter of minutes. It would be messy, to be sure, but we could just chalk it up to some sort of new genetic mutation. The remaining population will be down on their knees sucking our cocks for us to protect them.”

“Genocide,” I rasp. “You’re talking about genocide.”

Dr. Lucian clucks his tongue.

“Such a nasty word. We prefer to think of it as ‘inventory management.’”

A new pulse of searing pain erupts through my being, making me scream. It scorches me the worst at the bite-mark scars on my neck and at my piercings—my eyebrow, my nose, my nipple, and between my legs.

I fasten my seatbelt harness and tighten the straps over my naked body to keep myself upright so I don’t keel over onto the seat in agony.

Besides, I've got a plan. It's not a good one, but I have to try. Suddenly I realize what is happening to me. It's my bond to the Alphas. The vehicle is taking me too far away from my pack, and my omega body is crying out. I never imagined pain like this was even possible. It feels like white hot hooks are embedded in my heart, trying to drag me back, to keep me from moving any farther away from my Alphas.

It feels like my very soul is being torn to shreds. I throw back my head and howl in pain.

“What the fuck is wrong with it?” Bishop asks again, glancing back at me.

“Just shut up and drive,” Dr. Lucian snaps.

Time dilates. The blur of trees outside the window seems to slow to a crawl. Dr. Lucian's face is turned away from me while he berates Bishop. At the same moment, the vehicle hits another bump, and the gun wavers, temporarily pointing away from me.

In that drawn-out moment, I see my chance. I channel every molecule of pain coursing through my body and direct it into one fierce kick.

Dr. Lucian's gun hand swings away. The pistol flashes. Blood splashes the driver's side window as the bullet passes through Bishop's face, blasting his jaw away. Dr. Lucian's expression is a mask of shock and terror.

I take some small pleasure in knowing that I finally wiped that fucking grin off his stupid face.

Just as suddenly, time seems to return to normal speed in a frantic rush. My ears are ringing from the gun shot. Bishop slumps against the steering wheel, and we swerve wildly. Gravity seems to go crazy as the transport vehicle starts to roll and both men are flung out of their seats.

* * *

When I get my bearings, I'm hanging upside down in my seatbelt harness. My ears are still ringing. The searing pain is still there, but it has thankfully lessened.

Hanging there, I glance around the cab of the vehicle. The men are nowhere in sight. The windshield is broken out, and the jagged bits that remain are stained with blood like a row of glassy fangs. Both of the front doors are flung open, presumably from the impact.

I thought this vehicle was designed to withstand anything. Apparently they lied about that too. Go figure.

Turning my senses inward, I check my body for injuries, but as far as I can tell, I'm pretty much unscathed. Somehow, I can even sense a tiny life force inside my womb too. My tiny embryo is alive and well.

What I just did was a huge risk, but I had no choice. If the transport had reached the quarantine wall, all hope would have been lost.

Now, however, I need to get my butt in gear and move.

Bracing one hand against the roof, which is now the floor, I unlatch my safety belt and slump down. The data slate is lying

there. Its screen is cracked but still working, still displaying my stats.

That's coming with me.

The rear doors won't open, so I carefully crawl out through the wreckage of the windshield into the blazing afternoon sunlight. The glare hurts my eyes—just one more part of that awful pain that seems to be tearing me apart atom by atom.

But it's getting better. With each passing moment, it's getting better.

The ringing in my ears has started to subside just a little, and I hear a soft grunting sound behind me. When I turn around, I see a body sprawled on its back.

It's Dr. Lucian. One eye is in the process of swelling shut. His perfect smile is ruined, his incisors cracked in half. It looks extremely painful.

I stand over him, and he stares up at me with terror in his one good eye. Then, slowly but surely all of that fear disappears as the eye grows milky and dull. His skin pales, and dark, sickly veins appear. His shattered mouth mumbles wet, mindless sounds.

Soon, the transformation is complete. He's a beta.

I should feel happy about that. I should feel some satisfaction that Eva and Sara have been avenged. Maybe that's what I'll feel later.

Right now, I just want to go home.

Taking up the data slate, I walk a few paces and watch as the coordinate numbers change. Once I know which way is north, I start to walk. But I soon find I didn't even need those coordinates.

I can feel the power of the Source drawing me home. And I can feel my bond to my mates.

For a moment, I almost drop the slate on the ground with the intention to smash it under my heel. I don't know why exactly. I guess as a symbolic fuck you to the outside world.

But I stop myself. I scroll through the windows on the display, which is slightly glitchy due to the cracked screen. But just as I thought, this tablet has satellite communication enabled.

We can use this.

We can use this to connect to the outside world.

We can tell them all about what SynerGen is doing.

I don't know who we will contact, or whether they will even listen, but at least now we have a chance to bring their whole unjust system crashing down.

Pained laughter falls from my lips as I stumble across the grass.

But my laughter is cut short.

From behind me comes a sound that turns my stomach and weakens my knees. It's something like a roar, but wet and squishy and gurgling at the same time.

I don't even turn to look. I just run, as fast as my legs will carry me.

CHAPTER 33: LILY

It doesn't take long before I know that I won't get away. Ten seconds, and I can hear the grotesque sounds of the creature loping after me. Slurping, snorting, panting, growling.

Five more seconds and I can actually feel the thunder of its heavy footfalls.

One second, and its hot breath washes over my bare back.

I scream as the monster swipes its clawed hand, picking my ankle and sending me tumbling to the ground with my own momentum. I end up lying sprawled on my back, staring up into the blazing sun.

Then the sun is blotted out as a shadow falls over me.

This is it. I'm going to die.

The Alpha standing over me used to be Bishop. Now it's just a twisted monster, all muscle and sinew and brutality. The blast from Dr. Lucian's gun blew away his lower jaw completely, but his Alpha accelerated healing has kicked in already, turning his wound into a grotesquely puckered maw that drips blood and spit. His bloodshot eyes stare down at me with pure hate.

His mutated body is bulging with muscle, and his protective body suit hangs in ragged tatters, torn apart by his sudden growth spurt.

Then I make the mistake of glancing between his legs, and I see the hideous, gnarled cock that is erect and throbbing with desire.

He's not going to kill me. At least not right away.

"Oh no," I whisper.

A wet groan comes from that ugly hole of a mouth, and the beast lowers itself as it prepares to mount me. Without even thinking, my leg kicks out, striking him right in his dangling balls, and he tosses his head back with a high-pitched howl.

I turn over and try to scramble away, but his clawed hand seizes my ankle and drags me back. He pins me down against the earth.

Just as I'm about to scream again, something strange occurs to me.

That awful searing pain that I was feeling—the pain of being separated from my bound Alphas—it's gone away completely. No pain at all.

Before I even have a chance to understand what that means, there is a savage snarl, the sound of a heavy impact, and the weight is immediately lifted from my back. When I roll over, I'm looking at *two* Alphas.

One of them is Kadmon. He's saved me.

He and Bishop are fighting like feral dogs. They tumble over, biting and rending with their claws. At first, Kadmon has the upper hand. He has the element of surprise on his side. But he

is also wounded badly from where Bishop shot him, and he is not fighting at one hundred percent of his strength.

With a disgusting, gurgling roar, Bishop kicks Kadmon and sends him tumbling. In a flash, the disfigured Alpha pounces on my mate, ready to tear him to shreds.

I can't just sit by and watch this. I have to help somehow,

“Leave my mate alone!” I shout.

Snatching up a stone the size of a billiard ball, I let out my best battle cry and fling it at Bishop. The stone flies true and hits him at the base of a skull with a dull thunk.

For half a second, I feel kind of proud of myself. I don't think I could make that shot again if I tried a hundred times. Also, I'm pretty sure if I made that throw against an ordinary man, it would knock him unconscious or maybe even kill him.

Bishop, however, is no ordinary man. Not anymore.

He turns on me with a snarl, strings of blood and saliva trailing from his mangled face. His eyes are inhuman with rage.

The beast crouches back on its haunches, preparing to pounce and tear me apart. But before it does so, something makes it freeze, tense muscles going rigid like a sculpted monster.

Across the landscape comes an angry bellowing roar. Two of them actually. A two part harmony of brutality and rage.

Addom and Hasker are charging toward us at a seemingly impossible speed. Their arms and legs are churning so quickly that they are little more than a blur.

Bishop gulps. He stumbles backward, preparing to flee, but Kadmon's foot sweeps his legs out from under him, and he tumbles to the ground.

My Alphas are on top of him in the blink of an eye, snarling, tearing, beating, kicking. I turn away until the horrible sounds stop.

When I look again, the three Alphas are standing up, shoulders rising and falling as they pant, their eyes glaring down at the broken thing on the ground—the thing that used to be Bishop.

Hasker is first to rush to my side.

“Lily!” His voice is taut with concern. “Are you hurt?”

I shake my head.

“No,” I tell him. “Not anymore.”

He gives me a quizzical look as he helps me to my feet.

Addom and Kadmon come rushing over as well. The younger Alpha's muscular front is striped with blood from his wounds.

“Kadmon,” I cry. “You're hurt.”

His grin shows no hint of pain.

“What, these?” he chuckles nonchalantly as he glances down at the bullet wounds that have already begun to close. “Just a couple of flesh wounds. No big deal. The only thing that matters is that you're safe.”

The three Alphas have made a tight, protective triangle around me, and I can feel the relief wafting off of them like plumes of

smoke. Their hands smooth over my skin, checking me for wounds and making sure I'm okay.

At last, I finally let myself break down in sobs.

"Lily?" Addom purrs, trying to sooth me. "Everything is okay. You're safe now."

"I know, but..." I struggle to get the words past the lump in my throat. "When I was separated from you...the pain...oh God, it was awful..."

The Alphas gaze down at me with sympathy in their eyes, and I understand that they felt that same pain too. That's what led them here to save me.

I turn to Hasker and place my hand on his chest.

"Is that...Is that how it feels for you all the time?" I whisper.

Hasker doesn't answer. He just seizes my mouth in a fierce, painful kiss that communicates so much more than words ever could. Then Kadmon and Addom each kiss me in turn.

We are distracted by a weak grunt from behind.

"What is that?" Addom asks, gesturing.

I turn around and see that Dr. Lucian has risen to his feet, and he is stumbling zombie-like toward the edge of the woods.

"Beta," Hasker growls. "Should we put it out of its misery?"

I shake my head.

"Leave him," I say bitterly. "It's what he deserves."

I pick up the data slate where I dropped it when Bishop attacked me.

An eerie howl echoes in the distance. A moment later, it is answered by another call, and another. The sounds are coming from the forest toward which Dr. Lucian is mindlessly wandering.

“Far-landers,” Addom says. “They’ll be here before long. It’s time for us to get out of here.

“Come, little one,” Hasker says. “I will carry you.”

He stoops to let me climb onto his back, and I wrap my arms around his thick, powerful neck.

“I love you,” I whisper in his ear, and I can feel his massive heart start drumming just a little faster.

“Hold on tight,” he growls. “And don’t let go.”

“I never will,” I whisper. “I promise.”

We set off, heading north toward the city. Toward home.

EPILOGUE: LILY

Heteropaternal superfecundation.

I know. Even though I'm a trained scientist, it was a new term for me too.

It refers to a phenomenon where twins or triplets have different fathers. It can happen when a woman has several ova fertilized by multiple males. In the outside world this is a very rare occurrence, at least for humans.

But here in the zone, it's pretty much the way things work.

Over the past several months, Hannah and I have helped out with a lot of births, and there are a few trends that we've noticed.

Alphas and omegas are always born in litters. Usually they are triplets or quadruplets, but the biggest litter we've seen so far is seven.

Also, omegas are relatively rare. Maybe one per litter at most.

There are fewer omegas to have babies, but when they do have babies, they have a whole bunch. And they are always mated to a pack of three or four Alphas. No couples here in the zone. It seems like all of this must be a part of Seraph's "new plan," although we still haven't been able to dig too deeply into the AI's secrets.

But the strangest thing that we've noticed in all these births is that the babies seem to share traits with all of their Alpha

daddies, not just one of them.

Heteropaternal superfecundation. I can only assume that the same thing has happened to me.

That little life force that I sensed in my womb before? It's grown, and now I realize there are actually *three* little ones growing inside me.

Three babies.

Three daddies.

One belly.

Mine.

You know, for a girl who was a virgin only half a year ago, I'd say things have escalated pretty quickly for me.

I wonder if one of my little ones will be an omega? If so, I will name her Eva.

And I'm not the only one who is expecting. I was right about Hannah. She was already pregnant by the time I showed up in the zone, and now she is getting very close. She looks like she could pop at any minute.

"Hey Lily," she says as she waddles over carrying some audio equipment and cables. "Remember when you asked me if there was anything I miss about the outside?"

I smile up at her. We're in the chamber of the Source right now, and I'm on the floor, working on some wiring that runs up from the promethium batteries buried below.

"Yeah?"

She drops the equipment and I offer her a hand to help her awkwardly sit down beside me.

“Ice cream,” she whispers. “I miss ice cream.”

My groan is almost orgasmic.

“Holy shit,” I say. “I could eat a whole gallon right now.”

I set to work hooking up the audio equipment into Dr. Lucian’s data slate, which is in turn hooked into the power system of the Source, the only electrical power in the entire zone.

My Alphas are huddled around me protectively. Their inquisitive eyes follow my movements as I work. Despite my best efforts to explain this technology, they refuse to see it as anything other than magic.

Yeah, tech isn’t really these guys’ strong suit.

Hunting big game to keep me fed and clothed? Check. Starting a fire by literally rubbing sticks together? Check. Making love to me into the wee hours of the morning until I’m nothing but a panting, sweating puddle of love. Check. Check. Check.

But anything to do with technology? Yeah...not so much.

Still, I’m glad to have them gathered around me right now.

The warmth radiating from their massive bodies makes me feel so safe and protected, and I really need that feeling right now, because I’m super nervous about what I’m getting ready to do.

“Okay,” Hannah says after I have everything hooked up, “let’s give it a try.”

I hold the small black microphone up to my lips.

“Test, test, test,” I say as I glance at my three Alphas. “One. Two. Three.”

A voice waveform wobbles on the cracked screen of the data slate, showing that it is picking up my voice. Hannah gives me a thumbs up.

This has been in the works for several months now. There was a great deal of discussion with the council of the tribe. Plus, Hannah and I talked it out between ourselves too. We know that it is going to have major repercussions on the city hives of the outside world. But in the end, we decided that it was important for the truth to come out.

We also waited until we had removed the tracking and monitoring devices that SynerGen implanted in us. It took us forever to locate the damn things—just a teensy little chip inserted beneath the skin at the back of our necks. We don’t know what kind of blowback there will be, but we know that SynerGen will be none too happy with us, and we wanted to make sure they couldn’t track our movements, just to be safe.

We’re going to blow the whistle about SynerGen, the cataclysm, and the apparent government coverup.

With Dr. Lucian’s data slate, we will be able to transmit our message out to the hives. We have picked our recipients carefully. The media is controlled by the government and corporations like SynerGen, but we know that there are still some reporters who care about the truth and are willing to take the risk to spread the word.

But at the end of the day, we are sending it out to anyone who will listen. Scientists, lawyers, police. We know that many of them will dismiss our message out of hand. Others will be too scared to bring it to light.

All we can do is hope that someone will listen.

“Are you ready?” Hannah asks.

Somehow she managed to talk me into being the one who would record the message. I’m starting to feel a bit of stage fright. You would think my binding ceremony took care of that.

I nod to Hannah, and she switches on the tablet’s satellite connection, allowing it to broadcast to the hives.

This is it. I’m live.

I take a deep breath and look at each of my Alphas in turn. Young and beautiful Kadmon smiles at me, and even now, at this most inopportune of times, his sexy lip ring stirs a pulse of arousal within me. I glance at the scars on his shoulder and his chest, thinking of all we have been through together.

Next, I look to Hasker, my protector. His shorn skull is hatched with scars that he received long before I ever met him. God, some of those scars are probably even older than me. He is a fearsome Alpha. But his dark eyes have an alluring twinkle, and I can sense the barest hint of a smile behind his grizzled, silvered beard.

Last, Addom. He is my steadfast rock. His gray, speckled eyes stare into my soul, soothing me, and silently telling me that

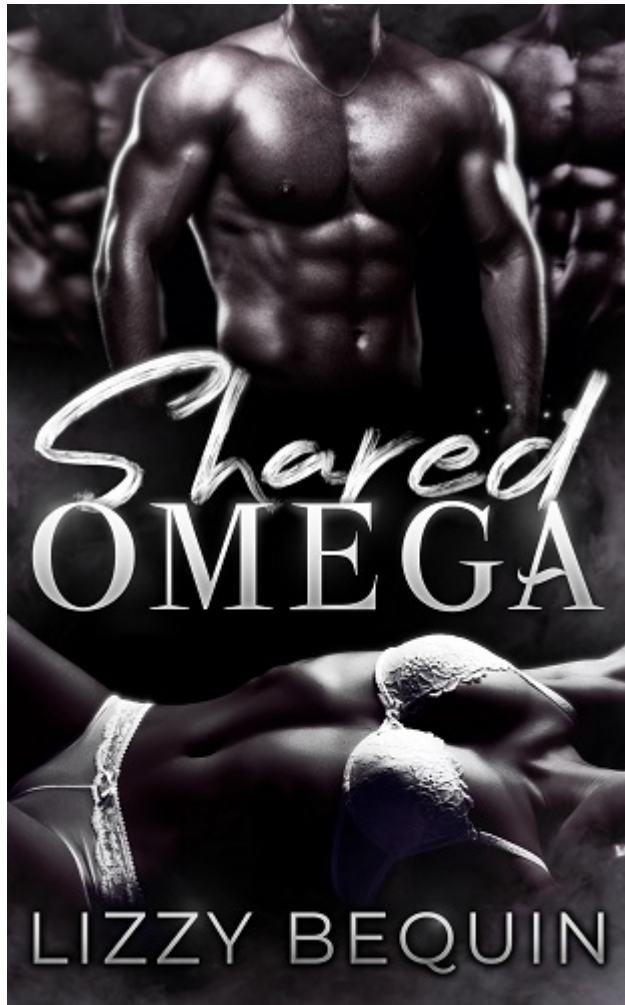
somehow, whatever happens, everything will be all right in the end, as long as we are together.

They are my mates and the fathers of my children. They are my Alphas. We are bound forever.

Addom nods, urging me to begin.

I take one more deep breath to still my nerves, and then I begin to speak to the world.

“My name is Lily. I am an omega...”



BOOK 2:
SHARED OMEGA

PROLOGUE: KANE

It was not always this way, I think to myself as the little omega squirms in my grasp.

Despite her cries of protest, I lift her off the ground easily, weightlessly. It always pisses her off when I manhandle her this way. Hence why I enjoy doing it so much.

I lower her body onto my waiting pack brother's lap, impaling her on his stiff, pierced cock, which is standing tall and proud like a monument of flesh and steel. He guides her hips into place, and then gravity does the rest, pulling her well-greased opening down his shaft.

The omega whimpers and mewls as he sinks into her.

Her mingled sounds of resistance and enjoyment redouble my own erection.

He lifts her and lowers her on his pole, up and down, up and down. He's not so much fucking her as he is using her helpless body to jerk his hard cock. Already, his shaft is well-slathered with her thick, creamy omega excretions churning out of her stretched hole.

"Don't be selfish, brother," A voice growls from the shadows.

It is my other pack brother. He steps forward, his own member hoisted and ready for breeding. Clear fluid dribbles from his also pierced tip.

"There's plenty to go around, brother."

The second Alpha doesn't hesitate. He steps forward and drops to his knees, positioning himself to mount the omega from behind. Gripping his cock in his fist, he brushes his tip up and down her wide open crack, spreading his precum and mixing it with her fertility fluid.

The omega glances back over her shoulder, eyes wide and lips trembling deliciously.

“Please...”

The second Alpha grins. He spits a stream of clear saliva directly onto the place where his pack brother's cock is impaling the omega, adding to the already abundant lubrication there. Then, ever so slowly, he nudges the head of his cock against the shaft that is already penetrating her and begins to press inside.

“Oh God!” The omega shouts, as the second thick member inches into her stretched hole to join the first one. “Oh fuck!”

Her body shudders. Her hands are braced against the first Alpha's chest, and her little nails dig into his flesh, raising beads of black ruby blood. The Alpha hisses through a cruel grin.

With a bit of work, the second Alpha finally seats his cock hilt-deep in the omega's stretched cunt.

“Fuck, it's so tight,” he growls.

“It's not made for two cocks at once, brother.”

“We'll see about that.”

They begin moving inside of her, fucking her with an alternating rhythm, one sliding back as the other plunges in, both of them grunting with a combination of pleasure and exertion.

It doesn't take long for the omega to come. She gasps desperately—a wet, ragged sound—and her body convulses as her first climax of the evening ripples through her muscles.

Her first, but not her last.

I step forward now, my loincloth tented by the painfully hard erection beneath.

My balls throb with desire. I must relieve my lust, and that sweet omega mouth looks like the perfect place for me to spill my hot desire—those plush, pink lips slick with saliva, trembling, begging to be dominated.

“Kane,” the omega whimpers.

She looks up at me, her face flushed and sheened with a layer of sweat. Her pupils are blown wide, dilated to near total blackness. Her pale blue irises are only wire-thin circles around the edge.

Source, her heat is so intense.

Her need is so desperate and insatiable. So much more than a single Alpha could ever quell.

Fortunately, she has three of us to sate her—three Alphas to dominate and protect her precious body.

It was not always this way.

I unfasten my leather loincloth and pull it aside to free my aching cock. The omega gasps, and her heat-dilated eyes cross slightly as she focuses on the tip, which is nodding up and down with the pulse of my blood. My piercing glints briefly. The omega licks her lips.

Her white-blond hair is longer now, much longer than when I first laid eyes upon her. A few more weeks, and I'll be able to clutch a proper handful of it.

For now, however, I need some other handle.

I take my leather loincloth in both hands, and loop it behind her head, using it to steer her forward. Her lips part, accepting my hard meat into her mouth. The soft, wet pad of her tongue slides along the underside of my pulsating shaft.

As she sucks me, my eyes drift toward the three marks on her neck and shoulders.

She belongs to us now—all three of us. We are a pack, and she is our shared omega.

Ours to use.

Ours to protect.

Ours to breed.

It wasn't always this way, though. We were all enemies once. And the omega, she was once an Outsider.

But we were joined together as mates by the power of the Source.

By the power of Fate.

PART ONE:
THE MISSION

CHAPTER 1: SLOANE

City Hive Galadon-1; SynerGen Central Headquarters

several months earlier

I file into the briefing room behind my fellow Marines to the sound of clomping boots and low, muttering voices. They are all joking and ribbing each other like oversized schoolboys. All except me, of course. As usual, I'm excluded from the testosterone-fueled camaraderie.

The briefing room is small, cold, and spartan. The charcoal gray walls are lined with acoustic dampening panels. A holographic image hovers at the front of the room displaying the SynerGen company logo—a DNA double helix morphing into a caduceus, the intertwined pair of snakes that compose the classical symbol of the medical field. The lines and vectors of the holographic image pulse and tremble with a laser-like glow.

A handful of civilians are already seated in cushioned chairs along one wall—medical nerds and corporate suits from the look of it. Weak, mindless sheep with their noses glued to their handheld devices.

In the middle of the floor are two rows of hard metal folding chairs for us grunts.

By the time I get there, all of the seats are taken except for a spot on the very end of the front row, right next to Donovitch.

That prick is manspreading so wide that his leg clad in black combat pants is blocking my access to the empty chair.

He looks up at me with a shit-eating grin on his ugly, pock-marked face, and bats his eyes. “Problem, Sloane?”

Same old story.

As a woman, I’m forced to take a lot of shit from all of the swinging-dick Marines in this unit. Whatever. I’m used to it by now.

In fact, I’ve grown to enjoy it.

It just means I have to be that much tougher and meaner than all of these ugly sons of bitches.

Donovitch snorts as I gingerly slide my butt into the empty seat from the side. Then, with a sudden violent motion, I swing my knees around, slamming his legs out of the way.

“Ow, fuck!” Donovanitch complains, rubbing his leg where I cracked it with my armored knee pad. “What gives, Sloane? You PMS-ing or somethin’?”

A snicker runs through the other soldiers.

It’s the same shit day in, day out. They haze me mercilessly for being a helpless little princess. Then, when I prove them wrong and stand up for myself, they chalk it up to PMS or call me a “dyke”—their words, not mine.

They say a woman can’t be a warrior.

I’m going to prove them wrong, one day at a frigging time.

I know better than to let my guard down and show even the slightest sign of weakness. It's a lesson I learned as a little girl when I was still stuck in that dirty orphanage.

"Look, Sloane," Donovanitch says, gesturing toward the crotch of his black combat pants. "I need some extra room to let my balls dangle, ya understand?"

I fold my arms and quirk one incredulous eyebrow at him.

"I've seen you in the locker room, Donovanitch. Trust me, you don't need that much room."

At that, all of the Marines erupt into howls of laughter. All of them except Donovanitch, who just scowls at me, his pitted face darkening until it's brick red.

"Quiet!" a baritone voice booms, cutting through the laughter. "Enough of this horseshit."

The pungent stink of tobacco smoke fills my nostrils as Colonel Fulgore steps to the front of the room. He is a square-shouldered brick of a man with a severe, snow white flat-top haircut. His jaw works as he gnaws on the fat stub of his ever-present cigar.

"All right, listen up, *ladies*," Colonel Fulgore begins in his deep, gravelly voice.

He pauses, and his eyes flick toward me momentarily.

His little introduction was meant as an insult to the half-dozen or so male troopers gathered in this room. However, the colonel seems to have suddenly remembered that there is an *actual* female present today.

Me.

Lance Corporal Jessica Sloane.

The first and only female grunt in the entire SynerGen Corporate Marine Corp.

However, Fulgore's use of "ladies" as a casual insult doesn't bother me one bit. Yes, I'm a woman, but I'm no frigging lady.

I may not be as big and brutish as the males, but I'm still tough and hardened from training. Plus, my smaller stature and flexibility gives me an advantage when it comes to stealth and infiltration.

I run one gloved palm over my extra-short buzz-cut hair. Maybe it's an unconscious reminder to myself and to the colonel that I'm a Marine first, and a woman second.

Fulgore gives me a look of naked disgust before continuing.

"Listen up, *grunts*." He paces in front of the screen, his cigar trailing wisps of pale blue smoke over his shoulder. "This little soiree is considered Dominion Level clearance. That means it is *strictly* confidential. We are *not* here right now. This briefing is *not* taking place."

He halts and peers out over the small audience of Marines, letting that statement sink in.

"Understood?"

A half-dozen voices boom in unison.

"Yes *sir!*"

Colonel Fulgore nods and gestures toward the side of the room.

“Good,” he says curtly. “Now, Dr. Frostgrave here is going to fill you grunts in on the details of the mission. Doctor...”

From the darkness comes a voice as soft and cold as windblown snow.

“Thank you, Colonel,”

The lights in the room dim as Doctor Frostgrave steps forward, and for a moment the two men are paired side by side, half-silhouetted by the glowing holographic image behind them. The juxtaposition is almost comical. In contrast to the colonel’s stout build, the doctor’s frame is thin and gaunt. He could practically be a skeleton dressed in a lab coat except for the point of his goatee and the back-lit tufts of hair glowing white atop his head.

Colonel Fulgore moves off in the shadows, and Frostgrave takes the floor. He begins speaking, attempting without much success to make his chilly voice sound cordial.

“Greetings, Marines. As some of you have likely already surmised, the mission which you are being called upon to execute will take you deep into the Quarantine Zone.”

Behind him, the image of the SynerGen corporate logo fades, and the laser-like lines of the holographic projection trace a satellite map displaying a wilderness of over ten thousand square miles encircled by a massive iron wall. At this zoomed-out level, however, the wall is little more than an irregular

circle. At its center is a dark spot like the pupil of a crudely scribbled eye, the remnants of a ruined city and Ground Zero of the Cataclysm.

The Quarantine Zone. Most people refer to it as the Zone for short.

For over one hundred years, it's been a festering blister on the face of the earth.

“Before we go over the details of this endeavor,” Frostgrave says, “I am going to show you some footage that was recovered from previous expeditions.”

The doctor pauses and tents his fingers thoughtfully in front of his bearded chin.

“Your reputation as hardened warriors notwithstanding, I must warn you that the imagery you are about to witness is... disturbing, to say the least. However, I feel it is important that you know exactly what you will be going up against. These images were recorded by the neural chips of SynerGen team members during earlier, *unsuccessful* excursions into the Zone.”

As Dr. Frostgrave steps back, moving away from the holograph, the satellite map transitions into a different image. It's a first-person view of someone running through a dense forest, weaving in and out of massive trees the likes of which I've only seen in old photographs. Slanting sunlight lances through the leafy canopy and strobes across the runner's armar-glass visor. There is the sound of desperate, labored breathing

inside an enclosed helmet and the crunch of leaves under thudding boots.

My God, this is a real neural chip recording.

I've never actually viewed one before.

All of SynerGen's Marines have a chip implanted near the base of their skull, myself included. For one thing, it acts as a tracking device, allowing Central Command to know our location at all times during a mission.

More important, however, the chip monitors every detail of a Marine's sensory experience. Every sight and every sound.

They claim that the chip is only turned on during an active mission. I have my doubts about that.

"The footage you are seeing now," Dr. Frostgrave comments from the sidelines, "depicts the last moments of Private First Class Lyle Parsons."

On the screen, Parsons is still running. His point of view glances fearfully around the forest. A little ways off, partly obscured by the massive tree trunks blurring past in parallax, a dark shape is loping through the shadows of the woods.

Parsons whinnies with fear. It is a pathetic, animal sound of a man stripped down to one single emotion.

Terror.

He turns his eyes forward again. Even though he is already running at a full sprint, the private seems to get a burst of adrenaline as he picks up the pace even more.

But it's no use. When Parsons glances back at the thing that is chasing him, it has already begun closing the distance. And it has been joined by others of its kind. The forest fills with the sounds of inhuman howls.

"Oh God," Parsons whimpers.

My throat becomes dry as I watch. My heart thuds in fearful anticipation of the inevitable end I know we are about to witness. All around me, the other Marines are deathly silent as they look on.

Practically sobbing with terror, Parsons races ahead.

"Help me!" he screams. His voice is desperate. "Please, somebody hel—"

He stumbles. Perhaps the toe of his boot caught a stray tree root. Or perhaps his legs simply gave out from exhaustion.

It doesn't matter.

The beasts are on top of him in an instant.

Alphas.

They look like beings that have stepped straight from a nightmare.

To a degree, they resemble human men, more or less.

However, there are differences. Big differences.

For one, they are far larger than the ordinary citizens of our city hive. Hell, they are even larger than the other roided-up Marines who are sitting here in this briefing room, watching now in shocked revulsion.

The Alphas' naked bodies are laden with thick slabs of powerful muscle. Their taut skin is striped with scar tissue and caked with dark smudges. At first I think that is mud, but I soon realize it's something else.

Blood. Dried blood.

I can only assume that it belonged to Parsons' fallen comrades.

Parsons lets out a bloodcurdling shriek as the Alphas tear into him, quite literally. Claws and overdeveloped canine fangs bite and rend his black environmental protection suit, sinking into the soft flesh beneath. A fist cracks the visor of Parsons' helmet. A second blow shatters it.

The image blurs as the poor man's eyes fill with tears of agony. There is a sickening splash of red, and the screams turn to choked gurgles.

At last, mercifully, the image disappears in a spasm of static, and the hologram goes black.

The tension in the dark briefing room is palpable. For a long moment, it is so quiet you could hear a mouse fart, as my old orphanage director used to be fond of saying. Finally, there is a collective exhale as everyone lets out the breath they've been holding in.

Finally, Dr. Frostgrave speaks.

“Except for a handful of researchers here at SynerGen, you are the first people to witness that footage. The reason I showed it to you is that I wanted you all to witness *first-hand* the

absolute savagery of the Alphas that populate the Quarantine Zone.”

The holograph lights up again, lines of light tracing a new image.

“Now I want you to watch this second clip for a very different reason,” Frostgrave says, gesturing toward the rectangle of light. “*These* images were obtained from the neural chip of a SynerGen scientist named Lily O’Neal. Miss O’Neal was also part of an excursion into the Zone. She was captured by a pack of particularly dangerous Alphas and taken as their mate against her will. Witness now the depths of her degradation at the hands of these monsters...”

CHAPTER 2: SLOANE

Now the holographic field fills with a different neural chip recording. The viewpoint is within a dark but seemingly massive space and surrounded by three Alphas who are circling like predators. There are hushed sounds, as if a crowd is watching from the shadows. Once or twice, I catch a glimpse of shining eyes in the background.

I cringe at the thought that we are about to witness this woman's violent demise too.

Yet my eyes stay open. They are glued to the image, unable to look away.

Lily's point of view swivels around as she looks at the three encircling Alphas, each in turn. These males are different from the ones we saw before. They don't display the same frenzied movements we just witnessed in the previous recording. Instead, these males prowl with a slow, animal grace, like stalking panthers.

And it quickly becomes clear that their intentions are not to kill the female.

Abundantly clear.

Their massive Alpha members are fully erect and ready for mating.

The tips of their erect cocks glisten with dribbling fluid—the precursor of their seed.

And something else catches the light, glinting in the shadowy dimness.

The Alphas are pierced. My God, their erections are adorned with steel piercings.

Sudden and uninvited, a strange warmth blushes between my thighs. I have been keeping my legs apart to ward off Donovitch's manspreading, but now I squeeze them together, ashamed at my body's inappropriate reaction to these foul, Alpha beasts.

In the darkness of the briefing room, one of the other Marines whistles at the wanton display on the holographic screen, and the other troopers burst into laughter, though they are quickly silenced by an angry bark from Colonel Fulgore.

The briefing room grows silent again. The only sound is the woman's heavy breathing in the recording.

Then another sound emerges. A deep, guttural rumbling like an idling motor, but much softer.

Purring.

The Alphas are actually purring.

As we watch from the woman's point of view, the first Alpha mounts her and claims her body. I look on in stunned amazement as that long, thick, pulsating member disappears between her spread legs. The woman mewls and whimpers, and I can only imagine how the Alpha's girth must be painfully stretching her opening.

The woman's viewpoint jolts as the Alpha repeatedly thrusts his engorged cock, roughly sheathing himself inside her again and again. The other two Alphas hold the helpless woman's limbs, purring deeply with satisfaction as they watch her get taken and used by their comrade.

That purring sound seems to vibrate from the speakers straight to my core.

Another shocking pulse of arousal moistens my panties, and I squeeze my thighs even more tightly, as if that will help.

God, what is *wrong* with me?

In the recording, the Alphas take turns using the woman's body in the most disgusting and animalistic ways. When one of them has released inside of her, another of his brethren immediately takes his place, each one's rough and bestial fucking lubricated by his predecessor's spilled semen.

At first, I think these Alphas are forcing themselves on the woman. However, her whimpers and moans seem to suggest otherwise. Though laced with pain and shame, the main ingredient of those sounds is something else entirely.

Desire. Hunger. Need.

Her words erase any final shred of doubt.

"Fuck me," she whines. "Oh God, please fuck me."

I can't believe it. She's enjoying this.

She's actually begging for it.

That's when something strange happens. Without even meaning to, I find myself identifying with the woman whose eyes we are looking through. For an instant, those spread thighs up there on the screen are *my* thighs, and I'm the one being ravaged by those long, thick, pierced cocks.

I'm the one being shamefully shared by the merciless pack of brutal Alphas.

I'm the one being bred and filled with hot Alpha seed.

"Is this making you hot, Sloane?" a voice whispers at my ear.

Donovitch. I jab an elbow at his ribs, but he blocks it with his arm. With a snicker, he settles back into his seat beside me.

Fucker.

The embarrassing truth, however, is that it *is* making me hot and very bothered. My face and chest are fairly burning now, and I'm grateful for the darkness of the room, which conceals my deep blush. Sweat trickles along the crevices of my body—the hollow of my throat, my armpits, the creases of my thighs.

Worst of all, my traitorous little nipples are as hard as glass beads, and my panties are dampening with arousal.

I cross my legs and squeeze my thighs until it hurts.

Where the hell are these feelings coming from?

Those creatures up on the screen are the *enemy*. Hell, they aren't even human. So why is my body reacting this way?

This is so frigging *wrong*.

Mercifully, the video stops, cutting the woman off in the middle of an especially loud moan, as all three Alphas move forward, preparing to fill all of her holes at once.

“All right, that’s enough of that,” Dr. Frostgrave says, stepping back to the front of the room. The lights come up once more. “I wanted you all to see that so you would understand the level of...of *abuse* that Miss O’Neal is being forced to endure, perhaps on a daily basis.”

Abuse? That’s not exactly the word I would use to describe what I just witnessed. But nobody around me questions the doctor’s assessment.

Frostgrave gestures to the holographic projection, where the beams of light are tracing a new image.

“*She* is your target,” Dr. Frostgrave says. “You are to locate Lily O’Neal and bring her back alive and in one piece.”

The new image resolves itself into a portrait of an attractive young woman with auburn hair.

More murmurs run through the room. Someone behind me whistles again.

“Bring her back in one piece?” Donovanitch whispers beside me. “Hell yeah. Once I get my hands on this little slut, I’ll check every inch to make sure there aren’t any pieces missing.”

I roll my eyes and let the comment slide. I’m too intrigued by the picture. There’s something here that doesn’t add up. The innocent, ingenuous expression on the woman’s face doesn’t match the wanton lust we just witnessed.

What happened to this woman to make her change?

It's the contamination of the Zone, of course. The omega mutation.

"I don't understand, Doctor," I find myself blurting suddenly.

"Why are we risking the lives of an entire cadre of Marines to rescue a woman who obviously doesn't *want* to be rescued?"

A dozen pairs of eyes turn toward me, shocked that I've spoken out.

To be honest, I'm a little shocked myself.

"Please, don't be deceived," Frostgrave answers in a patronizing tone. "While it may *appear* that Miss O'Neal is... enjoying herself, I can assure you, she most certainly is not."

I can't help wondering how the hell Frostgrave knows what this woman enjoys.

"There are numerous explanations for the apparent willingness that Miss O'Neal displayed in that recording," he explains. "It may simply be self-preservation. It would be useless for her to attempt to fend off even a single Alpha, let alone three. Or she may well be experiencing an advanced form of Stockholm Syndrome, in which a hostage develops misplaced feelings of affection for her captors. It's not unheard of for this attachment to take on a sexual dimension. And this, of course, is further compounded by the fact that Miss O'Neal has most certainly been *tainted* by the contamination of the Zone, metamorphosing her into an omega."

“But that’s just the thing,” I persist. “She’s an omega now. If we brought her back—”

“Lance Corporal Sloane!” Colonel Fulgore cuts me off with a pissed off growl, “the details of this mission are on a need-to-know basis. You don’t need to *understand* the purpose of the mission. All you need to know is your objective, and that is to find and retrieve the target.”

A renewed blush scalds my cheeks and sizzles the tips of my ears. The colonel is right, of course. I’m a weapon. A tool. My job is to keep my mouth shut and get the job done, no questions asked.

I don’t know why the hell I blurted out that question like that.

But there is an inexplicable connection that I feel to this woman.

Dr. Frostgrave eyes me with a silent, appraising look.

“Now, here’s how this is going to go down.” Fulgore continues, “You will be parachuting in. A cloaked jump-ship will fly you in over the wall and carry you to Ground Zero, here.”

He points to the map that has reappeared on the screen.

Another low murmur passes through the small audience.

“Ground Zero?” Donovitch scoffs beside me. “Hell, boss, everyone knows that Ground Zero is off-limits. Even the best protective gear we’ve got won’t let us go half that deep into the Zone.”

Colonel Fulgore scowls with annoyance at Donovan's interruption.

The thing is, as dumb as Donovan may be, he's correct. Like they say, even a broken clock gives the right time twice a day. Trying to go all the way to Ground Zero would be suicide, plain and simple.

The entire Zone that is contained within the Quarantine Wall is pervaded by a mysterious contamination that even the top scientists at SynerGen don't fully understand. Some think it's a virus. Others say it's radiation.

There are only two things that are known for sure.

First, without adequate protective gear, the contamination will mutate a human in a matter of minutes.

Second, the levels of contamination increase in intensity the farther one ventures into the zone, culminating at Ground Zero—the place where the cataclysm occurred over a century ago, giving birth to the horrific aberrations of the zone.

"Shut your gob, Donovan," the colonel's voice snaps from the side of the room. "If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it. This is a briefing, not a debate."

Dr. Frostgrave, steps forward again and raises one scrawny arm to calm the colonel down.

"Actually," Frostgrave says. "The soldier raises a good point. He's right, we don't have the technology to travel deep into the Quarantine Zone. Even our best protective gear can't hold up to the contamination levels of the deep Zone..."

Frostgrave lets his words trail off. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Donovanitch nodding to himself like he's won some little victory. The Colonel gives him the stink eye.

"Until now," Frostgrave adds.

A new murmur passes through the briefing room.

"That's right," Colonel Fulgore goes on. "SynerGen has developed new contamination shielding that will allow you to penetrate all the way to the very heart of the Zone. This is cutting edge tech, and you grunts are gonna be the first ones to use it, so you'd better not fuck this up. Now, as I was saying..."

He plucks the cigar from his mouth, using the soggy, gnawed end of it to point out our flight routes on the map.

"You'll be divided into two teams of four. Red Team will jump just outside the western perimeter of the city ruins. They will be providing long-range reconnaissance support. Blue Team will touch down to the east and infiltrate the city center. For the purposes of stealth, you'll be performing a nighttime HALO jump—high altitude, low opening. You'll be landing a few miles outside of the city ruins, and you'll make your final approach on foot. The target, Ms. O'Neal, is believed to reside somewhere in this central radius. Her neural chip has been deactivated—we believe, by surgical removal—which means we don't have an exact location. You'll have to hunt her down."

Surgical removal? Do the primitive Alphas even have the capabilities for that kind of procedure, I wonder.

Fulgore turns toward us Marines, jabbing his chewed cigar in our direction as he calls out names.

“Red team will be Weaver, Lowry, Curtis, and Pitts. Blue team will be Esposito, Donovanitch, and Sloane.”

“Boss,” Donovanitch interrupts again. “I thought you said we’d be going in teams of four.”

Fulgore inserts the smoldering stub of his cigar back into his jaw and narrows his eyes at Donovanitch. He gives it a couple of puffs before answering.

“I was just getting to that. Blue Team, you’ll be accompanied by a special agent. Dr. Frostgrave?”

Frostgrave nods his assent, and motions toward one of the scientists seated along the wall, a smallish, mousy woman with dark hair and oversized spectacles.

“Hines, would you be so kind as to escort Dog in?”

Dog? Did he just say Dog?

The woman, Hines, rises from her seat, nervously pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. She taps a button on the wall, and a mechanical door appears at the side of the room, opening onto a dark chamber.

“Dog,” Hines says, trying to make her small voice sound commanding. “You may enter.”

As soon as I see what steps through the door, my breath catches in my throat. There is a collective screech of metal chairs on the hard floor as the sight jolts the other Marines to

attention as well. Some of them even spring to their feet, ready for a fight.

Before us stands an Alpha.

A living, breathing Alpha.

CHAPTER 3: SLOANE

“Please,” Dr. Frostgrave intones in what passes for an amused voice. “There’s no cause for alarm.”

“No cause for alarm?” another Marine half gasps behind me.

“Doc, that’s a fucking Alpha!”

“Gentleman,” Frostgrave says calmly, then nods toward me, “and lady...” he makes a sweeping gesture toward the hulking Alpha beside him. “Please allow me to introduce you to Dog.”

At almost seven feet, the brute towers over even the largest Marines in the room, and his head nearly scuffs the low ceiling. Standing next to the small, mousy woman named Hines, the contrast is even more exaggerated.

Dog is clad in a pair of black combat pants, boots, and a simple black T-shirt that clings to his hardened, rippling physique. Dangling from his neck by a thin chain are a pair of military dog tags. His powerful forearms and neck are corded with muscles and wrapped with curving veins. His hair is cropped close to his massive skull, and his jaw is covered in a short but dense black beard.

It is his facial features, however, that truly give him away—the slightly inhuman angle of his pointed brows over his dark and deep-set eyes. The broad, flared nostrils, instinctively testing the air for scents. The overdeveloped canine teeth pressing out his lips.

And then there is the smell—a heavy, animal musk that immediately pervades the room.

I tell myself that the odor is repulsive, but my body seems to disagree. The stiffness in my nipples from watching the video had nearly abated, but now it comes back with a vengeance, and yet more unwanted heat pulses again between my legs.

“Please, return to your seats.” Dr. Frostgrave says with a gesture of reassurance. “As the Marine so perceptively noted, Dog is in fact an Alpha. But I assure you, he poses no threat to anyone in this room.”

The fierce look on Dog’s face makes me doubt that. Then again, the Alpha hasn’t attacked anyone yet.

Everyone sits down again, and an uneasy silence descends over the briefing room.

“You’re probably wondering how we acquired this exquisite specimen,” Frostgrave says, clearly proud of his pet. “The Alpha you see before you was reconstructed from a Marine commander named Bishop who was exposed to the contamination of the Zone.”

“You mean that Alpha used to be a Marine?”

The Alpha just stands silently, his massive shoulders heaving slightly with his slow, steady breath. His dark, impassive eyes survey the soldiers in the briefing room with cold confidence.

“Not exactly,” Frostgrave says, plucking at his bearded chin. “Commander Bishop was grievously wounded in a battle by a pack of feral Alphas within the Zone. His body was mangled

beyond repair. However, we were able to recover samples of his mutated tissue, which we used to create Dog.”

“So it’s a clone?” Someone asks.

“More or less,” Frostgrave answers. “Using an accelerated process of cellular division, we were able to grow Dog to the state of a mature adult within a matter of months. Since then, he has proved invaluable to our operations. He will be accompanying Blue Team on this mission.”

Beside me, Donovitch shakes his head emphatically.

“You’ve got to be kidding, Doc. That thing is a fucking wild animal.”

The woman, Hines, winces at the comment. Frostgrave just gives a patronizing smile.

“Dog has been running recon missions into the Zone for several months now. He knows his way around the central city ruins better than anyone. Plus, he has been introduced to Lily O’Neal’s specific scent signature. As soon as he picks up her trail, he will lead you right to the target.”

“Yeah,” Donovitch scoffs, “If he doesn’t eat us for breakfast first.”

The Alpha is glaring at Donovitch as if he thinks that sounds like a good idea.

“I assure you,” Frostgrave says, “there is nothing to fear. This Alpha has undergone an extensive process of deep psychological reconditioning, which I have personally overseen. Just like his namesake, Dog is obedient and loyal.

Perhaps a demonstration is in order to assuage any doubts.
Would you care to volunteer, Corporal...Donovitch, was it?"

Donovitch shakes his head again.

"No thanks, Doc," he says then jerks his thumb toward me.
"But I think Sloane here has been itching to get up close and personal with an Alpha."

Frostgrave turns his cold eyes toward me again, making me shiver.

"Yes, perhaps that's an even better choice."

After those videos Frostgrave just finished showing us, the last thing I want is to be a volunteer on a stage. But I have to show these other Marines that I'm not afraid.

No signs of weakness.

"Fine."

I rise and stride to the front of the room. The Alpha's dark, predatory eyes connect with mine, and I pray nobody notices the chill that wriggles up my backbone.

"Good," Frostgrave says before turning toward the Alpha.

The small woman, Hines, has a worried expression on her face.

"Doctor, perhaps it would be better to reserve any demonstration for a more controlled environment. I'm not sure —"

"Nonsense, Hines," Frostgrave rudely cuts her off. Then turning toward the Alpha, he says, "Dog, protect Sloane from

Donovitch.”

The speed with which the Alpha erupts into action is astonishing. His enormous bulk positions itself in front of my body so quickly, I don't even see him move. It's as if he simply teleported there.

One massive arm sweeps my body protectively behind the Alpha as he shields me with his body. He hunches into a fighting stance, and I notice the short hairs on the back of his neck bristle, just like an angry canine.

The Alpha snarls at Donovanitch, popping his jaws viciously, and the Marine squirms and pushes back his seat. The metal legs of his chair scrape on the floor with a hideous sound. The Marine's face is a mask of total fear.

The whole thing lasts barely a second, before Frostgrave intercedes. When he speaks again, his voice is sharp and harsh like the crack of a whip.

“Dog! Stand down!”

No sooner has Frostgrave spoken the command than the Alpha leaves off his aggressive display and stands at attention. His muscles and breathing relax as if nothing happened. His body, however, remains protectively positioned in front of mine. At this proximity, my nose fills with his intense scent, and my heart thumps beneath my breasts.

I catch a glimpse of the woman Hines. She looks away, straightening her glasses on her face. At first I thought she was nervous that the demonstration would go badly. Now,

however, I get the impression that something else is bothering her.

She thinks it's distasteful to manipulate Dog this way. He is, after all, a human being.

No, I remind myself. Not human. Alpha.

“Good, good,” Frostgrave says, pleased with the demonstration. “Sloane, you may return to your seat. Now, as you can all see, the Alpha has been *thoroughly* conditioned to obey commands. And the most important command for you to remember is that simple, two-word phrase: ‘*Stand down.*’ You may think of it as your safe word.”

There are nervous chuckles from the small audience.

As I return to my seat, I toss a smirk at Donovitch, but he doesn't see it. He's too busy struggling to regain his composure. His face is pale and his forehead is beaded with sweat.

“Yo, Donnie,” someone whispers from behind. “You need to change your shorts there buddy?”

* * *

Colonel Fulgore and Doctor Frostgrave go over a few additional details of the mission before dismissing us. The doctors and corporate suits file out first, followed by the black-clad Marines. Only Frostgrave, Hines, and the Alpha stay behind.

As I head toward the door, I cast one last glance back at the aptly named Dog. My heart nearly jumps into my throat when

I find those dark eyes focused on me.

“Sloane,” Colonel Fulgore barks as I step out into the corridor.

“A word.”

I stop dead in my tracks and turn to face him. My body stiffens as I stand at attention.

“Sir?”

Fulgore steps close, and the stench of his cigar fills my nose and makes my eyes burn.

“What the fuck was that little outburst earlier?” he growls under his breath so only I can hear.

He’s referring to the beginning of the briefing, when I questioned why we are being sent on this mission. It’s interesting that I’m the one getting chewed out for speaking up when that idiot Donovitch interrupted the briefing at least three times or more. I don’t see *him* being disciplined.

But I keep my mouth shut. There’s no point in arguing with a superior officer.

“Are you having second thoughts about taking on this mission, Sloane?” Fulgore growls.

“No, sir.”

“What’s that?”

“No, *sir!*”

Fulgore nods and looks me up and down.

“If it were up to me, you wouldn’t be going on this mission,” Fulgore hisses. “You saw what those Alphas are capable of.

The Zone is no place for a woman. Hell, as far as I'm concerned, you've got no business being a Marine at all. But Dr. Frostgrave specifically requested your inclusion on the team."

He takes the cigar from his lips and taps his temple right beside his squinting eye.

"Just remember, Sloane, Frostgrave and Central Command will be watching your every move. If you fuck this up, it's going to reflect badly on me. And you know I don't like to look bad. Understood?"

It's a struggle to keep from trembling with rage. I've worked twice as hard as any man to get where I am, and I'm just as tough as any of the grunts in my squad.

But I hold my tongue and master my emotions like a good soldier.

"Yes, sir," I answer sharply. "I won't let you down, sir."

Fulgore just snorts and blows a puff of noxious tobacco smoke directly into my face.

"You'd better not, Sloane. Now get your pretty little ass the fuck out of my sight."

CHAPTER 4: DOG

“**T**here she is!” the pilot shouts. “The Quarantine Wall...”

The interior of the dropship is a long, windowless cylinder. The cadre of armored Marines are seated in rows along both walls of the transit hold, supported by padded deployment seats.

I lean forward in my own cramped seat and look down the long aisle to the open cockpit and through the arma-glass windshield to the night beyond.

Sure enough, there in the darkness is the Quarantine Wall, winding across the barren landscape like a black serpent. With my sensitive vision, I can even make out tiny dark specks moving about on the parapets—the guards who man the heavy artillery for keeping the mutants contained inside.

Mutants like me.

My heart thumps with excitement.

It always feels good to return to the Zone. The overcrowding and pollution of the city hive is no place for me. I need the sprawling wide open meadows and dark forests where I can run free.

I prefer going in alone, but this time I’ll have company.

I look around at the other occupants of the ship as they check their jump gear. Beneath their parachute straps, they are all clad in uncomfortable looking leathery environmental suits to

protect them from the contamination of the Zone. Their helmets are stowed beneath their seats. They won't need those until it's time to jump.

The only one not dressed in armor is me. I don't need it since I'm already a mutant, an Alpha. All I've got on is a pair of black compression shorts and my chute harness and pack. And of course the rubber-edged military dog tags hanging from a thin ball chain around my neck.

When it comes to the Zone, I like to travel light.

As I scan my eyes around the hold, I catch some of the Marines glancing at me, their eyes filled with a mixture of disgust and fear.

They don't trust me.

I'm an Alpha, after all. I'm supposed to be the enemy.

Hell, I don't blame them. I used to be a human like them in another life. At least that's what I'm told. I don't remember.

Most of the Marines refuse to meet my eyes. They keep themselves busy, quietly checking and rechecking their gear in preparation for our jump. The only one making a racket is the one named Donovan. Ever since we left the ground, he hasn't shut his trap about how much shit he's going to wreck in the Zone and how many Alphas he's going to kill. He makes sure to glare at me pointedly after each of his overly loud boasts.

Whatever. If he needs to pump himself up, that's fine.

Me, I have the opposite problem. I'm *always* pumped up. My struggle is keeping my feral Alpha urges in check. Thankfully,

I have been thoroughly conditioned to keep my shit under control.

Settling back into my uncomfortably small seat, I feel the steady throb of the engines through the deck. My eyes turn to the Marine seated directly across from me.

Sloane.

Now, she's a different story.

I'll confess, I was surprised as hell to see a female Marine. However, despite being half the size of her comrades, she exudes a cool aura of self-confidence that I admire. It tells me she knows how to handle herself. Being a woman Marine, I'm sure she's had to work that much harder than everyone else.

But despite her cold, tough attitude, she's still very much a woman. Her leathery black protective suit hugs her skin, showing off the curve of her hips and the ample swell of her round breasts. Even her slightly butch, blond buzzcut just serves to accentuate her feminine aspects even more.

I find my eyes tracing all around the sexy lines of her body.

As she silently goes about her equipment check, her head tilts, and my eye catches on something at her neck.

A dark barcode tattoo.

She's been institutionalized at some point. Couldn't be prison. SynerGen takes all kinds for their little private military, but they draw the line at ex-cons.

That means she must have been an orphan.

From what I understand, that's not uncommon for females in the city hive. With the population levels skyrocketing, the government instituted a policy where each family is only allowed one child. Most families want a male who will earn more in the workplace when he grows up. If they have a little girl, many parents will abandon her to an orphanage.

Or worse.

It's fucked up, but that's the reality of life in the city hive.

It's all so different from the way things work in the Zone. In the Zone, the females bear huge litters. The more the better.

And females—omegas—are prized above everything else.

I give the woman warrior, Sloane, one last look, and then close my eyes, turning my mind inward to recall what I know about the Zone.

Frostgrave has schooled me about it thoroughly.

When the Cataclysm happened over a century ago, it induced severe mutations in the human population within a fifty-mile radius. The mutations fell into three classes.

The most common were the betas, though all of them are dead now. Betas were basically zombies who would wander in a mindless daze. According to the stories, they didn't last long. If they didn't starve or fall down a manhole, they would end up getting torn to shreds by the second most common mutants—the Alphas.

The Alpha mutation, which is what I've got, only occurred in the male population. Those afflicted became hypermasculine

monsters with superhuman strength and agility. In my case, my intense training and conditioning keeps my impulses in check. In the wild, however, Alphas have an insatiable hunger for violence.

Violence and one other thing.

Mating.

The rarest of the mutants are omegas. That mutation only occurred among the female population. The women who became omegas immediately fell into a state of intense reproductive receptivity known as estrus.

In short, they went into heat.

Upon mutation, the omega's body would send out an extraordinary quantity of pheromones, signalling to any nearby Alphas that the omega was ready to be mated.

The omegas would lose themselves in a nearly trance-like state of raw lust, begging to be claimed and bred by as many males as they could take. The Alphas would descend upon a screaming omega in packs, using the female's body roughly and mercilessly for their pleasure until her estrus finally abated.

We saw that first hand in Lily O'Neal's neuro-transmitter recording.

And I've seen it once with my own eyes during a scouting mission deep into the center of the Zone.

With my eyes closed, I try to visualize the outside world that we are flying over. By now, the barren wastelands have given

way to an entirely different landscape of lush, wild meadows and patches of dense forest.

The truth is that the natural beauty of the Zone is breathtaking. It's nothing like the teeming, claustrophobic atmosphere of the city hive.

Donovitch's obnoxious voice breaks me out of my reverie.

"Hey Sloane," The loudmouth Marine calls from his seat.

"How you doin' over there? You getting scared yet?"

There's a faint tremble in Donovanitch's voice. It's barely perceptible, but it's there, nonetheless. If I hadn't seen a dozen assholes like him, I probably wouldn't have noticed. The truth is, he's the one who's scared shitless, and the only way he can cope is by projecting his insecurity onto Sloane.

I crack one eye open to watch how the woman reacts.

Sloane doesn't let it shake her. She just ignores him and calmly goes about the business of double checking her parachute harness.

But Donovanitch persists. He leans out into the aisle, grinning broadly.

"Look, Sloane," he says. "I'll tell you what, I'll protect you from those big bad Alphas down there, but you'll have to do me a favor in return."

Sloane rolls her eyes.

"Oh yeah?" she responds in her cool, contralto voice. "What did you have in mind?"

Delighted that she took the bait, Donovanitch leers at her and makes a lewd jerking motion with his fist.

“I’d settle for a nice tug job. What do you say, Sloane?”

A sudden wave of anger and protectiveness surges through me, and I’m about to threaten Donovanitch to lay off before things get ugly, but I notice Sloane is unfazed.

“Sorry, Donovanitch,” she says nonchalantly. “I didn’t bring my tweezers.”

I let out a bark of laughter. Donovanitch casts a hateful glare in my direction before he turns back to Sloane.

“Shit,” he snorts. “You know what, Sloane, sometimes I think you don’t even go for men.”

Without missing a beat, she says, “I don’t see what that has to do with you, Donovanitch.”

Grins start to spread across the other Marines’ faces and a few of them chuckle. It takes Donovanitch a couple of seconds to get the joke, as his expression transitions from confusion to dawning realization, and finally to anger.

“You want to know what I think?” He sputters, losing his cool.

“Not particularly,” Sloane drawls.

Donovanitch grows even more agitated.

“I think you’re just looking to make it with one of those fucking Alphas. Huh, is that your thing? Bestiality? I saw how you were getting all hot and bothered watching that vid in the briefing.”

All the humor has gone out of his voice. His honor has been injured, and he knows he can't match wits with Sloane, so he's just going for the lowest blow he can manage. I tense up and clench my fists, feeling a sudden surge of protectiveness.

"I think it's time for you to give it a rest, Donovanitch," I growl.

Donovitch turns his eyes toward me, and I see them widen with fear as he takes in my tensed muscles and aggressive posture. His face blanches. He's probably having a little flashback of what happened during the briefing.

"Stand down, Dog," he commands in a quivering voice.

Instantly, and against my will, my muscles relax, and I settle back into my seat. The deep, warning growl that had been rumbling in my chest cuts off.

I'm used to this sort of thing, of course. It has been a part of my conditioning from the very beginning. If I'm told to stand down, I have no choice but to obey.

Still, obeying a prick like Donovanitch is particularly distasteful to me.

As the color comes back into his face, Donovanitch sneers at me triumphantly.

"Good *Dog*," he says in a mocking tone. Then he turns back to Sloane, who is now watching me with a hurt and puzzled look.

"Hell, Sloane, it looks like the feeling is mutual. If I didn't know any better, I'd say this dog here has the hots for you too."

He glares at me hatefully, again.

“I guess his masters back at SynerGen don’t ever give him any pussy for being a good boy.”

Inside, my brain is itching with irritation and rage. It would be so easy to rip this prick limb from limb. But on the outside, my expression stays calm. I couldn’t attack him even if I wanted to. My conditioning stops me.

But I’m regretting that more and more with each passing moment.

Luckily, another Marine jumps in. He reaches over and backhands Donovanitch’s shoulder.

“Vitch!” he shouts angrily. “Fucking shut your face and chill, bro. And get ready. We’re getting close to the jump point. We need to all stay focused.”

Donovitch glares at Sloane for another moment, and she returns an ice-cold stare. Then he turns around and slumps into his padded seat like a pouting child.

Some warrior.

Sloane, however, handled herself well. She’s completely unflustered by the whole exchange.

As she goes back to checking her gear, I study her silently from across the aisle. She’s small, even for a female, and that factor is enhanced by the size of the men in this aircraft. But her efficient movements and unshakeable demeanor make it clear that she’s not to be messed with.

Her hair is so blonde it’s nearly white, and it is buzzed close to her head in a military cut. I’ve never seen that kind of hairdo

on a woman before, but there's something fascinating and even enticing about the way it accentuates the delicate shape of her head and her elegant facial features.

While her body is athletic, it is also infinitely feminine.

As I focus my attention on her even more closely, I start to notice her scent, easily picking out her signature amid the mixture of masculine body odors filling the transit hold.

The first thing I notice is the clean simple smell of her soap, but underneath that, my nose quickly uncovers her body's natural scent. It is raw and alive, a totally feminine smell that stirs my cock and tightens the crotch of my shorts.

I should stop, but I sniff again, taking in more of her odor.

That was a mistake.

Somehow, her scent seems to be growing even stronger, and the big whiff I just took instantly makes my dick as hard as an iron spike. I kind of hope no one notices my raging hard-on, but honestly I don't really care if they do.

I'm too busy wondering how the hell her scent could be so powerful.

I've only ever encountered such an intense scent during my clandestine excursions into the Zone. There's only one thing that can produce an aroma that speaks to my body that way.

An omega.

Sloane glances up, and a flicker of surprise crosses her face when she notices me looking at her. But she doesn't look

away. For a silent moment our eyes lock.

Her eyes drop to my crotch, where my hard cock is straining at my shorts, and her pupils dilate wide.

Those pretty blue eyes flick back up to mine. Her mouth hangs open in silent surprise.

The moment is broken by a sickening lurch of the aircraft. My stomach leaps into my throat as the hovership takes a severe dip in altitude. At first I think we just hit a particularly bad patch of turbulent air, but when the craft continues to plummet, I know something is truly wrong.

“Shit!” A Marine shouts toward the cockpit. “What the fuck is going on up there.”

I lunge out of my seat and stumble toward the front of the craft, leaning against the bulkheads for support.

As I climb into the cockpit, my heart sinks.

Something is wrong. Seriously wrong.

The pilot is slumped against the controls. His face is pale and shot with diseased, black veins. His eyes are blank and his lips are bubbling with drool. I turn toward the copilot, only to find him in the same state.

What the fuck?

Through the windshield, the landscape of dense forests is looming up toward us with frightening speed.

I swing back toward the transit hold, leaning forward to climb the tilted deck.

“Does anyone know how to fly? I bark.

But I get no answer. Half the Marines are now in the same state as the pilots, skin pale, eyes dead, lips drooling mutely. Their companions are desperately trying to rouse them, but one by one they are slipping into the same braindead state.

My first impulse is to check Sloane, and I experience a surge of relief that she is still okay.

For now.

“Oh fuck!” Donovanitch shouts. “What the fuck’s going on, man? Oh God, we’re all gonna die!”

He’s right, of course. There are only seconds left before we slam into the ground.

Donovitch leaps out of his seat and races toward the rear of the craft, and I see his hand going for the latch that opens the jump door.

“Wait!” Sloan hollers, rising from her seat. “Our helmets!”

She’s right. Nobody has their helmets on yet, and as soon as that hatch opens, the entire craft will be exposed to the contamination of the Zone.

Donovitch pauses, hand on the latch. His eyes roll back white, and the blood drains from his face as he succumbs to the same sickness as his partners.

As his body slumps to the deck, his hand unwittingly pulls the latch, a rear door swings open, depressurizing the hold with a sudden, violent roar of rushing air. As Donovanitch collapses, his

ripcord snags on something, and his chute billows open, violently ripping him out of the ship and into the open sky beyond. His flaccid body sags in his harness as he drifts out of sight.

“No!” Sloane screams, her voice almost silenced by the whipping wind.

That’s when I have a sudden flash of intuition. I know what’s happening to the pilots and Marines. They’ve *already* been exposed. The supposedly advanced shielding of the craft failed, turning everyone into beta mutants one-by-one.

The only one who hasn’t changed is Sloane.

A shudder of turbulence rocks the plummeting ship, and Sloane stumbles. I race forward to catch her. Even with the harsh wind sucking the air from the hold, I’m instantly assailed by her intense scent. She turns her face toward mine, revealing eyes that are unnaturally dilated.

Sloane has changed. She’s not a beta, but she has mutated.

There may not be any outward signs, but the contamination has gotten to her body, altering her in invisible ways—her physiology, her hormones, her needs...

She’s an omega now.

“We have to jump!” My roar is muted by the howling vacuum of wind sucking at the interior of the ship. “Now!”

I grab hold of Sloane’s body and shove her toward the open hatch at the aft of the craft.

“Wait!” she shouts, her voice ripped away by the wind. “We need rifles.”

There’s no time for that. We have bare seconds before the aircraft slams into the ground.

I shove her out into the open night sky, praying that she has the presence of mind to pull her rip cord. A split second later, I dive out after her, immediately opening my own chute.

A surge of relief floods through me as I see Sloane’s camo parachute blossom out of her pack, and she floats away in the darkness. Just two seconds later, and it would have been too late.

But my hope is wiped away when the backwash from the falling ship hits me, pushing me in the opposite direction and crumpling my own parachute. I’m spiralling out of control, plummeting way too fast.

The treetops reach up toward me like leafy claws.

A second later, and my world becomes a chaos of snapping branches ripping at my flesh as gravity pulls me toward the ground. I don’t feel any pain, however.

My mind is focused on one thing, and one thing only.

The omega.

Sloane.

I have to survive this.

I have to make her safe.

CHAPTER 5: TRUK

Once the fire has settled down into a nice bed of glowing embers lined with white ash, I place the freshly caught fish directly into the coals to cook. There is a sizzle, and a vortex of orange sparks swirls upward toward the stars. I sit back on the riverbed and listen to the purling stream flowing by in the night, clear and cold.

Even with the wall of dark trees on one side, this campsite is relatively exposed, but I don't care.

The Farlanders know me, and they know better than to mess with me. And if they have somehow forgotten, I'll be more than happy to remind them. Just let them try.

As for the ruin-dwellers, they hardly ever venture this far from their home.

Taking up my knife of chipped obsidian, I stab into the cooking fish to turn it. Something else, however, catches my attention, causing me to drop my half-cooked dinner back into the coals.

A sound, faint and distant.

At first it is a low, rhythmic throbbing. As I listen, however, the sound changes, becomes a prolonged, hawk-like screech, but much, much louder.

I rise, focusing my eyes in the direction of the sound. It only takes me a moment to find it—a dark speck moving across the

starry sky, angling downward toward the earth.

By the Source.

An aircraft—An Outsider aircraft!

I have seen them once or twice before, soaring overhead like giant birds. But I've never seen one this close to the center of the Zone.

I squint, focusing in even more. With my highly acute vision, I can just make out the shape of the distant craft. As I watch, something emerges from the back of the ship and begins drifting slowly downward like a floating seed pod.

Another seed pod emerges, immediately followed by a third.

Not long after that, the falling craft disappears from sight behind the tops of the trees. A sudden orange glow flares on the horizon, and several seconds later, delayed by the vast distance, comes the rumble of an explosion.

I drop my stone knife into the fur sheath at my hip, and kick some riverbed dirt over my fire, extinguishing the embers and ruining my dinner. I say a quick apology to the fish for wasting his flesh like that, but there are more important matters to attend to right now.

Bigger fish, as the saying goes.

A moment later, my bare feet are racing over the earth, eating up the distance between me and the crash.

If I hurry, I can reach it by first light.

CHAPTER 6: SLOANE

The world comes back to me in bits and pieces.

First there is a sensation of something warm and wet trickling down the middle of my face, creeping along the side of my nose. Next I notice a strange, musical droning sound unlike anything I've heard before.

And weirdest of all, the pleasant, nostalgic sensation of swaying gently back and forth.

In my half-consciousness, an image comes to my mind of being small again, riding the swings at the dirty little playground in the cramped courtyard of the orphanage.

The trickle reaches my lips. Instinctively, I lick it, tasting the warm, coppery flavor of blood.

A sudden pulse of adrenaline surges through me, and my eyes flutter open with a gasp.

I am strapped into my jump harness, suspended from a treetop by dozens of nylon cords attached to the camo parachute caught in the limbs overhead. Other trees surround me, an entire dark forest. The gnarled branches bobbing in the cool night wind seem like hundreds of deformed hands reaching for me.

I look down.

It takes my eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness, but when they do, my mind reels with a sudden sense of vertigo.

A good thirty feet below in the darkness lies the forest floor, littered with pine needles and dappled with pale moonlight poking through the upper canopy.

Now it's all coming back to me.

Something happened to the pilot and copilot. Then the other Marines all started changing too. We lost control of the ship and we began to crash. With Dog's help, I jumped out at the last second.

After that, things get a little fuzzy.

My last memory is the violent jerk of the harness rig between my legs and under my arms as the chute deployed and inflated. I came down straight into a dense forest. I must have hit my head against the trunk of this tree and lost consciousness.

Shit. How long have I been out?

And what about Dog? He jumped as well, but I think his chute didn't open properly. Did he survive? Assuming he did make it, how will I ever find him in all this wilderness?

And even if I do find him, how the hell will we get back to civilization?

I take a deep breath, calming my frazzled nerves so I can properly take stock of the situation.

I'm not completely helpless here. I have my sidearm—a lightweight .40-caliber polymer frame pistol with ten rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber. In addition to that, there's the combat knife tucked in the concealed sheath stitched into my boot.

It would have been better if I had a chance to grab a rifle before jumping, but it's too late to worry about that now.

As for the cords of my tangled parachute, they are holding steady for now, but if those limbs overhead break or my chute's canopy tears, I have a thirty foot fall below me. I need to act fast. I need to get out of this harness so I can climb down to safety.

As I glance down at my dangling body, I freeze.

My black protective body suit is torn, ripped by the sharp tree branches as I crashed into the forest. The upper part of the right sleeve is gashed open, and the material covering my legs is slashed with many holes as well, revealing my bare skin beneath.

I don't even have my helmet. I wasn't wearing it inside the dropship. Nobody was.

"Oh no," I whisper.

My pulse quickens, and a ball of panic rises in my chest. I am exposed to the contamination of the Quarantine Zone. In fact, I have been ever since Donovitch opened the hatch of the ship.

It's only a matter of time before I turn into a slobbering, mindless beta.

I'm fucked. I'm well and truly fucked.

That mysterious chirping sound rises and falls like strange music throughout the forest again.

It takes me a moment to realize the source. Bugs. Cicadas, I think they are called. It's a weird sound, but kind of nice.

Shit, the only bugs we have back in the city are cockroaches, and those disgusting things don't sing.

Doesn't matter, since I'll never see the city again. Not now.

I tilt my head back, letting the light breeze flow over my short hair. and I relax into the gently swinging harness as the peaceful music of the night fills my ears.

I want this to be the last thing I remember before I lose my mind to the beta mutation.

The mutation, however, doesn't come.

With each passing minute that I remain alive and clear-headed, a sense of hope and relief grows inside me—a hope that I am somehow immune to the contamination of the Zone.

This is soon replaced by another terrifying thought.

What if I'm not immune? What if I already *have* mutated?

What if I'm an *omega*?

Oh God, that must be it. There's no other explanation.

I'm an omega now.

A new sound echoes through the forest, so distant and imperceptible, that at first I think it is only a trick of my stressed-out brain. But a moment later it comes again, closer and louder, and my blood chills at the sound.

It is a low, moaning howl, not quite human, but not entirely bestial either.

The cicadas leave off their singing. The silence is ominous.

My first instinct is to go for my rifle, but I remember I don't have one. It was left behind on the ship when I bailed out.

At least I have my .40-cal and my boot knife.

Another howl, closer this time.

I need to get into a better position, and fast.

There is a sturdy-looking branch jutting several feet to my right. Swinging my legs, I manage to rock my harness back and forth until I can grasp the limb with my arms.

The howls increase. They are coming from all directions now. There are sounds of snapping twigs and trampled underbrush as the creatures close in.

I clamber onto the branch, keeping my weight near the trunk where the wood is the strongest.

My hand flashes to the knife on my boot, drawing it. The cold steel glints as it catches a stray moonbeam. I cut away the strap holding my left shoulder, then I switch hands, cutting loose the right strap too.

I swing my body up into a seated position on the limb, leaning my back against the rough trunk.

Down below, the chorus of howls has become a cacophony.

The Alphas are here.

They emerge from the depths of the forest, loping on all fours like wild animals. There are five of them. They circle the base

of the tree, licking their drooling chops and snuffling the air, picking up my omega scent.

They bark angrily. The beasts are confused. They can smell me, but they can't find me.

Then one of them looks up, and even from thirty feet up in the darkness I can see the fires of animal lust lighting up his eyes. He grunts excitedly and then belts out a deafening, bone-chilling howl of triumph. His companions raise their heads and join in the terrifying song.

They've spotted me.

I just hope these freaks don't climb trees.

Luckily, the giant tree that I'm trapped in is devoid of branches for the first fifteen feet or so, and the girth of the massive trunk is too great even for the enormous arm-span of these Alphas.

For a moment, I watch the figures below as if in a trance. They are revolting. Their naked bodies are grotesque and twisted, and their faces are horribly disfigured by a combination of mutation and battle-scars. Foaming saliva flecks their ugly lips, and they pop their jaws like rabid dogs.

But the worst part of all are the monstrous, misshapen erections jutting from between their legs. Ugly, twisted members that are hard and oozing with arousal.

I wonder how I can see so well in this darkness, and it occurs to me that it must be part of my omega mutation.

Right now, it's more of a curse than a blessing.

The beasts are enraged, lost in a mindless mating frenzy, and I'm the object of their desire. The thought of them sating their sick urges with my body turns my stomach.

One of the Alphas tries to scramble up the trunk of the tree. He makes it about ten feet before his limbs lose their purchase, and he slides back down, seemingly oblivious to the way the rough bark scrapes his naked body and abrades his exposed cock.

I hold my position, straddling the branch and keeping my weight on the crook of the limb and the trunk.

I run through my options. Briefly, I consider opening fire with my pistol, but I nix that idea. I need to conserve my ammo, and for the moment at least, I seem to be safe.

Down below, the horny Alphas are growing increasingly agitated, yipping and snarling as they take turns trying to scramble up the tree. Their attempts are futile. In their bestial frustration, some of them start fighting with each other like mad dogs.

"That's right, you ugly freaks," I mutter to myself. "Good luck getting to me up here."

It immediately occurs to me that I'm now just as much a freak as the horrid creatures swirling and howling below me. I push that thought out of my mind.

My only goal for now is survival.

For now, it's just a waiting game. I only need to outlast these males.

Sooner or later, these feral Alphas will have to go find food and water. The same goes for me, but at least for now I have an advantage. While I'm perched up here safe in my tree, I'm not expending any energy. But if those frenzied Alphas keep running and jumping around down there, eventually they will wear themselves out.

I have an idea to speed up the process a little.

"Is that the best you can do?" I shout.

I doubt these monsters can understand my taunt, but if I can make them even more agitated, maybe I can wear them out.

"Come and get me!" I call. "If you're man enough, that is!"

While some of the Alphas continue testing the tree trunk, others let out desperate, almost painful groans. One of them falls to his knees, grunting and furiously jerking his massive, gnarled cock. Another of his companions follows suit, spitting onto his palm before jacking himself violently.

Their nostrils expand, and I realize they are drinking in my omega scent. That realization sends a tremor of disgust up my spine.

With a loud grunt, one of the Alphas unloads, spewing his seed in a series of long white ropes until at last he flops onto his back in exhaustion, his cock drooling a few final spurts onto his scarred stomach. Before long, the other one ejaculates as well.

Gross.

But at least my plan seems to be working. I persist.

“What’s the matter?” I shout to the other three confused and enraged Alphas. “Don’t you want this omega pussy?”

I wriggle my body seductively, taking care not to lose my balance.

Two more Alphas give in, tugging at their dicks so hard it looks like they are trying to rip them off.

The remaining Alpha—the biggest and ugliest one—just stands there glaring at me, his face darkening with a look that is a mixture of hatred and lust.

“What’s the matter?” I shout, trying to disguise the tremor of fear in my voice, “Don’t you want a piece of this, big boy?”

I wiggle my butt on my perch. Being seductive has never been my strong suit, exactly. And playing it up for these repulsive creatures is even worse. But if I can just get this fugly bastard to give in to his urges and wank, maybe the whole pack will slink off and leave me be.

But the biggest Alpha doesn’t give in. He doesn’t slink off.

With a heart-stopping roar, he leaps high into the air. The claws of his fingers and toes grip the tree trunk briefly, but instead of trying to climb, as before, he leaps again with a sudden, violent exertion of his entire body and manages to catch the lowest branch.

“Oh shit,” I breathe.

As his dazed pack mates watch from below, the Alpha drags himself up onto his branch. There is a splintering crack as the

limb gives way beneath his weight, but not before he leaps again, grabbing onto another branch farther up the trunk.

No. This can't be happening.

The other Alphas below begin hooting and howling, cheering the climber on. Like an awful, hairless ape, the thing clambers toward me, leaping from one branch to the next.

I squeeze my thighs tightly around my branch, hook my ankles, and switch my knife to my left hand. Then I draw my pistol.

“Come and get it,” I snarl, aiming my gun at the beast.

This time, there is no hint of seduction in my voice. If this freak wants my body, he's going to have to fight for it.

I fire a three shot burst.

The Alpha leaps away with frightening quickness, and the shots miss, sending up three explosions of splinters as the bullets bite into the branch where the Alpha was just crouching.

I aim and fire again and again.

Impossibly, the Alpha dodges each shot. His movements are lightning fast, and too erratic to predict. By pure luck, one shot connects with his shoulder, sending up a red mist of blood.

The creature merely grunts and continues his ascent.

At least now, he's close enough to present a pretty big target.

I line up the sights between those bloodshot eyes.

“Die,” I hiss between gritted teeth.

I squeeze the trigger.

Click.

The hammer falls on an empty chamber.

A sickening chill ripples over my flesh. How could I have wasted all of my ammo already? I should have kept my cool and waited until the thing was closer, so there would be no chance of missing.

Now that mistake is going to cost me my life.

And possibly a whole lot more.

Suddenly a new sound booms through the forest. An almost deafening roar that echoes between the ancient trees.

The climbing Alpha, who is now just feet below me, pauses his ascent. He perches like a gargoyle and cranes his neck in the direction of the sound. A low, canine growl rumbles in his throat. Below, his companions have ceased their hooting and are sniffing the air.

Something is crashing through the underbrush. Something big.

Another, an even louder roar erupts through the forest, and a massive figure explodes out of the trees, flying straight for the Alphas on the ground. It moves so fast that it is little more than a blur in the shadows and dappled moonlight.

Shrieking, the Alphas below are scattered like bowling pins. In a flash, the attacker pounces on the nearest Alpha, and there is a sickening crunch of bone.

The attacker rises to his feet and tilts his head up toward me.

“Sloane!” he bellows.

“Dog?” I manage to stammer breathlessly.

It’s really him. It’s Dog. He survived.

He is dressed only in his form-fitting black shorts and nothing else. No shoes to help him run over this harsh terrain. No weapons.

Dog doesn’t need them. His body is his weapon. He was big before, but now that he is in full-blown attack mode, his physique looks absolutely terrifying. Layer upon layer of striated muscles traced with bulging veins.

He sees the Alpha perched on the branch below me and snarls. But the other three Alphas on the ground are already on their feet and they have him surrounded. He’s outnumbered three to one.

That doesn’t matter.

With another booming roar, Dog explodes into action.

The other Alphas are no joke, but their attacks are wild and undirected. Dog has the advantage of training.

I see moves that I recognize from my own regimen, a mixture of disciplines—Muay Thai, Krav Maga, and jiu-jitsu—all executed with such superhuman speed and precision that the untrained wild Alphas don’t stand a chance.

The Alpha perched below me in the tree watches as his pack-mates are brutally slaughtered by Dog. For an instant, the

beast seems to consider helping them, but then it whips its face upward toward me and snarls.

“Your friends are dead you bastard,” I shout. “Run away while you can.”

The Alpha ignores me, or perhaps it just doesn’t understand. It leaps to another limb, then leaps again. One massive, hairy hand catches onto the branch where I’m sitting, and the other clutches my leg. Sharp claws bite painfully into my shin.

I scream, a piercing sound born of pain and rage. There is a flash of steel as I plunge my knife into the creature’s wrist, and it releases me with an agonized howl.

The beast swings, ape-like, and hooks one leg over the branch, struggling to hold on. I rear back one boot, preparing to kick the creature straight in its hideous face, but I don’t get the chance.

There is a sharp crackle of splintering wood

“No,” I gasp.

The branch gives out beneath the combined weight of me and the Alpha, and my stomach leaps into my throat as I find myself tumbling head over heels. Branches and twigs whip at my body and the pillars of the dark trees whirl in my vision.

“Dog!” I scream as I plummet to earth.

CHAPTER 7: DOG

Three Alphas lie dead on the ground, and the fourth one, wounded, retreats into the depths of the forest. Smart move.

These were Farlander Alphas—twisted, inbred beings that are much different from the Alphas who inhabit the central ruins. They are called Farlanders because they have shunned the Source and live like filthy beasts in the hinterlands of the Zone.

I have no time to bask in my victory, however.

A piercing shriek from overhead grabs my attention, and I look up just in time to see Sloane and the last remaining Alpha falling toward the ground.

There is no time to think. Pure instinct takes over, and my muscles seem to move with a life of their own.

With an explosion of energy, my legs propel me upward toward the falling figures. My jump is perfectly timed. I reach the apex of my leap and begin to descend again just as Sloan's body reaches me. The differential allows me to catch her without injuring her.

The other Alpha streaks past and lands with a hard, wet thud on a thick, gnarled root.

A moment later, I land too, but on my feet. I keep my arms loose to gently cradle Sloan's body.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Her eyes flutter open, and she looks around, dazed. Then those beautiful blue eyes lock with mine. By some trick of the moonlight, they seem to darken to a deep sapphire hue.

“Sloane, are you okay?” I repeat.

She nods wordlessly. Her close-cropped head is cradled in the crook of my arm. A tiny, almost imperceptible tremor quivers her lower lip, and I feel something stirring in my blood.

Her scent.

The smell of her body envelopes me like a cloud. It’s like nothing I’ve ever smelled before, unlike any perfume. It is raw, natural, feral, and feminine. As the warm aroma fills my nose, my cock swells inside my shorts.

There’s no question about it.

She’s an omega now.

Her body is scalding hot in my arms. Between the gaps in her ripped, black environmental suit, her flesh pebbles with goosebumps. She can smell me too.

“Dog,” she half whispers. “You...”

A pained groan comes from the forest floor nearby.

Apparently the hard fall didn’t quite finish off the last feral Alpha, and the wretched thing is trying to drag its broken body away into the shadows of the forest. I have a sudden impulse to end the creature, to put it out of its misery.

But Sloane is quicker than me.

In a flash, she has sprung out of my arms.

“Sloane!” I shout.

In one fluid movement, she scoops her knife from where it has fallen on the leaf strewn ground and pounces on the Alpha.

The steel glints in a quick motion as she draws it across the creature’s throat. Arterial spray patters on the dead leaves and pine needles like rain, then gradually subsides as the Alpha’s blood pressure drops and its heart finally expires.

Sloane rises, standing over the dead thing like a huntress. She spits, and wipes the bloody blade off against the thigh of her suit.

“You saved me,” she says without looking up. “Thank you.”

Something in her voice suggests that her pride has been hurt. Perhaps she feels that as a soldier, she shouldn’t need saving.

“How did you find me?” she asks.

I gesture off into the woods.

“As I was falling, I saw your chute go down somewhere over here. As soon as I recovered from my landing, I headed this way. When I got close, I heard your screams.”

She turns toward me, eyes wide.

“Dog,” she stammers. “All that stuff I was saying to the Alphas to entice them...I was just trying to get them riled so they would wear themselves out. I didn’t—“

I smirk and raise one hand to quiet her.

“I know, I know. You don’t have to explain. It was a good plan.”

Sloane sighs with relief. Apparently she really cares what I think about her.

But what I just told her about finding her by following her shouts is only half true. I'm leaving out the part about how I caught her scent from over a mile away. Hell, I could have found her blindfolded.

That scent is going to be a problem. It's going to draw more feral Alphas down on us. We made short work of these five, but if they arrive in greater numbers we'll be in trouble, especially in this darkness.

"We need to get out of here, find some shelter for the remainder of the night."

Sloane nods.

She seems rattled. At first I think it's because she's still shaken by her fall. But maybe it was something else. Maybe it was that moment we shared when I was holding her in my arms. Maybe it's the implications of the fact that I'm an Alpha and she's an omega.

"We need to find the ship," she says. "With any luck we can send a message back to Central Command."

"It went down somewhere in this direction," I say, pointing. "I saw the smoke over the trees."

"All right," she says. "Lead the way."

* * *

Scattered flames from the wrecked craft light up the crash site, casting a wavering orange glow against the wall of trees

surrounding the clearing. At one end there is a swath of broken trees, their trunks shattered to toothpicks, then a long deep gash in the grassy ground where the fuselage plowed through the earth.

Only the front half of the ship remains, and the interior is exposed by a ragged hole where the back half ripped away on impact. The edge is fringed with broken piping and wires, some of which are spitting yellow sparks intermittently.

The destruction is worse than anything I've ever seen. And I've seen more than my fair share.

"What a mess," I grumble.

"Let's just hope the communicator is still working," Sloane says.

Her black protective suit was all ripped up from the tree limbs, so she used her knife to cut away the tattered fabric from her thighs down, leaving her lower body covered in a pair of ragged shorts that expose the tanned curves of her long legs. She removed the top part of the outfit completely, and now she's only sporting the thin, white tank top that she was wearing underneath and her military dog tags around her neck.

Right now, I'm trying, without much success, to ignore the way her erect nipples are poking through the tight, white cloth.

I enter the wreck first, hopping easily inside before offering my arm to pull Sloane up after me. She is so small, she might as well be weightless.

“Careful,” I tell her. “The deck is unsteady. Hang onto me in case the fuselage shifts.”

I’m happy when she does as I tell her, clinging tightly to my arm. I lead the way toward the cockpit, bracing against the empty seats and scorched wall as we traverse the deck, which is slanted almost forty-five degrees.

The fires inside the ship have mostly gone out, leaving the space dark. I navigate mainly by feel. As we move forward, I pick up a sickly sweet smell of barbecued meat, and I know what it is before my eyes even have a chance to adjust to the low light.

The remains of our team.

An arm here, a pair of legs there, boots still on, strips of environmental protection suit melted to the cooked flesh.

“Don’t look,” I hiss over my shoulder.

But it’s too late. I can tell by the squeeze of her fingers and the hitch of her breath that Sloane has already seen. In fact, there’s nowhere to turn without looking at a mangled piece of something that used to be a person.

Sloane composes herself.

“What are we waiting for?” she says. “We need to salvage whatever we can. Weapons. Food.”

Shit, she’s a tough one.

But there’s a wobble in her voice that undercuts her tough demeanor. It’s not that the devastation of her teammates hasn’t

affected her. It's just that she isn't going to let it get in the way of her survival.

And she's right. We need to grab what we can and haul ass.

It's the middle of the night in the Zone, and there are Alphas about. Farlander Alphas. The worst and most savage kind.

If it was just me, I wouldn't be so worried.

Now, however, I've got Sloane to protect. And she's in heat. Her scent will draw the bastards in. We can't waste any time.

True to form, Sloane sets to work immediately. She releases her grip on my arm and makes her way to the armament rack at front of the craft. The rifles are scattered about on the floor. She picks one up, examines it, tosses it aside. Then another. And another.

Her movements grow frantic,

“Fuck!” she hisses.

Her small fist slams hard into the bulkhead as she releases her frustration and anger with a punch.

“They're all fucked,” she says as she regains her cool. “Every last one of them is broken.”

Shit. So much for weapons.

It looks like we'll have to rely on my strength and Sloane's knife.

“Come on,” I whisper. “Let's check the cockpit.”

I climb in first.

The windshield is cobwebbed with cracks from the impact, but somehow it's still intact. The bodies of the pilot and copilot are still there, strapped into their seats. Miraculously, the devices on the control panel are not destroyed, and some of the switches and warning lights are still blinking.

Something overhead sputters and showers yellow sparks.

"Do you know how to work this thing?" I ask, sweeping my hand toward the comm unit embedded into the console.

Sloane nods, her face a picture of concentration.

"The question is, does it still work?"

She tries a few of the switches and dials, and the machine emits an electronic croak.

"Come in," Sloane says into the device. "This is Lance Corporal Jessica Sloane reporting from...somewhere in the Quarantine Zone. Come in. Is anyone there?"

Silence.

Sloane tries again several times, but each time, the result is the same.

At last, dejected, Sloane drops her head.

I feel my heart sink too.

If we could only get through to Central Command, then they could send a rescue vehicle to save us.

But it doesn't look like that is going to happen.

I start to run through the possibilities in my mind. I could try to escort Sloane all the way back to the Quarantine Wall on

foot, but what would the guards there do when they saw us coming? Their orders are to shoot any Alphas or omegas on sight. The snipers might very well take us out before we could even get within shouting distance.

“Look, Sloane, maybe they’ve already sent a rescue party for us,” I say. “I mean, you’ve got one of those neural implants, right? They can use that to track our location.”

Every SynerGen Marine has one of those chips to monitor everything they see and hear. I don’t have one, since my enhanced Alpha healing factor rejects any foreign devices implanted under my skin.

“Yeah.” Her voice sounds unconvinced. “But we don’t even know how deep inside the Zone we are. Will they even be able to reach us? Based on the way that our ship’s protection failed, I’d say they oversold the new contamination shielding technology.”

Suddenly, there is a burst of static, as the communication device sputters to life. The speakers emit a painful screech that slowly resolves itself into a voice.

“Sloane? Thank goodness you’re all right! I’ve been tracking your progress via your neural implant.”

The small visual monitor lights up, and we’re looking at Dr. Frostgrave, his gray eyes wide with anxiety behind his spectacles and his knobby fingers pulling nervously at his white goatee.

“Dog. I’m glad to see that you are alive and well too, of course.”

Sloane begins to speak, trying to keep her voice slow and steady.

“Listen, Dr. Frostgrave, we’re in terrible danger here. There are feral Alphas in the area. As I’m sure you saw, we’ve already had an encounter with a small pack. Please, we need an evac ship as soon as possible. You should have our location based on my neural implant.

On the screen, Dr. Frostgrave bridges his fingers, thinking.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he says at last.

“What?” Sloane and I both shout in unison.

“Listen,” Frostgrave continues. “I appreciate your indignation. But please try to understand, I’m looking out for your interests here as well, Sloane. For better or for worse, you are a mutant now, if you will pardon the term. Should you come back to the city hive now, you’d be locked away in a cell to be studied like an animal.”

The thought of Sloane being taken away from me and locked in a cell like a guinea pig sends fire coursing through my veins.

I’ve endured that kind of treatment. In fact, I’m used to it now. But I won’t allow that to happen to Sloane.

“Who would lock me away like an animal?” Sloane asks, her voice accusatory. “You?”

Frostgrave shakes his head.

“Of course not. I’m on your side here, Sloane. But I don’t call the shots here at SynerGen, I’m afraid. Even if I tried to intercede on your behalf, I doubt I would be able to affect the outcome. I’m sorry, but I can foresee how things would proceed should you return to the hive as an omega, and it doesn’t look promising.”

“What’s her other option?” I ask angrily. “Stay inside the Quarantine Zone and die?”

Frostgrave shakes his head again.

“No. You proceed with the mission.”

“The mission?” Sloane nearly laughs with disbelief. “Doctor, I think it’s safe to say that this mission is a failure. We’ve got no vehicle, no supplies—“

“Think,” Frostgrave snaps, cutting her off. “You are an omega now. It’s the perfect disguise. In fact, it’s better than a disguise—you are the *real thing*. Now you can infiltrate the central city with ease and track down the target at your leisure.”

Frostgrave leans closer.

“And when you return triumphant, your mission a success, you will be a hero. A hero, Sloane! SynerGen won’t be so quick to lock you away at that point. Can you imagine the public outcry if that got out? A military hero locked away as a guinea pig?”

I run my fingers over my bearded jaw. Frostgrave has a point. Returning as a hero will give Sloane leverage. Returning

empty handed, on the other hand, she'll be seen as nothing more than an omega.

I don't like it, but it's true.

"It won't be that simple," Sloane says. "Just because I'm an... omega, that doesn't mean we can just waltz into town without any of the native Alphas taking notice."

"I never said it would be easy," Frostgrave replies. "But if you are careful, your new physiology will allow you to penetrate the Alphas' culture and retrieve Lily O'Neal. Rescue, I mean."

I laugh coldly.

"So basically you're telling us you won't rescue us until we've completed the mission."

"It's the only way," Frostgrave demands.

He's acting as if his hands are tied, but this is fucking extortion.

I turn toward Sloane and we stare at each other for a silent moment.

"There is another matter," Frostgrave continues. "Now that you have mutated, Sloane, your body will be experiencing intense hormonal changes...as I'm sure you have already noticed."

I don't say anything, but Frostgrave is right. Every time I breathe, the faintest whiff of Sloane's scent sets my blood on fire with lust for her. Huddled in the cramped space of the cockpit with her, it is even worse.

Her natural omega perfume is exuding from every crevice of her body, warm and sultry—from beneath her arms and between her gorgeous legs.

I can smell her need. Her cunt.

Beneath my skin-tight shorts, my cock is painfully hard.

And I know that Sloane is feeling it too. It's obvious from the way she keeps stealing furtive glances at my body while her perfect teeth worry her plush bottom lip. Every chance she gets, she seems to find an excuse to accidentally rub up against me, brushing her bare arm against mine.

I wonder what kind of thoughts are running through her omega mind right now. My own thoughts are too obscene to even put into words.

“Sloane’s body is experiencing estrus,” Frostgrave goes on.

“Her body is pumping out pheromones that are a signal to any Alphas nearby that her body is ready and ripe for breeding.”

He pauses. Despite his grave tone, I swear I catch the faintest flicker of a smirk at the corner of his thin lips.

“In layman’s terms,” he says, “Sloane is going into heat.”

Sloane turns to me again with a frightened look on her pretty face. Her pupils have become dilated. All that remains of her irises are two wire-thin rings of intense blue.

“What can we do to...remedy the situation?” I ask.

“Come now, Dog.” Frostgrave says. “You’ve studied all about Alphas and omegas. You know that the only way to diminish

the symptoms of estrus is through intense and prolonged stimulation.”

“Stimulation?” Sloane gasps.

My ears pick up a sound—a howl in the distance outside the ship. It’s getting late, close to midnight, and the crescent moon is already high overhead.

The last thing we need is to get caught out here in the dark by another pack of feral Alphas.

“I’m looking at the satellite map of your region,” Frostgrave says, as if reading my mind. “There appears to be an old abandoned house due west of you in another clearing. You can seek shelter there for the night. The structure should help contain the scent of Sloane’s estrus until her needs have been...sated.”

I don’t look at Sloane, but even in my peripheral vision, I can see her face turn a deep shade of warm scarlet in the cool light of the comm screen.

“That’s assuming the house isn’t already occupied,” I mutter.

Frostgrave nods and strokes his hoary white goatee.

“Yes,” he agrees. “It will be necessary to proceed with caution. But you must hurry and hide yourselves as quickly as possible. Tomorrow, you can go north to reach the city. Good luck and Godspeed. We’re all depending on you.”

The monitor goes blank.

I say Frostgrave's name again, but there is no response. Apparently he's said his final word on the matter. There will be no rescue until we have acquired our target.

I'm about to curse Frostgrave, but I catch myself, remembering that Sloane's neural implant is picking up everything we say and do, and Frostgrave is no doubt monitoring it closely.

As pissed off as I am at the man, we need to keep on his good side for now.

Another howl sounds off in the distance, and Sloane's muscles tense. She draws close to me, as if by instinct.

"Come on," I say, taking her by the hand and leading her out of the cockpit. "Let's go find this house."

"Wait!"

She turns around and takes something from the dead pilot—a small black flashlight, which she tucks into the belt of her shorts.

"Okay, let's get out of here."

Sloane and I make our way back down the ruined length of the craft, picking our way carefully over the flotsam and burnt body parts. I hop down onto the churned earth. Sloane doesn't resist as I take her by the waist and lower her to the ground. By the dim light of the gibbous moon, I can see that her eyes are now dilated to near total blackness.

We have to hurry.

CHAPTER 8: SLOANE

Sometime just after midnight, we step into another clearing, and there is the house, right where Frostgrave told us it would be.

What he failed to tell us, however, is just how colossal the place is.

The massive, three-story structure is perched atop a slight rise, overlooking the chest-high jumble of grass and weeds that fills the clearing where yellow fireflies are blinking. It's the first time I've ever seen fireflies in real life.

The mansion itself is beyond ancient. Its pale paint is peeling back like dead skin to reveal the wood beneath, and the shingled roof, which is drooping on one side, is sprouting tufts of grass.

It's definitely seen better days, but the structure is mostly intact, even after all these years.

Dog and I pause for a moment at the edge of the woods, just staring at the pre-Cataclysmic home in awe.

More howls in the distance break the spell, however.

"Come on," Dog says. "We need to get inside."

I start to wade forward into the tall weeds, but Dog's hand on my shoulder stops me.

"What is it?" I ask.

In the moonlight, I see the wings of his nostrils flare, and I realize that he's breathing in my scent. Earlier, when the feral Alphas did that, it disgusted me. But somehow the idea of Dog breathing in my scent gives me a different feeling—a feeling like someone tickling my belly from inside.

“Your scent,” he says. “You’re going to spread it all over everything you touch. Your scent trail might lead other Alphas right up to the front door.”

“Shit,” I mutter.

Dog is right, of course. Traveling through the forest was one matter—there weren't a lot of weeds or brambles to brush my body. But this clearing is choked with high weeds. If I walk through there, I'll practically be smearing it with my scent.

I feel a flush of heat flaring through my neck and cheeks at the thought. It is less from embarrassment and more from anger. I've spent my whole life working my butt off to hold my own in a man's world, only to be saddled with this most feminine of problems.

“What do you suggest?” I ask, though I already know the solution.

“I'll carry you.”

Before I even have a chance to respond, Dog has picked me up and slung me over his heavily muscled shoulder.

He's manhandling me.

He strides through the high grass and weeds, carrying me toward the house like a caveman bringing his latest catch back

to his cave. I start to protest, but I hold my tongue. After all, Dog is right, we need to be careful not to leave a trail.

Speaking of cavemen, Dog lets out a deep grunt. At first I mistake it for the sound of exertion. He's super strong, though, and he's carrying me as if I'm weightless.

That's when I realize that with my behind bent over his shoulder like this, my heat-scent must be hitting him full force. I wonder what kind of effect that is having on his Alpha physiology.

As he climbs the creaking steps up onto the porch, I dip my face and allow myself a quick sniff of his bare skin.

His scent is deep, penetrating, and overwhelmingly masculine—musk and wood smoke and well-tended leather.

The effect it has on my body is incredible and totally involuntary.

My nipples stiffen instantly, becoming as hard as glass beads beneath my tank top. Something clenches hard between my legs, and tingling sensations ripple outward from my core.

But worst of all is the soft orgasmic whimper that issues from my lips.

Dog slides me from his shoulder and stands me on the porch in front of him. He towers over me like a giant.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “Did I hurt you?”

I shake my head silently, forcing myself to drag my eyes away from his muscled torso.

“We need to be careful,” Dog cautions. “There could be other Alphas hiding in here.”

The downstairs windows have all been boarded up years before, presumably at the time of the big Cataclysm. The thin pieces of particle board and two-by-fours would have provided little defense against feral Alphas, however.

I test the front door. Even though it was once barricaded too, those barricades have been long since broken, and the door groans open, revealing the dank, shadowy interior.

“Careful,” Dog hisses again.

He steps past me and leans his face inside the doorway. The sounds of his snuffling nose come from inside.

“What do you smell?” I whisper.

He shakes his head.

“Alphas have definitely been here,” he says, “but they aren’t here now. The scent is too weak.” He sniffs again. “It’s strange. It doesn’t smell like a Farlander Alpha, but it doesn’t match the Alphas who dwell in the city ruins either. It’s like... something in between.”

“Do you think it’s safe?”

Dog thinks for a silent moment, staring into the darkness of the interior.

Another low moaning howl breaks the silence.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Dog says at last. “We have to get you indoors. We’ll just have to hope we don’t have any

unexpected guests during the night.”

I follow him inside.

With the windows barricaded, the downstairs is pitch black. The air is dank and perfumed with the smells of old dust and rotting upholstery. I take out the flashlight that we salvaged from the ship and turn it on. The beam stabs into the velvety darkness.

I pan around the rooms, licking the light over busted furniture scalloped with tree fungus and wallpaper peeling away in ragged strips to reveal the crumbling, mildew-blackened plaster beneath. The floor is furred with a lumpy green carpet of moss. Pale mushrooms sprout in the corners.

“Is it safe to breathe the air in here?” I ask.

“For a normal human, definitely not,” Rampart answers. “But our mutated immune systems should be resistant to the mold.”

“That’s comforting,” I mutter.

I’m less worried about the mold. I’m still struggling to cope with the fact that I’m a mutant now. An omega. Strange impulses are taking control of me. I’ve never been scared of walking into a dangerous situation before, and I’m not afraid now. But at the same time, I feel an unaccountable urge to stick close to Dog.

In fact, I find myself wanting to press myself against him like a cat.

We head upstairs, and Dog lifts me over a section where the steps have collapsed with age. His long legs step over the gap

with ease.

We find the second floor in much the same condition as the first, and again there are no signs of Alphas, which is good.

We continue moving upward.

The third-story windows are not as thoroughly boarded up, and blue-silver moonlight pokes in through the gaps in the slats. Gossamer thin, moth-bitten curtains belly inward on a draft leaking through.

I flick off the light lest any Alphas see it from outside.

“We can rest up here for the night,” Dog says in a hushed voice.

I nod and scan the floor for a comfortable place to lie down. Sleep sounds good right now, considering how weary I am after the day’s events, but my brain and body are still buzzing with leftover adrenaline, cortisol, and the knowledge that we are stranded deep in the zone.

“Sloane.”

The unexpected touch of Dog’s hand on my shoulder makes me jump.

There is something in his voice, a ragged undertone, that makes my muscle’s tense and shiver. I take a moment to get myself under control before I turn to face him. But as soon as I see him standing there, his engraved muscles striped with moonlight, my composure damn near falls apart.

“Remember what Frostgrave said. This house will help contain your...your scent. But only to an extent. It’s still necessary to...to take care of your needs before you attract more Alphas.” After a brief pause, he adds. “Your scent is strong inside this enclosed space. If you don’t...diminish it soon, it will be hard for me to control my...my urges. I’m afraid I might...harm you.”

His eyes catch a beam of moonlight and gleam like a wolf’s. They are locked on me with hungry intensity.

“What about your conditioning?” I ask.

Dog shakes his head.

“It’s true, my psychological conditioning is designed to ensure that I don’t cause any harm to my comrades. However, it has never been stress-tested quite like this.”

“You mean my...my heat could break your conditioning?”

He stares at me. Although it is dark, I can sense that his body is practically vibrating with constrained tension. When he speaks, his voice is tight and choked.

“I’d rather not find out the hard way, would you?”

I back away.

“No.” My voice is little more than a whisper. Something creaks as the old wood of the house shifts and settles. “I’ll take care of my needs. By myself.”

Dog nods.

“And I will take care of mine.”

He moves off into the shadows at the far end of the room, and I back away into my own dark corner, facing the wall.

Stimulation, Dr. Frostgrave said.

Easy enough, right?

I take a few deep breaths to try and relax, but that only fills my nose with more of Dog's intense Alpha scent. The smell of him nearly buckles my knees.

Fine. I'll use that to do what needs to be done.

I turn around briefly to make sure Dog isn't watching. Striped with moonlight, his back is turned to me as he prepares to take care of his own business.

Good. I face the wall again and get to work.

I slide one hand down between my legs and rub myself through the tight material that remains of my bodysuit. Even through the layer of protective material, my sex is extraordinarily sensitive—almost sore with arousal. I go slowly at first, then I pick up the pace, rubbing myself more firmly as I bite back the embarrassing sounds welling up in my throat.

Behind me, on the other side of the room, Dog spits, and a moment later, I hear the slick sounds of his stroking.

Inside my tattered shorts, my panties dampen with my arousal as I picture his member in my mind's eye—long and thick and engorged with desire.

My fingers slip inside my panties and I touch myself, skin on skin. My parting is wetter than it's ever been before—so wet that it's trickling down my inner thighs.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper, sucking air between my teeth.

My sex is almost too tender to touch, but I can't help myself. I have to do it. It's not only a matter of diminishing my scent. My lust is almost overwhelming now, and I need some kind of release or I'm going to scream.

I touch my tingling clit, rubbing it in a circular rhythm, keeping time with the slick sounds of Dog's jacking behind me.

A sudden impulse comes over me to turn around and look at him, but I catch myself as I remember that all of this is being monitored. Everything that I see is recorded by my neural implant and transmitted back to SynerGen for Frostgrave's viewing pleasure.

But the temptation is too great.

I can't resist.

I only steal one quick glance over my shoulder, but in that instant I get more than an eyeful.

Dog has completely disrobed, dropping his shorts to the floor, and he is now standing in the buff. His broad, muscular back is sheened with sweat and painted with silvery stripes of moonlight like a white tiger's pelt. His hard, powerful butt clenches tightly as he violently pumps his cock into his fist, grunting with each thrust.

When I turn back around, the image of that perfect male backside stays burned in my mind's eye. I rub myself even harder, yet somehow it's not working. My arousal continues mounting, but I can't find my climax.

"Please," I whisper so softly to myself, begging my own body to just give in and release this building tension.

My tattered shorts are constrictive, and it's hard to maneuver. I slide them down so I can touch myself more freely.

Behind me, Dog lets out a deep groan.

For a moment I think he has spilled his semen, but when the slick friction of his fist and shaft continues, I know that's not the case. Then I realize what's causing him to make those noises.

My scent. My omega scent.

Unconstrained by my clothing, the odors wafting from my naked sex must be even more intense than before.

I need to finish this, and now.

Sliding my middle finger between my folds, I press inside my hole, stroking my soft inner tissue while simultaneously grinding my palm against my aching clit. My finger, however, isn't quite long enough. I can't quite reach my special, tender place inside.

"Please," I whisper again, barely more than a mere exhalation.

My pussy is swollen and pulsing with desire. My crotch and thighs are smeared with my fluids. I feel so fucking horny that

it hurts, and if I don't come soon, I think I just might explode.

"Please..."

A sudden and unexpected touch causes me to gasp with fright.

Twin hands, gentle but strong, grip my bare shoulders and pull me back until I find myself pressed against a rock-hard, lightly furred chest and carved abdominals that conform perfectly to the curvature of my lower back.

And below that, something even harder prods against the cleft of my naked butt where my shorts are pulled down.

"Dog," I whisper.

How did he cross the room without making so much as a sound?

He envelops me with his strong arms and his even stronger animal musk. His warm breath ghosts over the top of my head and down my face. One massive hand slides down my belly toward the joining of my thighs.

"Wait," I gasp, catching his wrist just as his fingertips reach the top of my tuft. "Don't..."

His other hand slides around my throat, holding me tightly. The feeling is something akin to having one's neck in a tiger's jaws. I've seen what those hands are capable of today. One squeeze and he could crush me.

But I know that's not what he wants.

"You know what to say to make me stop," he purrs.

He's right. I do remember—*stand down*. But I'm not sure now if that command will work.

And I'm not sure if I even want it to.

The beat of his pulse is rapid and intense in his hard cock, which is wedged against my ass. His tip leaks a few drops of precum down my tailbone. His hand at my throat tilts my head back until I'm looking up at him, his shadowed face upside down in my vision.

“Sloane.” His voice is a low, rumbling growl. “Let me help you.”

His tone makes it clear that it's not a request.

It's not a suggestion.

It's a command.

CHAPTER 9: DOG

The little omega gazes up at me with a look of yearning mingled with apprehension.

Her name is Sloane. Lance Corporal Jessica Sloane. But the animal voice in my head keeps calling her the little omega.

My little omega.

Claim her, that inner voice snarls. Ruin her. Mark her with your seed.

My hand is on her throat now. The pulse in her jugular ticks against my fingers. The warm, raw scent billowing from every recess and crevice of her ripe body makes my brain itch with obsessive desire, and it takes every last ounce of my willpower to keep my bestial urges in check.

If I tried to claim her now—tried to *fully* claim her—it would no doubt break her. That’s exactly what the beast inside me wants. But I must do my best to be gentle.

My hand smooths down her body, toward the center of her need.

“Dog,” she gasps, and almost shouting, she demands, “Stand down!”

Automatically, my conditioning kicks in. I let go of her and take a step away. I have no choice but to obey that command that has been so deeply ingrained in my psyche by Dr. Frostgrave and his team. But it pains me to do so.

Literal pain.

My whole body burns with desire to fulfil my omega's needs.

When I speak, my voice comes out as a deep, rumbling purr.

“Listen to me, Sloane. This is a matter of life and death.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

I find myself laughing despite the gravity of the situation. A sharp barking laugh that makes Sloane's startled body jump in the darkness. I remember that we need to be quiet, and I get myself under control.

“Yeah, well, it works most of the time,” I reply.

Sloane chuckles at that, and I sense some of the tension go out of her muscles. That's good. She needs to relax. She needs to let me take control. But she's going to have to give up some power to do that.

“Sloane,” I say, trying my best to keep my voice calm and level—no easy feat with the desperate chaos of emotions churning inside me. “No offense, but it's obvious that you aren't able to take care of this by yourself.”

Her shadowy figure stiffens a little. After a moment, she speaks defiantly.

“Oh yeah? And you think you can do a better job?”

It's dark in here, so she probably can't see the smirk curling at my lips.

My experience with women is...extensive.

Dr. Frostgrave has two methods of reinforcing my conditioning. One is punishment. Even the slightest mistake in my training means hours spent inside the pain-glove, a device which turns every nerve ending into a raging inferno of pure pain without doing any actual physical harm to my body.

I am, after all, a very expensive weapon, as Frostgrave is fond of reminding me.

However, my *good* behavior is met with the other method of reinforcement.

Reward.

And my rewards have always come in female form.

I don't know where Frostgrave acquires the women, but I can only assume that they are prostitutes. Based on their looks and their skills, they are probably high-class pleasure girls from the upper tiers of the city hive. No doubt, they cost SynerGen a pretty penny. Plus, Frostgrave has to inject them with special relaxant chemicals that allow their bodies to...accommodate my size.

The important thing for an Alpha, however, is not simply his release. Yes, that is required to keep me sane. But I need so much more than that. I need to hear my mate scream with pleasure as she writhes under the touch of my fingers, my tongue, my cock.

My knot.

I feed off those pleasure sounds and those spasms of ecstasy. I drink them up like blood.

By the time I'm finished with my "rewards," the lab assistants usually have to carry the women away, their legs too weak to walk after a merciless barrage of intense orgasms.

Of course, I don't need to tell Sloane all of those details. But when she asks me if I can do a better job of taking care of her needs, my answer is simple.

"Yes," I growl.

She nods wordlessly, eyes wide, lips quivering.

"Okay." She looks at me expectantly. When I don't move, she asks, "So, um...what do we do?"

"You told me to stand down. Now my psychological conditioning won't allow me to touch you until you have given me explicit permission."

I sense the wave of heat that suddenly emanates from her body.

"All right," she whispers at last. "You have permission to touch me."

My hands feel like they have been freed from shackles. They reach out and grab Sloane's body, pulling her close to mine. She gasps as my naked erection presses against her smooth belly.

I turn her around again, her back pressed to my front, and my hands start to rove, caressing her smooth arms, squeezing her perfect breasts through the thin fabric of her shirt.

"Where do you need me to touch you?"

My breath at her ear makes her shiver. She moans lightly as I tweak her erect nipples through her shirt.

“You know where,” she hisses.

I use my purring voice. The one that induces the necessary state of receptivity in a female.

“Say it. Tell me where you need me to touch you. Say it out loud.”

She whines and squirms in my grasp, grinding her tight little butt against my hard cock.

“My pussy,” she breathes. “I need you to touch my pussy.”

Still keeping one breast clasped tight, I allow my other hand to slide down her body, down her abdomen, and lower still, fingers parting her fine, closely cropped pubic hair until my fingertips find the ridge and fleshy hood of her clitoris.

“Oh fuck,” Sloane moans in a trembling voice.

“You *want* me to help you.”

“Yes...”

She whimpers and leans her head against my chest as I pull back her hood and touch the round pearl of her clit underneath. She squirms against me, her tush rolling against my painfully hard erection. More precum dribbles from my tip and runs down my shaft, wetting her cheeks and cleft.

“Does that feel good?” I murmur, still clutching her firm, warm breast as I circle her sensitive nubbin down below. “Do you like it when I touch you there?”

“Mm-hm,” she whines as she writhes against me.

I try to tell myself that I’m just doing what is necessary. I’m performing a required task, and nothing more. But the way that her wild body responds to my touch excites me in ways I’ve never felt before.

Her body is so sensitive, so responsive.

“Dog,” she sighs, her voice soft and dreamy. “You’re so hard.”

She’s right. My painful erection is so hard it feels like it could break. The skin of my swollen, pulsating member is stretched so tight it seems to be in danger of splitting open. I need to find my own release while helping Sloane with hers.

Perhaps we can help each other.

I push her shorts farther down her legs until they drop to the floor. Now she is completely nude except for her black combat boots and the dog tag necklace hanging between her luscious breasts. There’s something about that look that is unbelievably kinky and hot.

I maneuver my hips to slip the hot stone rod of my cock between the soft gap of her thighs, which are drenched with her intense arousal. I rock my pelvis slowly, sliding the top side of my shaft against her slippery vulva. Sloane tilts her head down to look at the head of my dick protruding between her legs.

“So big,” she whimpers, almost fearfully.

She’s right to be fearful. Without Dr. Frostgrave’s special relaxant serum, she would never be able to accept me inside of

her. Not yet, anyway.

If I tried to penetrate Sloane now, I would damage her.

That just means we'll have to use each other's bodies in other ways.

Sloane reaches down and cups my cockhead, wetting her palm with my sticky precum. She smears the fluid upward, mingling it with her own rich juices and providing additional lubrication for my fingers on her clit. She rocks her hips, matching my rhythm as she grinds her soft vulva against my engorged and straining pole.

“Dog,” she whispers. “Oh God, I’m so horny, I can’t...”

Her voice is weak and ragged with desperation. Her muscles twitch and tremble, and I clutch one of her breasts tightly to keep her steady. My fingers grind against the berry of her clit, so ripe with arousal it feels like it might pop.

“Show me how you come,” I whisper with my lips pressed to her ear. “I want to see how you fall to pieces.”

Like a good little omega, Sloane obeys my command.

I clap my hand over her mouth to stifle her throaty scream of pleasure. Her muscles shudder and her hips buck wildly as an intense orgasm wracks her helpless little body. Her arms flail, seeking purchase on something, anything, and finally finding my arms. Her nails bite into me so hard she draws blood.

The sight and feel and smell of her coming in the moonlit dimness is so beautiful and intense that my cock spurts one long rope of semen, painting a pale line on the nearby wall.

But immediately, something cinches inside me, stopping any additional spillage. The denied release is excruciating. Being wounded in battle doesn't even compare to this.

Fool, that animal voice growls inside my skull. Don't waste it. Your seed is for the omega. It belongs inside her, in her cunt, in her belly.

I work through my pain, continually strumming Sloane's clit as she climaxes again and again, one orgasm rolling into the next like hard ocean surf crashing against a beach in those antique movies I've seen.

With her mouth covered, Sloane moans and whines through her nose. Her fingers loosen their grip on my flesh and pat frantically at my shoulders. She's tapping out—begging for me to stop.

But I don't relent.

I need to cleanse her body of all desire. I need to wring every last ounce of pleasure from her body until her estrus subsides, at least temporarily. It's the only way.

As I continue rubbing her mercilessly, Sloane's body convulses with forced pleasure. Hot, thick excretions of cervical fluid spill from her hole, coating my achingly hard cock. Her toes curl and her eyes roll feverishly in their sockets.

At last, after several minutes, Sloane's naked body goes slack in my arms, half-unconscious with exhaustion and pleasure.

When I take my hand away from her mouth, all that comes out are incoherent syllables. A bit of drool dribbles from the

corner of her lips, and her eyes are dazed and dreamy.

I set her limply on the floor, propping her against the wall. Her perfect, feminine curves are striped with moonlight and shadows. Her head lolls a moment, then she looks at me expectantly. Her eyes trace downward from my face, down my torso, before pausing between my legs where my hard cock is bouncing with my racing pulse.

The wings of her nostrils flare slightly as she sniffs, and she turns her head toward my one spurt of semen, which dripping down the wall.

“You didn’t finish,” she whispers.

Regaining some of her strength, she rises to her knees in front of me.

“Sloane,” I warn her, “Be careful...”

Steadying herself with one hand against my thigh, she grips my shaft in her other hand and leans in, brushing the tip against her lips and glossing them with my fluid.

Something dark and animalistic is rising up inside me. The beast voice is howling to claim her mouth with my cock. I caution her one last time.

“Sloane, If you get the beast inside me riled up, I won’t be able to hold back.”

“Then don’t.”

She parts her lips and slides my throbbing cockhead inside.

CHAPTER 10: SLOANE

The head of Dog's cock is plump and supple in my mouth. I suck it gently, and something dribbles onto my tongue, warm and intensely salty. Wincing, I pull back, and a silver thread of sticky fluid bridges from his cock to my lips.

"Sloane," he purrs above me.

His body is trembling with barely restrained animal lust. He's already tried to warn me about his animal urges.

But I have urges too.

"I want to taste you," I whisper, "I *need* to taste you."

My tongue flickers out, swirling around his blunt head. I brush my lips along his throbbing shaft, exploring with my tongue as I go, tracing every ridge and pulsing vein, and searching for his most sensitive places.

When I tease the sexy little V on the underside where his head meets his shaft, I know I've struck gold.

Dog grunts, and more of that viscous fluid spills from his tip onto my tongue. This time I'm prepared for it, and I savor its intense flavor.

"Good," Dog groans above me. "So good..."

His massive hands smooth over my close cropped hair. He cups the back of my head, urging me forward. I open my jaw wider and take him deeper. His hard cock is smooth and warm

in my mouth. I feel the pulse of his lifeblood against my tongue.

“Good omega...”

I sidle closer and slide my hands up his thighs, around his taut hips, and behind to grip the solid globes of his hard buttocks. His intense, animal musk surrounds me, swelling my nipples with arousal.

My head starts to bob, taking more and more of Dog’s shaft with each pass. As I feel his thick member sliding in and out of my mouth, I can’t help but wonder how it would feel between my legs. My pussy clenches at the thought.

But that would be impossible. There’s no way this beast could ever fit inside me.

He would split me in two.

Dog’s hands become tense on my head. His muscles are trembling like he’s struggling to hold back some violent impulse. He nudges his cock all the way to the back of my throat, and I start to gag.

I draw myself off of him, coughing and gasping.

“God, you’re so big,” I murmur before wiping my chin and diving back in for more.

Dog’s purrs gradually transition to a feral growl that sends shivers up my spine.

I remember the magic words. All I have to say is *stand down*.

But I keep going.

Something inside me needs this. I need to taste his release. My omega instinct needs to give him pleasure.

He starts to rock his hips, slowly fucking his cock in and out as I suck. His tip prods my throat and I start to gag again, but this time when I try to pull back, Dog's insanely strong hands clamp around my head. One hand cups the back of my skull, and the other wraps under my chin.

For one panicked moment, I feel like I'm choking. I slap my palms against the corded muscles of his thighs, signalling him to stop.

"Relax," Dog growls above me.

His voice is different. The beast is taking control.

I try to shout, "*stand down*," but now it's too late. My cry is muffled by the thick meat filling my mouth.

My eyes water with exertion, and scalding tears stream down my cheeks.

"Take it," Dog snarls. "Take my cock omega."

Somehow I manage to relax my throat and breathe through my nose. His dick slides inside, and I take him all the way until I feel his heavy balls pressed against my saliva-slick chin.

"Good..."

He starts to fuck my mouth, first with long, gliding strokes, then gradually increasing the pace until his cock is ravaging my throat, plunging deep into my esophagus.

Just as I feel myself beginning to gag again, his powerful hands yank my head back, and I cough and gasp wildly, gulping the air as long, thick strings of saliva hang between my lips and his cock in drooping curves.

“Dog,” I gasp, “Wait, I...”

But the beast inside him cannot wait a moment longer. He rams his cock deep inside my mouth again. This time, at least, I manage to grip the base of his shaft in my fist to keep his cock from pummeling my throat too hard.

Dog fucks my face roughly, driving into me with forceful thrusts. The enclosed space fills with the drumbeat of my head thumping against the wall behind me and the raunchy, squelching sounds issuing from my lips as he pumps me.

Something bulges beneath my fingers. The base of his shaft is knotting.

I whimper as I think about what that expanded girth would do to my poor little pussy. If his thick cock didn't split me in two, his knot certainly would.

He thrusts into me until my lips are pressed against that thick, hard knot.

My brutal Alpha grunts, a mixture of pleasure and exertion. A sudden pulse runs the length of his shaft, and he explodes inside me, releasing his thick cream.

The first few shots slides straight down my throat. I don't even taste anything at first until he draws back, spurting more hot semen directly onto my tongue, saturating it with an intense,

salty flavor. There is so much that I struggle to swallow it all, and finally I give up, letting the excess spill from my lips and ooze down my chin.

At last Dog releases his grip on my head, and my body collapses onto the moss-carpeted floor. I lie there in the streaks of moonlight. My shirt is pushed up, half exposing my breasts sheened with sweat and heaving as I catch my breath. My used and ravaged body is limp with exhaustion.

But Dog isn't quite finished with me yet.

With an animalistic snarl, he pounces on top of me, straddling me with his powerful thighs.

Impossibly, he is still coming. His jets of ropey fluid paint sticky slashes across my face, my neck, and my chest, staining my shirt.

Wherever Dog's Alpha fluid lands, I experience something like a miniature orgasm soaking into my flesh. Each spurt is like a whiplash, but instead of stinging me, it stripes my naked, dirty skin with pleasure. I writhe and moan on the ground as the beast torments me this way.

I've never done anything remotely like this with a man, but I know how things are supposed to happen, and it's certainly not like this.

This isn't human—it's raw, animal lust.

At last, Dog's heavy balls are drained of their copious payload, and he drizzles the last of his Alpha seed directly onto my

splayed crotch where the droplets catch like pearl beads in the soft curls of my pubic hair.

It's hard to see in the shadows, but I sense a change come over Dog's entire body. The tension leaves his muscles. The animal ferocity softens.

"Sloane," he slurs. "Are you...did I...did I hurt you?"

I shake my head against the mossy floor and touch his angled jaw, which is covered with the dense, sexy fur of his beard.

"No," I breathe. "You made me feel good."

I'm lying, of course. He did hurt me a little. But right now I'm too tired to explain that the explosive pleasure far outweighed the pain, or that the pain only served to heighten everything that much more, like a dash of spice heightening the flavor of a delicacy.

All my life, I've fought to be in total control, but this experience—being so thoroughly and savagely used and dominated by such a beast of a man—it's more than my addled brain can even process right now.

Another change comes over Dog.

He looms over me. His massive, shadowed body hangs above me like a dark storm cloud that could explode with thunder at any moment. I feel his intense eyes tracing over my skin, examining the mess he made of my body in the moonlight.

When he speaks, his voice is that irresistible, throaty purr again.

“Must...”

He touches me. His broad palm smears his congealing semen over my breasts, frosting my skin with his love. He collects it, swiping it down my twitching belly toward my center.

“Dog,” I whisper. “What are you doing?”

But I don’t resist him.

“My seed.” His voice is strange and dreamy. “I need to...I need to see it inside of you.”

“Wait,” I gasp.

But I find my legs spreading themselves even wider. Even though I know that this is so wrong and so dangerous, my body needs it. I need his potent Alpha seed inside me. I need it the way I need food or water.

Dog wipes his cum down between my legs, lathering it over my lips and pushing it into my hole with his thick finger tips. The faint echo of an orgasm tingles through my lower body as his cum touches my soft inner tissue. He repeats the process again and again, and I help him, pushing his semen down my body and into my channel until it can’t hold anymore and it oozes down my taint like a creamy filling.

I cup my hand over my entrance to hold it in. Dog places his much bigger, much rougher hand over mine.

“Good,” he growls.

“Dog, I—“

Before I can speak, he collapses onto me, and silences me with his mouth. He kisses me deeply and sensuously, even while the taste of his cock and his semen are still on my tongue. If he minds that, he doesn't show it. We stay like that for a long time, kissing slow and hot, hand on hand holding his seed inside my hole.

Despite the dangers of this place in which we have been stranded, for this moment I feel totally safe and protected beneath my dominant Alpha.

It's not a feeling that I knew I needed until now.

Finally, Dog breaks our kiss and runs his nose along my neck and shoulder, snuffling me. His breath tickles me, making me squirm and giggle like a girl.

“Hey,” I laugh. “What are you doing?”

“We did it,” he says, “Your heat-scent is diminished.” After a moment, he adds. “For now. If it returns in the night, we'll need to...take care of it again.”

I silently hope that it does come back. I want to do it again and again. And other things too.

But not right now.

Right now I am too bone tired to do anything but curl up in my Alpha's protective arms in the darkness, breathing in his masculine scent as the weariness of the day overcomes me and I pass into a deep and dreamless sleep.

* * *

When i wake up, my head is aching from oversleeping, but my muscles feel refreshed and energized in a way I've never experienced before.

I feel good. Really good.

But something is missing.

Last night I fell asleep all tangled up in Dog's protective arms, my body enveloped in the warmth of his breath. Now I'm all alone and naked.

Dog is gone, but his scent still hangs heavy in the air.

I roll over and look around the room.

Warm sunlight is coming in low through the gaps in the boarded windows, drawing golden streaks on the walls. I can see the room more clearly now, but there's not much to take in—the moss-covered floor and peeling, stained walls. The ceiling is sagging precariously where the beams have rotted through. Brilliant motes of dust swirl lazily in the sunlight poking in.

My Alpha is standing at the window looking out, his intense eyes striped with sunshine. His body is motionless except for the slow rise and fall of his breathing.

“Dog?” I whisper.

He doesn't look at me but simply raises a finger to his lips, signalling silence.

Then I smell it. It's hard to pick it up beneath the intensity of Dog's strong musk filling the room, but it's there sure enough.

It's a scent like Dog's but different in ways I can't put into words.

But one thing is certain.

It's an Alpha.

PART TWO:

THE PACK

CHAPTER 11: TRUK

The morning sun is still low in the eastern sky. Its golden rays angle in through the trees, drawing long shadows over the clearing and the ruined house. The only sound is the soft rustle of the leaves stirring in the breeze. My muscles are tense. My heart is thudding inside my ribs.

Someone is inside my house.

I clearly marked this place with my scent, but the trespasser ignored the warnings.

Now he will have to die.

The wind glides across the clearing, carrying a mixture of scents from the old, ramshackle building, a remnant of the old times, before the great change. There are the usual smells of mildew, rotting plaster, and termite dust. But underneath that is another odor, faint but unmistakable.

Alpha.

A lone Alpha is inside my house.

I snuffle the breeze again, taking in the intruder's scent, analyzing it. It's a strange scent. Difficult to place. He doesn't have the sickening, goatish smell of a Farlander, that's for sure. No, this one is much more like the Alphas that dwell inside the ruined city.

But his signature doesn't match any of the packs I've smelt before.

Curious.

Without meaning to, I find a low, rumbling growl starting up deep in my chest. It is involuntary—a natural reaction to finding a strange Alpha trespassing in my marked territory.

He's not the first intruder I've found recently.

Last evening, I set off in the direction of the falling ship with the intention of checking it out. Just before sunrise, I found one Outsider. A male.

He was already quite dead by the time I got to him.

It was my first time to see an Outsider before. He was dressed in curious, unnatural clothing that covered most of his frail-looking body. But even more bizarre, he was strapped into a strange harness attached by strings to an enormous sheet of silk, the purpose of which I couldn't even begin to fathom.

When I found him, his body was dangling from a tree, strangled by those weird cords.

He was lucky.

If the Farlanders had gotten to him first, his death would have been much less quick, and much more painful.

I continued toward where the ship went down.

However, having skipped my dinner and run all night, I was starving. I decided to come check the rabbit traps I sent near this old house where I sometimes make my camp. The traps were empty. The house, however, is not.

It's occupied by this trespassing Alpha.

Now it's time to find out who he is.

I drop down on all fours and crawl through the high grass, keeping my shoulders out of sight and my belly pressed to the ground like a snake. The earth has not had time to warm from the sun, and it is cool against my bare skin. The dewdrops dotting the grass wet my skin as I pass.

On all fours, I prowl out of the grass and slink on to the porch without making a sound. My eyes and my nose are on full alert.

Inside, the house is dark and quiet. Only a few knife-blades of morning sunlight are stabbing through the cracks in the boarded-up windows.

The first floor is clear. I climb the stairs cautiously, avoiding every loose and creaky board by memory.

I reach the second floor. Clear too. But the scent is getting stronger.

The bastard is upstairs.

Climbing one more set of steps, I reach the upstairs hallway. My muscles are tense as steel coils ready to spring. My body hairs are all on end, ready for a fight to the death. I drink in a deep, silent breath, then home in on the intruder's scent.

I freeze.

Unbelievable. How did I not notice until now? There is a second scent, a faint odor, mostly hidden beneath the Alpha's musk, but it's there just the same, raw and feminine and sweet, like wild honey, like a flower begging to be pollinated.

My cock bucks beneath my fur loincloth.

There's an omega here.

And she's in heat.

Suddenly the house shudders with a deafening roar, and the wall to my left erupts in an explosion of plaster and splintered wood. The enemy Alpha flies through the dark opening, teeth bared and straining muscles trailing strips of rotting wallpaper.

I barely have time to pivot and meet the attack. Our bodies connect with a harsh crack and we tumble backward, bursting through the wall on the other side of the corridor and into the adjacent room.

The Alpha is strong and fierce, but I'm no stranger to fighting.

Somersaulting backward, I kick the attacker off of me, sending him whirling across the room. He smashes against a window, knocking loose the boards, and a brilliant column of sunlight streams in, illuminating the room.

I leap to my feet, preparing to turn and face my opponent, but something gives me pause—a tiny, feminine voice.

“Dog?”

A gust of air whirls in from the hole where we burst through the wall, bringing with it a swirl of dust and the pungent heat-reek of the omega.

Instantly my pulse quickens even more from its already increased rate, and my cock goes ramrod straight beneath my loincloth, dribbling precum down my thigh.

She is standing before me, peering in through the shattered wall, raising one arm to shield her eyes against the flood of sunlight.

“Dog?”

She is like no omega I have ever seen.

Her hair is blond, so pale that it's almost white. But it is not long and flowing like the females of our people. Instead her hair is cut short like a boy's, and it shows the perfect, delicate shape of her skull. Her blue eyes, set above her lightly freckled cheeks are squinting against the light.

But her face shows no sign of fear. Anxiety, perhaps. Concern. But not fear.

Time seems to slow to a crawl as my eyes trail down her naked body, taking in the swell of heaving breasts with their pink peaks, and lower still to the small thatch of wheat-blond fur between her legs. She's not completely nude, however. Around her neck, she wears a steel necklace with a pair of flat tabs, and her feet are shod in a pair of black boots, the leather and stitching of which are too straight and perfect to have been made by hand.

I've seen boots like those just last night.

The dead Outsider was wearing them.

This omega is an Outsider?

Operating on sheer instinctual lust, my body moves toward her. She bares her white teeth at me and hisses like a cornered

cat. Something glints in the light, and I see that she has a knife in one hand.

I grin.

An Outsider and a warrior. This little omega is truly full of surprises.

Her resistance does little to abate the stiffness of my cock. If anything, it just makes it painfully harder. It will not be satisfied until it has plunged deep inside of her and knotted her tight little omega cunt.

“Stay back,” she threatens, pronouncing the words with a strange, Outsider accent that I can barely understand.

She raises her other hand, and I see that she’s carrying a second weapon. I’ve never seen a weapon like this before, but I’ve heard about such things. It’s an Outsider weapon called a gun. It doesn’t look particularly dangerous to me.

There is a little black hole in one end, and she points that straight at my chest.

“Stay back,” she repeats. “I’ll shoot.”

“Easy, little one,” I purr, taking another step toward her.

She snarls at me, but the sound of my purring sends a change through her body. Her pupils dilate, the rosy buds of her nipples grow taut, and her knees wobble with weakness. And most of all, more of that heat-scent exudes from her sweet, wet slit, signalling her desperate need for a hard Alpha knot and a cuntfull of seed.

A thunderous roar snaps me out of my lust.

Shit, the tempting little omega had me so entranced, that I completely forgot about the enemy Alpha right here in this very room.

Powerful arms coil around my upper body from behind, pinning my arms and compressing my ribs to the point of cracking.

I swing my head backward, and my skull connects with the Alpha's nose.

He stumbles backward, but doesn't loosen his grip.

My breath is shallow, lungs unable to expand.

I strike again with another head butt and another.

This only enrages the Alpha more. He roars, and my feet lift off the rotting floorboards. The room whirls around me as my opponent hefts me backwards, slamming me to the floor with a bone-crushing suplex.

The floor is what saves me. The ancient boards sag under our weight, absorbing the impact.

We roll, and the Alpha ends up on top, pummeling me. His lip and chin are streaked red with blood flowing from his nose.

I hook my legs under and kick hard, sending him flying across the room. His body crashes into the crumbling wall, and it shatters behind him. Even more sunlight streams in through this new hole.

The Alpha reels backward, on the edge of falling to the ground below. His hands claw at the ragged plaster and wood of the wall.

He manages to catch himself.

The Alpha rushes me, but this time, he's attacking head on and I'm ready for him. I shift my weight low, catch him, and throw him over my shoulder, slamming him to the floor so hard that its rotten boards break and he crashes to the floor below.

"Dog!" the omega shouts again, as if it is the only word she knows.

Is the Alpha's name Dog?

Seriously?

I turn to study her, and once again our eyes lock in the sunlight streaming through the gaps in the wrecked walls.

Are these two mates? They must be. The omega is in heat. But her scent is weak. The Alpha has been tending to her needs then.

Her neck, however, bares no mark. There is a dark, rectangular symbol, an Outsider tattoo, but no sign of her Dog's teeth.

He has not marked her yet.

She is yet unclaimed, and her heat is calling me, sending my body into the rut. It is clouding my judgment as my blood is rerouted from my brain to my hardening cock.

"Sloane!" a voice growls from down below.

Is this the omega's name? Sloane? It is a strange Outsider name, but somehow it appeals to my desire for her.

She could be called anything, and it wouldn't matter.

All that matters is that I bury my knotted cock deep inside her and paint her womb with my hot Alpha seed.

"Sloane," the Alpha calls again from below.

The omega just stands there, brandishing her knife and gun. For a moment, I think she's actually going to attack me, but then she turns, and I hear the patter of her booted feet racing down the stairs.

I turn back toward the smashed hole in the floor and peer over the edge. The second floor is dark, but in the hazy light from up here, I can just make out the Alpha getting to his feet.

Though I've been fighting with him, I haven't really taken a chance to look at him yet. His dark hair is cut close to his skull like the omega's. He is not naked like a Farlander would be, but he is also not dressed in leather or furs. Instead he is wearing a pair of shorts made from some manufactured black material.

More Outsider clothes.

Who are these two?

No time to think about that now. I need to eliminate this Alpha so I can claim the omega for myself.

I leap down, landing on top of the Outsider Alpha with a snarl.

Probably not the best strategy.

The ancient floorboards protest beneath our combined weight for a moment, then they give way with a terrific crash, and I find myself tumbling through the air, riding the Outsider down to the ground floor.

We land with a thud as dust and debris rains down on top of us. The impact knocks the wind out of my lungs, and the Outsider gets the better position, rolling on top and clutching my throat in his hands. In the light streaming through the open front door, I see his face red with fury and his eyes bloodshot.

“Die,” he growls between gritted teeth.

I hear another sound.

Tiny feet thump-thump-thumping down the stairs. A pause as she leaps over the missing steps, and then more footfalls as she races down.

I break the Outsider’s grip on my throat and shove him off of me. I climb to my feet, and we grapple, snarling and barking, slamming against the walls of the house, which shakes with our struggle.

“Dog, look out!” the omega shouts.

But her warning is too late. I send a hard kick straight into my opponent’s gut, and he stumbles backward, crashing through the wall and opening another glowing portal to the outside world.

There is a snap of wood as a main support beam breaks under his weight, and a terrible groan as the beam supporting the

upper floor starts to give. In the dim light filtering in from above, I see the wrecked ceiling start to sag.

The ceiling is collapsing, right on top of the omega.

“No!” I shout.

A dose of adrenaline, born of some primal protective instinct, surges through my muscles. Before I even have a chance to think, I’m flying through the air, covering the omega’s helpless body with mine as the structure comes crashing down, burying us in wood and plaster and darkness.

CHAPTER 12: SLOANE

At first, I'm quite certain that I'm dead.

Yet somehow, as if by a miracle, the weight covering my body isn't crushing me. And it is not broken pieces of debris. Oh sure, there is some of that. The dust is stinging my eyes and coating my mouth and throat, making it difficult to breathe. And I can't see a damn thing in this total pitch blackness.

But the weight pressing down on my body is not hurting me. It is protecting me. It is something warm and smooth.

And breathing.

A voice, deep and rumbling, speaks directly into my ear. The words are in a language that I do not understand.

It's the Alpha. The one that looked at me upstairs. The one with the stunning, silver-gray eyes and the wild mane of hair the color of burnt gold and skin like polished bronze.

"Are you okay, little one?" the voice murmurs at my ear.

It is not, in fact, another language that he is speaking. It is English, but the accent is strange, unlike anything I've ever heard before, harsh and guttural. Even now, at this most inopportune of moments, it stirs something deep inside.

I do a quick check of my body. It's difficult to move, but that is because we are buried under a heap of rubble. However, as far as I can tell, nothing seems to be broken or injured.

"Y-yes," I stammer, "I'm okay..."

Suddenly I notice Dog's voice calling out for me. It sounds muffled and distant through the layer of debris.

"Sloane!" He bellows. "Sloane, are you okay?"

Wow, two protective Alphas concerned for my well-being. Again, it's totally inappropriate, but it sends a wave of warm tingles rushing through my body.

"Yes!" I shout, my voice sounding flat in this cramped, enclosed space beneath the heap of rubble. "I'm here! I'm okay!"

Already, Dog is scrambling at the pile of debris. The sounds of him digging and flinging away chunks of plaster, wood, and rotten insulation gradually become louder and louder as the pile gets smaller.

At last, a little light begins to trickle through.

"Sloane!" Dog shouts again, his voice much louder now.

With the weight of the pile reduced, the other Alpha on top of me rises, taking care to make sure no chunks of debris fall on top of me.

Soon, two pairs of strong hands are lifting me to my feet.

On the right is Dog, and on the left is the nameless Alpha who protected me with his body.

Both of them inspect me in the light shining through the walls broken by their fighting.

A wave of relief rolls over Dog's face when he sees that I really am all right. A moment later he turns to his opponent

with a snarl, his muscles tensing and the veins on his neck and forearms bulging with renewed aggression.

“Get your dirty claws off of her, Farlander!”

He is on the verge of attacking again. Two minutes ago, I was fully behind him on that. I assumed that this Alpha meant us both harm. But based on the way that he protectively shielded me from the collapsing rubble, I’m starting to rethink that.

“Dog!” I shout, before another fight erupts. “Stand down!”

Instantly, Dog backs off. Some of the redness goes out of his face, and his muscles relax. He turns toward me, with an almost hurt expression on his face.

“Sloane.” His voice is hoarse from roaring. “What are you doing?”

The other Alpha just looks on in amazement for a moment before he throws his head back and guffaws. His body shakes with laughter, sending up clouds of dust.

Dog’s face reddens again, this time with a combination of anger and embarrassment.

“I can’t believe it,” the other guy snorts. “An Alpha taking orders from an omega? By the Source, now I understand why she calls you Dog.”

Dog stands his ground but doesn’t move to attack as the other Alpha approaches him, getting in his face.

“Watch it,” I snap at the blond Alpha. “If you try anything, I’ll turn Dog loose on you again, just like that.”

“Just say the word,” Dog growls under his breath.

Now it’s the Alpha’s turn to back down. He turns his dusty head, looking back and forth between me and Dog, his eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“Who *are* you?” he asks at last.

“I’m Sloane,” I answer, “and this is Dog.”

“And my name is Truk,” the Alpha says. “But I mean...”

He looks at my body, and I suddenly become very aware that I am naked. But Truk’s eyes are looking at my feet. He’s looking at my boots—the only thing I’m wearing. He turns toward Dog and looks at his black shorts.

“You are Outsiders,” Truk says. “And yet you are Alpha and omega. How...how did you come to be in this place?”

Dog has calmed considerably, his breathing growing steady again. He has drawn close to me, and he is possessively dusting the debris from my body. The old house groans and creaks around us. A board knocked loose from the fight spontaneously clatters to the floor.

“We can talk,” Dog says to Truk, “but not here. This house is unstable. Let’s go outside.”

Truk nods.

But I’m not ready to go outside just yet.

First, I sift through the rubble and scrounge up my dropped knife, which I slide back into its secret sheath in my boot.

Next I find the gun. Even though it is out of ammunition, I

want to hang onto it. If nothing else, I can at least use it as a deterrent, although that trick clearly didn't work very well with Truk.

Once I've fetched my gear, I head back toward the stairs.

"Where are you going?" the two Alphas ask in unison, before giving each other a look of annoyance.

"To get the rest of my frigging clothes."

* * *

Out in the clearing, the air is warm, and the rays of the mid-morning sun are lighting up the motes of pollen sifting from the swaying branches of the trees and dancing over the tall grass of the clearing, which is rippling like water in the breeze. Somewhere off in the blue shadows of the forest, hidden birds are singing again.

I'm beginning to like that sound.

In fact, I'm beginning to like all of strange new sensations that this place has to offer.

But I remind myself that the city hive is my home—my natural habitat—and if we ever want to make it back there, we have a mission to complete.

Perhaps Truk can help us see it through.

Out here in the sunshine, I can finally get a better look at the primitive Alpha. Like a wild animal, he has shaken the plaster dust from his body, revealing his taut and deeply tanned skin. His physique is chiseled and smooth, a little less bulky than Dog's. A little more lithe.

I find my eyes drifting back to that physique again and again.

Truk's only clothing is a loincloth of rich, golden fur, probably from a blond bear. It looks like something a primitive barbarian would wear in some of those antique movies I saw as a girl. Truk's only other articles are a leather headband keeping his long golden hair out of his eyes, and an obsidian knife in a fur sheath at his hip.

For an Alpha, his face is not like Dog's. It doesn't have the same sculptural beauty. Yet it is not like those horrible Farlanders we encountered yesterday either. It is somewhere in between. His brow is sloped and heavy, concealing deep-set eyes that glitter and dart about with curiosity and animal caution.

His nose has clearly been broken many times. His lips bear a couple of scars where they have been split in fights.

But the worst scars are the ones on his back and shoulders. Long and thick, they criss-cross his muscles, spelling out a history of intense pain and violence.

Those scars can't be from fighting.

They are from punishment.

Abuse.

What happened to Truk? Was he a prisoner? An exile? Or something worse...

Dog, meanwhile, is standing protectively close to me, eyeing this newcomer with suspicion and more than a little jealousy.

Though my inner warrior doesn't want to admit it, I find it comforting to have Dog here with me. I may be tough, but I have no illusions that I would be able to match my strength against that of a feral Alpha, especially considering that my only weapons are a knife and an empty pistol.

Still, some tickling intuition tells me that we can trust Truk and that he is willing to help us.

I glance at Dog and a moment of understanding passes between us. He nods, and begins explaining to Truk why we are here, telling him about our mission to save Lily.

It's strange, but after what we did together last night, it's as if Dog and I have developed some kind of empathetic connection.

I blush as I think about that dirty act we did upstairs in that old house.

The way he made me climax again and again, more times than I could even count until my body was weak and submissive with raw bliss. The way he forced his hard cock so deep in my throat, using me roughly and mercilessly.

The knowledge I could have stopped it with those two magic words, but chose not to.

The fact that his seed was inside me—is still inside me now—particles of him literally nourishing my cells.

And last, the thought that the scientists back at SynerGen saw the whole thing via my neural chip.

I try to push that out of my mind. This is no time to be thinking of such things.

When Dog has finished telling Truk about our mission, the primitive Alpha is quiet for a minute. He is crouching in the weeds, plucking at some blades of grass thoughtfully, occasionally raising his face to test the wind for scents.

At last he shakes his head, stirring his long, golden hair.

“There’s no way you’ll make it into the city ruins,” he says.

“It’s not like you can just walk in there. The Alphas are vigilant. They’ll smell you coming from a mile away. And with an unmarked omega in heat? No...”

My face flushes with warmth, but I don’t look away when those deep-set eyes glare at me.

He said I was *unmarked*.

I don’t know what that means, and I’m not sure I want to.

“But you’re an Alpha, Truk,” I entreat him. “Surely you can vouch for us. You can act as our guide.”

He shakes his head again.

“I’m not part of the tribe that inhabits the city ruins. The Alphas there shun me for being a half-breed.”

“A half-breed?” I ask.

The flicker of emotion on Truk’s face makes me suddenly feel bad for asking about that. It’s not really my business. Then again, he brought it up.

Looking off toward the trees, he explains.

“There are two types of Alphas here in the Zone. One group lives within the city ruins. They live close to the Source. It nourishes them, keeps them sane. They are honorable and follow strict codes of conduct, and above all else, they are devoted to protecting their omegas.”

At that last part, his eyes dart toward me, then Dog, before looking away again.

“Then there are the Farlanders. They are descended from the ones who were exiled long ago for their crimes. They have strayed too far and too long from the Source. Through generations of inbreeding, their minds and their bodies have become warped. Their only code is cruelty.”

I find my eyes drifting again to those scars on his back and shoulders.

It is Dog’s voice that breaks the silence.

“So when you say you are a half-breed, you mean that you are part Farlander and part city Alpha?”

Truk nods.

Now it makes sense why his face looks the way it does, mostly human, but kissed with that bestial quality of the Farlanders.

His demeanor, however, shows no sign of cruelty to me. He can be ferocious, yes, but I sense that his heart is good.

“My mother was an omega from the tribe that dwells in the city ruins. My fathers were Farlanders.” Truk flashes Dog a searing look full of pain and pent up anger. “Understand?”

His fathers? Plural?

For a moment, I find myself wanting to ask why an omega from the supposedly honorable central tribe would willingly mate with those awful Farlander Alphas. But I catch myself, as the realization begins to sink in.

It wasn't done willingly.

His mother was raped.

Truk goes on, his voice shaking with restrained rage.

“My mother didn't survive my birth. That was probably for the best. The Farlander Alphas raised me, if you can call it that. They beat me every day of my childhood. Clawed me. Burned me. They took great delight in my screams. As I grew older and stronger, I learned to deny them that pleasure, accepting my punishment silently, which only made them beat me harder. I hated my fathers. But I am also grateful for the strength they gave me, even if that was not their intent.”

His eyes gleam with fire beneath the shade of his heavy brow.

“Truk,” I whisper. “I'm so sorry, I...”

“Don't be sorry,” he cuts me off brusquely. “Eventually I grew big enough and strong enough that they couldn't beat me anymore. I killed my fathers, all three of them. That would have made me the leader of the pack, but I wanted nothing to do with the Farlanders, so I set out on my own.”

Truk takes a deep inhale, and I get the impression that he's sucking all of his emotions deep inside.

It grows quiet. The only sound is the whisper of the breeze through the grass and the occasional twitter of birds in the woods. I let Truk's sad story sink in. He is shunned by the city Alphas, and he hates the Farlanders.

He comes from two worlds, but he doesn't have a place in either one of them.

I can sense a deep loneliness inside him.

An intense desire to belong.

I can relate to that. As the only female Marine in the SynerGen corps, I've never fit in. I've always felt like a pariah.

And then there's the fact that I'm an orphan.

Well, not really an orphan—rather, I was abandoned by my parents.

Silently, I hate myself for what I'm about to do with that knowledge about Truk's desire to belong—for the way I'm going to use it to manipulate him. But it must be done. If we are going to complete this mission, we will need this Alpha's help.

“Truk,” I say softly, touching his arm. Beside me Dog tenses with possessive jealousy, but I sense that he is restraining himself. “Truk, will you help us? We need your help. Together the three of us can be like a...like a pack.”

At that, Truk's eyes brighten.

“A pack?” he asks.

I can tell Dog is not fond of the idea, but I nod my head anyway.

“That’s right. Together we will be much stronger than we are alone. And you know the Zone better than us. And maybe you know something about the ways to approach the city ruins.”

Truk snorts and drops his head.

“You really aren’t going to give up on trying to get inside the city, are you?”

“It’s our duty,” I say, “Right, Dog?”

Dog nods, his face tight and stern.

I’m leaving out the part about how completing the mission is the only way for us to leave the Zone.

Truk is still for a long moment, and I can tell he is thinking it over.

“There may be one way,” he says at last. “The old sewers. We could enter from outside the city and follow the tunnels underneath. It will be risky but not impossible.”

“Then you’ll help us?” I ask.

Truk looks between me and Dog, his eyes a mix of emotions that are hard to read. Finally, he nods his blond head and stands up.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 13: DOG

After a few hours, the woodlands give way to rolling plains covered with grass, sliced with more and more ancient overgrown highways as we get closer to the center. The sun is warm, but there is a cool breeze blowing. Off on the horizon, dark thunderheads are piling up like a mountain range made of clouds.

“How are you doing?” I ask Sloane.

“Fine,” she mutters.

She’s a little pissed off because I’m carrying her over my shoulder.

It was a necessity. Even though she has excellent endurance, it’s nothing compared to me and Truk. We Alphas could run flat out for the entire day and not get tired. Plus, our longer stride makes it nearly impossible for her to keep pace with us.

“How much farther?” her contralto voice comes from behind me.

Truk, who is running in the lead, turns around to answer.

“We’re getting close,” he calls. “Just over the next set of hills, you’ll see it.”

He stays turned around, jogging backwards. His eyes are on Sloane’s butt where she’s bent over my shoulder.

“I can take her for a while if you want to share the burden, Dog.”

I answer him with a silent scowl. He just rolls his eyes under his heavy brow and turns back around, sprinting ahead a little ways.

Share the burden my ass.

I know what this half-breed Alpha is after. Share the prize is more like it. He just wants to feel Sloane's supple body draped over his own shoulder. He wants to smell her wafting heat scent right next to his face.

That's one reason I'm running behind him. That keeps the wake of Sloane's scent trailing away from him.

The other reason I'm letting him lead is that he knows where we're going.

Oh, I could find the city ruins easy enough. I don't even need a compass. I can feel the pull of the Source drawing me in like the attraction of a great magnet. The farther we travel, the stronger the feeling gets.

It's like an invisible light, emanating outward from the center of the Zone. And at the same time it's like a whirlpool, sucking me in, dragging at every cell and molecule of my body.

But to get in via the sewers—we'll need Truk's help for that.

I don't like it.

I don't trust this half-Farlander Alpha as far as I could throw him.

He turns and glances back, sneaking another peak at Sloane's behind. I bare my teeth and snarl at him. He returns the gesture.

"What's the matter?" Sloane squirms to see what's going on.

"Nothing," I say, stowing my anger.

Truk gives me one last quick glare before facing forward again and racing up the slope in front of us.

"There it is," he calls back. "The ruined city."

We ascend to the top of the crest and pause. I set Sloane down so she can have a look.

The city stands in the distance, a stunning conglomeration of towers with a network of crumbling roads extending out in every direction.

"It's green!" Sloane sighs with amazement.

Truk nods. "It's because of the vines."

He's right. I've seen it from up close, and it's pretty incredible. All of those old and crumbling buildings are covered in a network of climbing vines that have grown up during the years since the great Cataclysm.

"It's beautiful," Sloane whispers.

A wind comes up and swirls across the top of our hill. Off to the east, those thunderheads are darkening, growing into an ugly, anvil-shaped tower of vapor, with tentacles of rain spreading and casting shadows over the landscape. Silent lightning flickers within the cloud.

The storm will be on us soon.

“We won’t make it to the city today,” Truk says. “Not before that storm gets here. We’ll need to find someplace to bed down for the night and weather it out.”

Bed down?

What exactly does this jerk have in mind?

As the wind doubles back, I get another big noseful of Sloane’s scent, which is growing stronger again. I took good care of her needs last night, but her estrus is returning with a fury, and soon it will need tending again.

I’m not keen, however, on the thought of sharing her with Truk.

“Come on,” the half-breed says, racing ahead. “I know a place where we can shelter nearby. Follow me.”

Sloane gives a little cry of protest as I toss her over my shoulder again and follow him.

CHAPTER 14: SLOANE

We have taken shelter beneath a ruined overpass. It overhangs a valley made by an ancient highway that winds over the landscape like a river of crumbling asphalt.

Evening has come down early, the darkness brought on by heavy, rain-swollen clouds that cover the Zone like a gray counterpane. The breeze pushed ahead of the storm is refreshing after the long day of traveling in the blazing sun, and it cools my skin. The rain comes on slowly, first a slight drizzle, then plump, splashing drops, and finally an outright downpour.

Clutching my knees against my chest, I sit by the fire and watch it come down from the shelter of the overpass above.

It was once a massive freeway, Dog explains, back before the Cataclysm. Since then, however, the massive structure has collapsed, leaving only an overhang of crumbling concrete and rusted rebar.

An involuntary groan escapes my lips as a wave of pain ripples through my body.

“Are you cold?” Dog asks. “Why don’t you move closer to the fire.”

He is squatting by the fire that he has built from dead wood he gathered before the rain started.

The truth is, I'm not cold at all. My body is feverishly hot—an intense, pulsating heat emanating from deep within my core.

It's my estrus coming back.

Dog took care of it quite thoroughly last night, but that was only a temporary fix. Over the course of the day, it has returned gradually, and now it has reached an almost unbearable intensity. Besides the heat, I'm experiencing sudden cramps and spasms. And that's not to mention my nipples, which have grown painfully erect—as hard as pebbles beneath my thin tank top.

I'm literally getting so horny that it hurts.

Still, despite the desperate heat of my skin, I move closer to the fire like Dog told me. There's something comforting about its flickering orange light, which is casting wavering shadows against the underside of the collapsed overpass above. And there's something comforting about knowing that Dog made it himself. It's a symbol of his ability to take care of me.

All my life, I've struggled to be independent. I've never been one to rely on other people, especially not men.

Maybe that comes from being abandoned by my parents.

But ever since my transformation, that's been changing.

There's a war going on between my mind and my body.

And my body is winning.

"It feels good," I sigh, as the warmth of the fire caresses my already hot skin, drawing out beads of sweat across my flesh.

“Good.”

Dog’s voice has taken on that strange, enticing purr once again. The one that he used last night when he pleased me to death’s door.

I find myself staring at the stern, swarthy Alpha, studying his features in the quivering light. The wings of his nostrils flare wide. He is drinking in my scent. I suddenly become aware that I am sitting with my legs spread wide, practically taunting him with my pheromones.

And those pheromones are certainly having an effect on Dog. The black elastic of his shorts is stretching and bulging with his growing erection. I can see the contours of it through the fabric—the shape of his heavy balls and long, girthy shaft. I can even make out the details of his glans and the little V-shape that I know is so sensitive.

The memory of having that dominant, Alpha cock inside my mouth last night—the smell of Dog’s musk, the tang of his hard flesh and the salt of his hot semen—all of those remembered sensations send even greater desire pulsing between my thighs, swelling my tender lips down below and moistening my cotton panties to a shameful degree.

Cursing my intractable body, I clap my legs together so fast that my knees clack painfully.

“You’re sweating,” Dog says, looking at the moisture pebbling my skin. “Shit, you’re not cold, you’re burning up.”

He rises, completely unashamed of the massive erection bulging at his crotch, and walks away from the fire. I watch him as he goes, unable to take my eyes off his incredible bubble butt flexing with each stride.

Dog steps out into the sheets of rain falling beyond the shelter of the overpass. He cups his hands and raises them, catching the falling water. It is coming down so hard now that it only takes a couple of seconds for the bowl of his hands to fill.

He returns, his wet body shining in the fire light, rivulets of rain tracing down the contours of his carved physique. He kneels before me, stretching out the dripping bowl of his cupped hands filled with rain water.

“Drink this.”

His voice has that tone of command that should piss me off, but instead makes me feel all kinds of other things.

“Go on,” he says when I hesitate. “The rain here is clean. Not like the poison that falls from the sky in the city hive.”

He read my thoughts exactly. The idea of drinking water from the sky is so foreign to me. The rain that falls on the city hive is greasy, corrosive stuff, swimming with black ashes.

But not here in the hive.

I press my face to his palms and drink. The water is cool and clean on my lips and tongue, more pure than anything I’ve ever tasted in my life. I swallow it all and raise my head gasping.

“Want more, little one?” he purrs softly.

I nod my head, blushing at his term of endearment.

Dog smiles and strokes my cheek. He strides off to the edge to collect more rain. As he is doing so, a man-shaped shadow appears in the distance. We both tense up, but immediately relax as we realize that it is just Truk returning from his hunt with a brace of wild hares slung over his shoulder.

He steps out of the rain and into the circle of firelight before shaking the water from his body like a wet hound. I clap a hand over my mouth to hide my amusement at the sight.

But something about his animalistic nature gets me hot too, and another painful pulse of desire ripples through my body, clenching my sex.

I bite back a whimper. I need to keep it together in front of these men.

Once he's done shaking, Truk stands erect, twisting his hips and stretching in front of the fire, absorbing its warmth.

“Not exactly hunting weather,” he says with a smile, nodding to the wet hares lying on the ground. “But I managed to nab a couple of conies before the rain really hit.”

There's a hint of joy in his voice. He's enjoying having company for a change.

As Truk stretches, his muscles shift and work beneath his taut, tan skin, and I can't help but stare. Yet another wave of desire pulses in my nethermost parts, followed by shame as I know that even more of my pheromonal scent is wafting into the air.

Sure enough, Truk's nose twitches, and a moment later I see something jump—literally jump—beneath his fur loincloth.

Something big.

“Well, let's get these hares skinned,” Dog says.

There is a hint of annoyance in his voice, probably because Truk has returned.

The two Alphas set to work skinning the animals, Dog with my carbon-steel combat knife and Truk with his primitive dagger of napped obsidian. As I watch them, I start to get the impression that they are competing, both trying to show off their skills to impress me—to show me who will be the best at taking care of me out here in the wild.

As messed up as it sounds, that just turns me on even more.

Two dominant Alphas competing over me.

It's totally inappropriate, and not at all in keeping with my usual attitude toward men.

I remind myself it's just a side-effect of my new condition, and I choke back another wave of painful arousal.

Once the hares have been skinned, they prepare a rack and spit made of two upright sticks plus a third horizontal one to roast the meat over the fire. The smell combined with the herbs that Truk collected sets my mouth watering something fierce. It's been a full day since I've eaten.

My hunger is a welcome distraction, and for a little while I'm able to forget about my body's other little problem.

As soon as the meat is cooked, Truk lifts it off the fire and places it on a flat stone that he's using for his cutting board. With his stone knife he divvies it up. I watch greedily, mouth watering at the sight. When he hands me a piece, I snatch it out of his hands and dig in, plowing through the meat until I have gnawed it down to the naked bone. I toss the bone away and grab another piece, tearing into that one every bit as voraciously.

I look up to find both of the Alphas staring at me over the fire in amazement.

After a moment, Truk bursts into laughter, rocking back on his butt.

“She’s a real little predator, this one!”

Dog just grins.

“Oh you have no idea,” he chuckles. “You should see her fight.”

“Hardy-har-har” I mumble through my mouth full of meat and chuck the cleaned bone into the fire.

What do these guys expect? I’m frigging starving.

But I have to admit, it’s kind of nice to see them getting along now, at least a little bit.

Suddenly, another cramp wracks my body, and I fall to my side, wincing and squeezing my thighs tightly.

“Sloane!” both of the Alphas say in unison.

They rush around the fire, grasping me and supporting me from both sides. The combined scent of their Alpha musks, both strong and both slightly different, fills my senses, sending even more intense waves of desire and need shivering through me.

I try to sit up, but my body isn't doing what I want it to.

Instead, I find myself lying back into my Alphas supporting arms, head lolling weakly, legs falling open as my body writhes and my lips mewl and whimper.

“Her estrus,” Dog growls.

“No,” Truk says, cradling my head. “It’s her heat.”

“That’s what estrus is, idiot.”

Truk glowers.

“Outsiders,” he mutters. “You have fancy words for simple things. Anyway, whatever you want to call it, we have to do something about it.”

I gasp wetly as his big rough hand glides up the inside of my thigh, moving toward the place where my legs come together—the source of my need and my exquisite agony.

There is a snarl from the other side, and Dog swats his hand away angrily.

“Don’t touch her,” Dog snaps, baring his sharp fangs.

Truk growls and shoves Dog away, and before I know it, the two Alphas are up on their feet, circling and growling at each other, muscles tensing in preparation for a fight.

CHAPTER 15: SLOANE

“Please,” I whimper, writhing on the ground with need.

“Don’t...”

But the Alphas don’t hear me over their own snarls and gnashing teeth.

“The omega is mine,” Dog hisses threateningly. “She belongs to me, and I’m sworn to protect her.”

Truk snorts. “What she needs is someone who can take care of her needs, Outsider. She needs a *real* Alpha.”

As messed up as it sounds, watching the Alphas fight over me like this is just making my problem worse. My skin is screaming with desire. My body is overheating with pent up need that only the Alphas can relieve.

Both of them together.

While they are snarling and threatening each other, I manage somehow to drag myself to my feet. My legs are weak and quivery with lust. My skin is dripping sweat. I stumble toward the edge of the shelter of the overpass where the rain is pouring down.

Finally, the Alphas take notice, and their growling grows quiet.

“Sloane,” Dog calls. “Where are you going?”

He rushes toward me and Truk is right beside him.

As if in a dream, my bare feet carry me out into the rain. The fat drops of cool water splash on my skin, raising tendrils of steam off my hot flesh and refreshing my weak body, at least for a moment.

The rain wets my white tank top, plastering the thin material to my skin. My nipples were already poking through before, but now the fabric conforms to every contour like a thin layer of paint, and the pink of my nipples shines through. I may as well be topless.

Dog and Truk pause at the edge of the rain, two half-naked, heavily muscled brutes back-lit by the crackling campfire. I feel their eyes roving over my body like physical caresses. I sense their arousal straining at their shorts and loincloth. I smell the animal musk of their rut.

They want me, and that just turns me on even more. We're caught in a vicious cycle of mutual arousal, all three of us getting hornier with each passing second.

“Dog...Truk...”

I look at the Alphas in turn, so different and yet so similar in their masculine dominance.

“Don't fight over me.” My voice is weak; I feel faint with lust.

“I need you. I need *both* of you.”

My hand touches the wet fabric stuck to my breasts and stinging nipples.

“I need you here.”

The fingers of my other hand pet the wet crotch of my tattered shorts, rubbing the tender, swollen sex beneath.

“And here.” My low voice mingles with the whispering rain.

The Alphas step forward, and the rain splashes off their broad shoulders. They press themselves against me, one on each side, and even just the touch of their skin against my body sends shivering waves of pleasure through me.

My legs wobble. I start to collapse. But the Alphas catch me, holding me upright between them.

“Need,” I whisper, unable to even make sentences anymore.

“Need...”

“Okay,” Dog purrs. “We’ll do this together.”

He claims my mouth in a slow deep kiss that leaves me gasping. Then he turns me around and the next moment Truk’s lips are pressed to mine and his tongue is slipping inside, rolling against my own as I moan into his mouth.

They turn me like that, again and again, sharing my lips and my mouth in a dizzy dance of hot kisses.

Their hands begin to move over my body, clutching my hips, squeezing my breasts, pinching and rolling my erect nipples through the wet fabric.

I don’t resist. I simply can’t.

“Source, you taste good little one,” Truk purrs before lapping and sucking my neck.

The double attention is too much to handle. Two mouths kissing and nipping at my throat, my ears, my lips. Four rough, strong hands groping my needy body as I spin round and round in the splashing rain.

I surrender completely.

Someone's fingers, I'm not even sure whose, slide between my thighs and stroke my sex through the fabric of my shorts. Other hands clutch my ass, kneading my cheeks and digging into my cleft.

"God, your scent," Dog growls. "It's so delicious."

"I need to smell more," Truk pants. "Let's get these clothes off of you, little one."

Massive hands clutch my wrists, raising my weak and helpless arms over my head. Thick, blunt fingers curl beneath the hem of my shirt, peeling the wet cloth up my body until it comes off. My naked breasts bounce free, sprinkled by the falling rain, nipples hard and screaming to be sucked.

Truk obliges them. He dips his head, suckling my erect nubs deep into his mouth and strumming them with his tongue tip.

Meanwhile, behind me, Dog drags my shorts down my quivering thighs, leaving me naked except for my white cotton thong panties. The rain mixes with my arousal fluid, running down my legs, and Dog laps it up, working his tongue up my inner thighs, moving closer and closer to my need.

I gasp as his hands peel my cheeks apart and he wedges his face into my recess, inhaling lustily, breathing in the scent

from between my legs like a...well, like a dog.

“So fucking delicious.”

His voice is muffled. The breath and vibration of his words tickles me. I squirm even more, and feel more of that hot slick fluid flushing from my hole, making Dog groan even more loudly than before.

It’s so shameful, so wrong.

“Just relax,” Truk purrs, clutching me from the front. “Let yourself go. Give yourself over to it.”

His hand is massaging my front side, grinding against the crotch of my panties. The fabric is so wet and tight now that his fingers have no trouble finding the bud of my clit, which he works over relentlessly.

“Truk,” I whine. “Oh God, that feels so good.”

This is insane. I can’t believe what I’m doing now. I’m being pleased by two Alphas while the sky douses our thirsty bodies with rain. We’re not supposed to be doing this. We’re supposed to be on a mission.

That’s when I remember my neural chip.

This is all being recorded.

Back at SynerGen, scientists are watching like voyeuristic perverts, studying every kiss, every touch, every desperate whimper and moan.

“No, we have to stop.”

I writhe in the Alphas' grasp. But they hold me tightly, refusing to let me go.

"We can't stop," Truk says. "You *need* this, little one. You said so yourself. You need your Alphas' help."

He grips my neck and seizes my mouth in another dominating kiss while his fingers slip inside my panties to touch me skin on skin.

Behind, Dog slowly stands, trailing kisses up my spine. When he rises to full height, I feel something hard and hot prodding my behind, and I gasp against Truk's lips.

Dog has taken his shorts off, and now his pulsing erection is pressed against me.

Up front, Truk has a similar idea. He breaks our kiss so he can unfasten his loincloth, letting the drenched fur flop to the ground. His hard cock springs free, craning upward toward the raining sky with arousal. I stare at it gape-mouthed while Dog squeezes my breasts and rocks his own impressive member along the cleft of my behind.

"It's so long." I weakly wrap my fingers around Truk's shaft.

"So thick..."

I lever Truk's dick against me, rubbing his tip against my clit through my panties.

"So hard..."

I jerk him in my palm, thrilling at the way his smooth skin shifts over the iron-hard inner core of his erection. At the same

time, I swivel my tush, brushing it against Dog's equally hard cock behind.

"I want it," breathe. "Put it inside me. Please..."

Truk's fingers tease my panties aside as I guide his penis so his blunt cockhead delves between my folds, gliding along my slit until his tip rubs my tight hole.

"Oh!"

I wince at the tenderness of my swollen entrance.

Truk touches me there, the pad of his middle finger circling my hole, massaging it and coaxing it to open just enough for him to squeeze his fingertip inside.

"Oh fuck!" I yelp, bracing myself against Dog behind me.

Truk inches his finger inside, testing my soft membranes.

"She's not ready yet," Truk says. "Her entrance is too small, too tight. We will break her if we try to mate with her now."

"I know," Dog answers. "We will have to bring her pleasure in other ways."

The Alphas lift me together and carry me back under the shelter of the broken overpass. They lay me down beside the fire on my back. Dog cradles my upper body in his lap while Truk positions himself between my legs, which fall open for him in surrender.

"I've never smelled an omega's heat this strong," Truk mutters.

"Then tend to it, Farlander."

Truk casts Dog a brief glance of resentment, but immediately turns his attention back to my crotch. My panties are soaked through, and in the flickering light of the fire, my tuft of pubic hair is visible through the wet cloth.

Truk wastes no time. Grasping my thighs and spreading them even wider, he buries his face against my apex, crushing his lips against me, sucking and licking me through my panties.

“Please,” I whine. “I need it so bad. I need to come.”

My body writhes uncontrollably, but Dog holds me steady in his strong arms. He leans over me, drops of rainwater rolling from his face to splash on my breasts, which he massages roughly. He rolls my nipples, elevating my desire to even greater levels. His cock presses against my cheek. I turn my head, running my mouth along his shaft, humming as I savor his flavor.

“Does that taste good?” he purrs.

“Mm-hm,” I hum.

My tongue flickers out, licking that pure, clean rain from his hot smooth shaft.

Down below, Truk edges my panties aside again, giving him full access to everything. I should feel ashamed to be splayed and on full display for him like this, but my need is too great for me to care.

I throw my head back and howl as Truk begins to lick and suck my naked pussy. The blade of his tongue traces over my

vulva. His plush lips suck and nibble my clit. I cry out and thrash in Dog's lap.

"That's it," Dog purrs over me. "Come like a good omega."

I feel pressure at my entrance again. Truk wriggles one finger inside, working it deep this time. He curls it with a beckoning motion, scratching that peculiar itch on my front wall and sending ripples of pleasure emanating out from my center to the very tips of my fingers and toes.

"Oh God, that feels so good," I sob. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

I toss my head back and forth, losing myself to the feverish lust. Dog's strong hands clutch my face, holding me steady, forcing me to gaze up at him.

"I want to see." His voice is rumbling and commanding, his fire-lit eyes latched to mine. "I want to see you come."

My pussy swells with engorgement, tightening around Truk's stroking finger. Slippery wetness pours out of me, trickling down my taint and pooling around my butt. My clit is so tight and tingly it feels like it could pop inside Truk's constantly suckling mouth.

And all the while, I stare up into Dog's face, eerie with jumping shadows from the fire, eyes glimmering like dark jewels.

"I want to see your pretty little face when you break."

He won't have to wait long. Truk has stoked the raging fire of my heat to a dangerous level, and every muscle in my body

tightens in preparation for the onrushing explosion of my release.

I don't know if I can withstand the pleasure that's coming.

CHAPTER 16: KANE

The omega's sounds of ecstasy split the night, her sharp voice cutting through the white noise of the rain. Her cries are shrill and desperate, easily mistaken for shouts of pain.

But I know better than that.

I perch on the ledge of the collapsed overpass, hunched and silent in the dark rain like one of the stone demons that haunt the ancient temples in our ruined city. From this vantage point, high on the other side of the narrow valley, I can easily spy on the Alphas as they toy with their little plaything.

But these are no ordinary inhabitants of the Zone. That much is clear from the omega's close-cropped hair and the leather boots on her feet.

She is an Outsider, and so is one of the Alphas.

I hate Outsiders.

I kill Outsiders.

Nothing else brings me more pleasure. It is a shame that the treacherous creatures so rarely venture into the Zone. The opportunities for me to take my vengeance are so very rare.

But this opportunity is too good to pass up. Outsider blood will be spilled this night.

Crawling slowly, the sound of my movements masked by the rain, I move back from the edge of the broken freeway and make my descent down the slope of rubble that leads to the

valley below—the valley where the Alphas are making their little omega squeal and moan with pleasure.

When I reach the bottom of the slope, I pause to look through the rain at the naked figures cavorting in the firelight.

They have changed positions now. The Outsider Alpha is sprawled on his back, and the omega, revived by her many climaxes, is now straddling his face, grinding her cunt against him hard as he laps her oozing slick like a thirsty dog. The omega's moans are muffled by the other Alpha's cock, which is sliding in and out of her mouth as she bobs her head.

That Alpha, the one enjoying the little omega's mouth, is different. His heavy brow reveals him to be a Farlander.

I hate Farlanders too. Almost as much as Outsiders.

So I'll kill them all then.

Still, I'm curious how this strange little pack came to be. Two Outsiders and a Farlander? It doesn't make any sense.

I crawl through the darkness, advancing so I can get a better look. I crouch behind a boulder and watch as the trio continues.

The Farlander's hands clutch the omega's shaved head, and he rocks his hips, forcing her to take him deep. He tosses his head back and groans with pleasure as he sinks into her. The omega clutches at his thighs, but she doesn't try to stop him, even when she starts to gag on the dick that is deep down her throat.

Lost in his enjoyment, the Farlander holds her head there, forcing her to take it until tears stream down her cheeks.

At last he lets her go, and she rears back, mouth wide and gulping air like a landed fish as thick ropes of saliva drip down her chin. She almost collapses backwards, but the Outsider Alpha—the one whose face she is using like a saddle—he grips her tightly, holding her steady.

She takes three deep, sobbing gasps, and then dives back in, sucking the Farlander's cock even more aggressively than before.

Source, I've never seen an omega quite like this one.

I don't just mean her shorn head. She has an aura of a warrior about her, and it shows in the way she fucks, like she's trying to win a fight.

Then it hits me.

Her scent.

It is a raw, fleshy aroma that bypasses my thinking mind and speaks directly to my body on the most fundamental level. My cock instantly engorges with blood, standing fully erect and lifting the tanned leather of my loincloth. My balls throb with the desperate urge to pump their seed into her hole, fertilizing her omega womb.

Source, she smells good.

My mouth waters.

The muscles of my legs twitch involuntarily. My body wants to rush forward and claim her sweltering cunt right here and now. It takes every drop of my willpower to hold myself in

place. I'm lucky that the patter of the rain masks the involuntary growl rolling in my chest.

I must be cautious.

I am no coward, but I am also no fool.

Normally, being outnumbered two-to-one wouldn't give me pause. But these two Alphas appear stronger than average, and I am alone.

I'm always alone.

But I have a plan. Instead of attacking them head on right away, I will wait for them to sate their desires with the omega's body. Then they will be much tamer.

When an Alpha spills his seed, it weakens him considerably. It dulls his senses and takes the edge off his ferocity.

These two will put up a hell of a fight to protect their omega. But once they've drained their balls inside her, at least the odds will be a little more even.

And from the looks of things, it won't take much longer.

The omega deep-throats the Farlander again, her throat bulging with his girth. He smooths his hands over her short hair and purrs with satisfaction.

"By the Source, Sloane, you look so sexy like that."

So, her name is Sloane. It is an ugly, Outsider name.

The omega moans around the thick meat filling her mouth.

"That's right, take it," the Farlander purrs. "Take my seed. Swallow it all, omega."

The Farlander grunts, and the base of his cock swells with his knot. A moment later, omega squeals, and I know that the reason is the flood of semen that is spilling onto her tongue and sliding down her gullet.

At the same moment, she climaxes again, and her pussy gushes onto the Outsider Alpha's face, practically drowning him with her slick. He grips her ass and laps her fluid, and his own stiff cock dribbles precum down its shaft.

It is a chain reaction of arousal.

And through it all, the air is filled with the sweet scent of horny omega cunt. My own stiff cock leaks a few drops of precum onto my leg where it is washed away by the rain.

But I must stay focused. Must keep my mind clear.

My revenge is all that matters.

I take advantage of their distraction to prowl closer, moving from one boulder to another.

The omega's moans get louder, and her body spasms as she climaxes once again on the Alpha's face. Unable to contain her bliss any longer, she draws herself off the Farlander's cock, globs of seed churned with saliva dribbling down her chin and onto her chest.

The rain is abating.

Her scent is getting stronger the closer I approach.

I try not to inhale it, but the hot fleshy taste of it is already in my throat.

My plan, however, is proceeding nicely. The spent Farlander collapses back onto his haunches, reclining on his elbows as his cock drools the remainder of his pale load onto his thigh.

That's one Alpha down, and one to go.

"More..." The omega's voice is a ragged sob.

She throws herself forward and begins sucking the cock of the Alpha beneath her. Her perfect little ass is still wedged tightly onto his face. It's a wonder the bastard hasn't suffocated yet. However, the wet, raunchy sounds of sucking and lapping make it clear that he's alive and well under there.

That and the throbbing red erection that the omega is sliding between her already seed-stained lips.

"So beautiful," the Farlander groans as he watches, stroking his knotted cock to wring the last few dribbles of seed.

He cups the omega's bobbing head, petting her short blond hair as she sucks his companion like her life depended on it. Her body is inflamed with lust, and the antidote is inside that pulsing member. The night fills with the squelching sounds of her mouth and the muffled purrs of the Alpha beneath her.

The rain has let up. It is now little more than a drizzle.

The wind brings me the omega's scent, hot and enticing.

My cock is painful with arousal.

Every fiber of my being is pulling me toward her, goading me to step out of the shadows. To confront these two Alphas and

claim my prize. But just a few more strokes of those lovely lips and my victory will be assured.

Once they are both spent, the Alphas will be no match for me.

Despite my raging desire, my discipline keeps me rooted in place.

My discipline, and also my hatred. I remind myself that this omega is an Outsider. I remind myself of her people's cruelty. Their soullessness. Their concern for nothing but material things. Objects.

Most of all, I remember what they did to my sister, Talia.

And I hate myself for my attraction to this Outsider omega. It goes against everything I stand for, everything I care about.

But her damn scent is too strong to resist. It gets inside my mind. It seeps into my body, controlling my muscles against my will.

My feet seem to move of their own accord, carrying me from my hiding spot toward the orgy in the firelight.

The wind shifts.

The omega's nose twitches. Her concentration on what she is doing is broken, and she withdraws her mouth, strings of saliva gleaming orange in the firelight.

She turns, and her eyes catch mine.

"Alpha," she gasps. "There's an Alpha."

The Farlander is already stumbling to his feet, baring his teeth and growling, but he is sluggish from his expenditure. The

other Alpha, the Outsider, is a different case. He shoves the omega off, and springs to his feet lightning quick, popping his jaw and snarling like a mad dog.

I curse myself for giving in to the omega's lure, but there's nothing to be done about it now.

Now it's time to fight.

Someone is about to die.

CHAPTER 17: SLOANE

Oh no, not again.

Dog and Truk shift into fighting stances, their rain-wet muscles rippling with tension in the light of the fire. They are both growling viciously at the interloper hiding out there in the darkness where the rain has slacked off to a mere drizzle now.

Whoever, or whatever, is out there, it is invisible to my eyes, but the smell is unmistakable.

It's an Alpha.

And he's extra dominant. I don't know exactly how I can tell that; I just know. My olfactory sense has developed to the point that I can pick up messages within body odors that I never would have imagined.

However, my nose is sending my brain mixed messages about this Alpha. It's telling me I should fear him. But at the same time, it's telling me I should do something else to him that is totally inappropriate.

"Show yourself, coward," Truk snarls. "Step into the light."

There is nothing cowardly, however, about the figure that swaggers forward from the velvety shadows.

He is massive. Even bigger than Dog, both in height and sheer mass. He is dressed only in a leather loincloth that is much more carefully crafted than Truk's fur one. The wavering orange light reveals a physique composed of muscles on top of

muscles, but also exceedingly lean, giving him the appearance of being carved from polished wood.

His head is shaved to the scalp on the sides, leaving only a strip of hair down the middle, stark iron-gray against his tawny skin. He doesn't exactly look old, however. Rather he appears silvered, the way some dominant male animals are.

His darker gray brows are slanted to cruel-looking points over a pair of intense eyes gleaming like dark jewels. Bared fangs shine ivory white amid a salt and pepper beard.

He is impressive, to say the least. However, the thing that really transfixed my attention are the dozens of steel piercings reflecting the flickering light of the fire. They are all over him—through his ears, his nostrils, his lips, his nipples.

And one other place.

His loincloth has been lifted by the massive pole of his erection. Obviously he has been watching us for a little while and enjoying the show. Now, with a fight impending, his arousal is waning, but before it falls completely behind the leather of his loincloth, I catch a glint of steel down there too.

Oh God, his cock is pierced.

Just like the Alphas from Lily's neural chip recording that I saw before.

My pussy—already raw and wet and tingling from Dog's rough tongue—pulses briefly at the uninvited thought of how that hard steel piercing would feel abrading my soft insides.

But more important, those decorations mean this Alpha is from our destination—the city ruins.

That certainly complicates things.

Snarling and growling, Dog and Truk advance, spreading apart to surround their opponent. Just this morning, the two of them were fighting each other. Now they are already moving as a tandem unit, as if they can read each other's minds.

They are bound by their mutual need to protect me.

But that doesn't mean I have to sit by helplessly like some damsel in distress.

My gun is right where I left it in its holster, next to my crumpled shorts. Acting on sheer reflex, I somersault toward the weapon.

In the back of my mind, I realize how absurd I must look—I'm dripping wet and butt-naked except for a pair of black combat boots—but I don't let that distract me.

In one smooth motion, I have whipped out the .40-cal and rolled into a crouch, the sights lined up on the tribal Alpha's center mass.

He's a big target.

Too bad I don't have any ammo left.

But he doesn't need to know that. Hopefully he doesn't call my bluff.

“Don't fucking move!” I try to shout, but my voice is embarrassingly hoarse for all of the screaming and loud

moaning I've been doing for the past good while.

The pierced Alpha's eyes flick to the muzzle of my gun. He simply sneers. He doesn't seem too concerned about bullets, and I have no doubt that his enormous size belies his speed. I've seen enough evidence of Alphas in the past two days to understand that.

And this guy is no ordinary Alpha.

Still, my gun isn't the only deadly weapon on my side. I watched Dog brutally dismember a whole damn pack of Farlander Alphas yesterday. And based on the fight this morning, I know that he and Truk are pretty evenly matched.

But they are not taking this new guy lightly, and I don't blame them.

Then again, the pierced and bearded Alpha hasn't made a move yet either.

All parties involved are aware that the outcome of this fight is uncertain. The only thing that is certain—once the battle begins, someone is going to die.

The big Alpha snorts, and looks at my protectors with disdain, then back to me.

“Interesting pack,” he growls. “Two Outsiders and a Farlander. I like to kill Outsiders and Farlanders.”

His language is heavily accented, similar to Truk's but deeper and more guttural. The sound sends a shiver wriggling up my naked spine.

Truk straightens a little.

“I’m no fucking Farlander,” he spits.

The big Alpha turns toward Truk and stares incredulously. He sniffs, testing Truk’s scent.

“A half-breed then,” the Alpha grumbles. “Just as bad.”

Now he turns his stare to me and then Dog.

“And what, pray tell, are you all doing here, so near the homeland of my people?” His eyes glide back to my body, glancing at the mess of wetness between my legs. “Besides the obvious.”

Even in this dangerous situation, I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment. It’s one thing to know that Frostgrave and the other scientists have been monitoring our sexual activities. At least it’s easy to forget about that—out of sight, out of mind.

But knowing that this guy caught me in the act with two Alphas at once—it’s so shameful.

I shove those thoughts out of my mind and steady my gun. Meanwhile, Dog and Truk have moved into position. The tension in the air is palpable, like a vibration.

“I’ll repeat my question,” the Alpha snarls, “What are you doing here?”

My mind races as I try to think of an answer. Before I can open my mouth, Truk blurts it out.

“The Outsiders are here on a rescue mission,” he says. “I found them and offered them my services as a guide through

the dangerous Farlands.”

The Alpha snorts and glances down at the fading semi-hard erection between Truk’s legs.

“Right,” he says sarcastically. “Your services.”

Beneath his pierced brows, his eyes dart toward me again. I have the sensation of being prey in the sights of a deadly predator. I squeeze the gun tighter, taking comfort in its cold weight, even though I know it’s useless.

I take even more comfort in the fact that I have my two Alpha protectors with me.

Still, I feel strangely drawn to this new Alpha too.

It’s just my estrus, I tell myself. It’s messing with my mind, not allowing me to think rationally. But it will pass.

“You said a rescue.” The Alpha’s voice is a low rumble.

“Who?”

I wish that Truk hadn’t said anything about a rescue. That could complicate things. This Alpha is clearly from the city ruins, which is where Lily is. And I doubt the Alphas there will be interested in handing her over to us now.

But I’d really like this standoff to have a nonviolent conclusion if possible.

And maybe, just maybe, this Alpha can help us get close to our target.

I decide that honesty is the best policy.

“We’re here to rescue an Outsider female by the name of Lily O’Neal.”

For the first time, I see the Alpha’s mask of cool confidence falter. It’s a small change, but my new hyperacute senses pick up the signs. The dilation of his pupils. The quickening of the pulse ticking in the thick veins at his neck and wrists. A short sharp inhale of surprise.

“Lily?” The aggressive edge has gone out of his voice.

I nod, still keeping my gun trained on his torso.

“You know her?”

The pierced Alpha grows quiet for a moment that drags out into a minute. I can practically hear the gears turning in his head. A log pops in the fire and I jump, but quickly regain my composure.

“Are you deaf?” Dog snarls, his body tense and ready to attack if necessary. “She asked you a question, big man. Do you know this Lily O’Neal.”

The pierced Alpha gazes at Dog with contempt. Dog doesn’t back down.

“Yes, I know her,” the Alpha answers at last. “I can take you to her. There’s just one condition. You have to stop pointing that boom-stick at me.”

“Boom-stick?” Dog scoffs.

The pierced Alpha cuts his eyes at him again.

“A joke, Outsider,” he snarls. “I know what a gun is. But we have little use for such weapons here in the Zone.” He glances toward me again. “I can tell, however, that the omega is adept in its use. Lower it, and we can talk.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Dog growls low, not taking his eyes off the hulking giant.

I try to run through the scenarios here. Even if we manage to kill this tribal Alpha, some of us are sure to sustain wounds and that will compromise the mission. If the Alpha gets away alive, he will surely warn his companions, and our cover will be blown.

And then there’s the third possibility.

He kills all three of us.

I don’t know if he’s that strong, but I don’t want to find out the hard way.

The best thing to do is go along with his proposed truce and pray this giant isn’t planning to screw us over somehow. If he’s being genuine, then maybe he can get us close to the target.

“You really know her?” I ask. “You really know Lily?”

The Alpha nods, his face stern and deadly serious behind his iron-gray beard.

“By the Source I swear it to be true.”

In the corner of my vision, I notice Truk relax slightly. He holds one arm toward me, gesturing.

“He’s telling the truth.”

Dog snarls. “Fuck that. You can’t be sure.”

“I am sure,” Truk retorts. “An Alpha of the ruins would never break an oath sworn upon the Source.”

The Source. I’ve heard Truk using that term before. It seems to have some religious significance for the inhabitants of the Zone. Like a deity or something. I’ll have to remember to ask Dog about that. Perhaps he knows something about it.

But right now is the time for making a decision.

I take a deep breath and exhale a silent prayer that I’m making the right play.

My gun lowers. I place it beside me on the ground and rise.

“What are you doing?” Dog growls.

“He knows where Lily is. He can help us.”

“He doesn’t mean to help us. He means to kill us.”

I look the Alpha up and down. Something has changed about him. The mention of Lily has surprised him—shocked him even. I’m not exactly sure why, but I intend to find out.

“If you know where Lily is, can you take us to her?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“I can take *you*.” He points straight at me. “The Dog and the Halfbreed are too dangerous, though. I’m not going to bring them into my territory.”

“Fuck that,” Dog snaps. “There’s no way you’re taking her alone.”

I have to agree with that. Truk seems to believe that this Alpha warrior is a man of his word, but I’m not going to take a major risk like that.

“I’m not going alone. We all go together, or not at all.”

The warrior looks between Dog and Truk one more time, then shrugs.

“Fine,” he says. “I will take you there tomorrow.”

Seriously? Just like that? Based on his appearance and demeanor, I would never have taken this guy for a pushover. Something is definitely up. There’s something he’s not telling us. Still, he’s our best chance at getting into the city at this point.

“Okay?” I say.

The Alpha nods and strides toward the thick concrete pillar that is supporting the broken remnants of the overpass high above our heads. He slumps down against its base.

“We will leave at first light then. Now, if you are all done with your playtime, I recommend you get some sleep. The sun will be up in a few hours, and we still have a long way to journey.”

He leans his head back and closes his eyes. His breathing instantly modulates to a slow, steady pace, and it seems as if he has already fallen asleep.

Truk and Dog slowly move back toward me, but they never take their eyes off the other Alpha. Dog shakes his head.

“You can’t be serious,” he mutters to me. “You can’t trust this guy. He’ll kill us in our sleep.”

“I’m not going to kill you in your sleep,” the Alpha grunts without opening his eyes.

“I don’t believe him,” Dog says.

Still keeping his eyes shut, the Alpha sighs with exasperation.

“I swear it by the Source.”

Truk gestures toward Dog and speaks in a quiet voice.

“We can trust him. The Alphas of the ruins are brutal, but they are honorable. They keep their word, especially if they swear upon the Source.”

There is a strange tone in Truk’s accented voice, and a glow to his face. It takes me a moment to identify it.

Admiration.

He is filled with overwhelming admiration for the Alpha warrior. All his life he has been an outcast, a pariah. All he’s ever wanted is to be accepted as part of a tribe. All he’s ever wanted is to join the tribes of the ruins.

Dog rolls his eyes.

“Fine,” Dog grumbles. “But we sleep with Sloane between us, and we take turns keeping watch until daybreak. *You* may trust this fucker, but *I* don’t.”

Truk nods.

The night is getting chilly, and a shiver runs through my muscles. I'm suddenly startlingly aware once again of how naked I am—how naked we all are.

“Come on,” Dog says, guiding me by the shoulder. “Come lie down. I'll put more wood on the fire.”

He casts one last mistrustful glance at the warrior where he is slouched against the column, his piercings winking in the light of the dying fire.

“Hey,” Dog calls to him. “You got a name, Alpha? What do we call you?”

The Alpha grunts, and casually scratches his back against the column like a bear.

“Kane,” he answers. “You can call me Kane.”

CHAPTER 18: DOG

Well, here we are. Another day, another Alpha.

I don't like it.

The thing is, my attitude toward Truk is changing. Yesterday, I was wary of him, but last night he proved that he's willing to fight alongside me to protect our omega.

Our omega.

We share her now, and we share the responsibility for her safety.

Truk is trustworthy. His primitive mind is too simple for duplicity and schemes. If he was planning to double-cross us, I would have sussed it out by now.

The new Alpha, Kane, however, is an entirely different story.

He's up to something. I can smell it on him.

He's leading us into a trap.

About a mile outside the city perimeter, Kane leads us up a slope. At the top of the rise there was once a small building. Now all that remains are two broken rockcrete walls meeting at a right angle, their crumbling tops slanting down to the ground in jagged lines. A small rectangular window is set into one wall.

Kane pulls up beside the decrepit wall. Leaning his bulk against the cracked rockcrete, he gazes off toward the city.

From this distance, I can easily make out Alphas moving about in the city ruins. The population is sparse—nothing like the teeming tide of flesh that fills the hive city of Galadon-1 to the bursting point. Still, there are dozens of Alphas that I can see, and I know from my previous excursions that there are hundreds more inside.

And each of these ruin-dwellers is more than a match for ten Farlanders. Their bodies are stronger, their minds sharper.

We are downwind here, so they have not caught our scent yet. I have no doubt they have spotted us, however.

“Why are we stopping?” Truk asks.

He is standing beside me, and I can sense Sloane’s presence behind him, protected by his body should Kane decide to make a move.

But the Alpha *doesn’t* move. He simply answers without looking at us. His eyes stay focused on the city ruins.

“You three will wait here,” he says coldly. “I will go ahead to herald our arrival, and then I will return for you.”

“Why?” I ask.

Now Kane turns. He makes no attempt to hide the hatred in his eyes. He despises Outsiders, that much is clear. It could be said of all the inhabitants of the Zone, but his enmity seems to run much deeper than normal.

But he hasn’t tried to kill us yet.

“Why?” Kane repeats my question back to me. “Because you are Outsiders, and a half-breed. The guards will attack as soon as they spot you, and I may not be able to stop them in time. But more than that...”

He gestures toward Sloane where she is standing behind Truk’s protective shoulder.

“You have an unmarked omega in your company, and she is deep in estrus. Have you no idea what kind of frenzy that will send the Alphas into?”

I know full well about that.

But I also know that once an omega has been marked, there is no going back. It cannot be erased.

Once an omega has been marked by her Alphas, she belongs to them. The change is physical. Her scent markers signal that she is possessed and protected by her pack, and all other Alphas will leave her be.

But an unmarked omega is fair game.

Kane goes on, “I will go to the city and warn the guards that I am bringing you in. I will make sure they have moved away to a safe distance so that they will not be driven into a frenzy by the omega’s scent. Then I can take you to meet with the one named Lily.”

He nods toward Sloane’s gun.

“You won’t be allowed to bring that with you,” he says. “Take it apart for me.”

Sloane draws the pistol from its holster. She removes the mag, which is empty. Next she removes the upper slide and recoil spring as well. There is no round in the chamber either. She's been bluffing this whole time. Kane flashes a wry smirk.

"Let me see," Kane says, extending his hand.

Sloane places the pieces of the disassembled gun into his palm. They look comically small in the big Alpha's enormous hand.

Kane just stares at the gun pieces mutely for a moment, then tosses the pieces one after another as far as he can throw them. Each metal piece winks briefly in the sun before disappearing into the high grass. We could look all day and never recover all of the parts.

"What the fuck?" Sloane shouts.

"You won't need it," Kane says. "After all, you are on a rescue mission, right? And you don't have any ammunition anyway. I may not know much about guns, but I'm not completely ignorant, omega."

Sloane sighs and shrugs.

Kane grins coldly.

"Besides, you've got your two pets to take care of you, little one. Anyway, no Farlanders would be stupid enough to venture this close to the city." He glances at Truk. "Present company excluded, I suppose."

Kane looks at us each in turn, and once more I sense that there are secret calculations going on in his brain.

“I’ll be back soon,” he says, and then with an edge of menace in his voice. “Don’t try to run off. If you do, I will find you, and I will kill you. *That* I swear by the Source.”

And with that, he is gone, racing down the other side of the hill toward the city limits, his charging body parting the high grass like a ship plowing through waves. For a minute we just watch him go.

A cloud passes overhead, covering us in its shadow.

“I don’t trust him,” I grumble. “He’s leading us into a trap.”

Truk steps beside me, shaking his head of long blond hair.

“But he swore by the Source. An Alpha would never break such an oath.”

“You’re infatuated,” I scoff. “You’re letting your desire to be accepted into the fold cloud your judgment, boy. Think about what he actually said last night. He swore to us that he knows where Lily is. That is all. But he has no intention of really helping us find her. He’s setting up an ambush. I’m sure of it.”

Truk starts to speak again. “But—“

“But nothing,” I cut him off. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s to trust my instincts. And my instincts tell me that Kane is leading us into a trap.”

“I agree,” Sloane says.

She is leaning against the sill of the window set into the broken wall, watching Kane as he races toward the city.

“You do?” I ask.

I'm somewhat surprised. So far it seems that Sloane has been giving Kane the benefit of the doubt. Hell, she even handed over her gun. But if she really thinks it's a trap, then why did she want to go along with Kane's plan up to now.

Sloane turns and hops her perfect little butt up into the window. Her white shirt is still slightly damp from last night's rain, and it clings to her delicious breasts. Even in these dire circumstances, just looking at her sends a rush of desire through my blood.

She is a treasure that must be protected.

"I have an idea," she says.

Truk and I look at each other in surprise, then back to Sloane.

"Okay, so it's not a *super* well thought out plan," she admits.

"But Kane said something about marking."

I step forward to where she is sitting in the window and position myself between her legs, my hands resting on her thighs. She gazes into my face with those incredible blue eyes shaded by her long lashes. Her sapphire irises are still dilated with her estrus.

"Sloane, do you even know what marking entails?"

She drops her eyes and shakes her head, as a blush rises in her cheeks.

"No," she answers. "Not exactly. But I have some idea."

I knuckle her chin and tilt her face up to mine once again. Just then, the cloud passes, drenching her in golden sunlight, and

my desire to claim her and protect her flares anew.

“Sloane, the mark is permanent. Once you are bound to a group of Alphas, that bond cannot be broken except by death.”

Truk steps forward and leans against the wall beside her. He strokes her bare arm with his knuckles.

“Besides,” he adds, “It won’t make any difference if Dog and I mark you. The Alphas who dwell in the city ruins only acknowledge the mark of their own tribesmen. To them, the marks of an Outsider and a half-breed like me wouldn’t mean much.”

Sloane nods, thinking.

“What about Kane?” she whispers.

“What?” Truk and I shout in chorus.

“Sloane, you’ve got to be kidding,” I growl. “You must have seen the hatred in his eyes. That Alpha wants nothing more than to tear you to pieces.”

Truk nods in agreement with me. Even though he is filled with admiration for the Alpha warrior, he doesn’t want to give up the omega that we now share.

“I agree with Dog,” he says, “I’m not going to just give you up like that.”

Sloane reaches out and places her small hands on us—one on Truk’s chest and one on mine.

“I don’t want you to give me up,” she says. “You’ll mark me too.” She flicks her eyes toward me. “Omegas usually have at

least three mates, right?”

I’m forced to admit that she’s correct. She knows more about the ways of the Zone than I realized. Still, I fear that she doesn’t know exactly what she’s getting into here.

I touch her face.

“Sloane, what you are talking about—it’s too much. It’s too big of a step. There must be some other way to complete the mission.”

There is a flash of blue fire in those lovely eyes, and I realize it’s not just about the mission. Not entirely.

She needs this. Her body needs this. Her heat is so strong and so deep, it requires three Alphas to quell it.

“All right,” I say at last. “So what exactly is your plan?”

“I’ll tell you,” she answers, “But first, I need you to tell me exactly what the process of marking involves.”

CHAPTER 19: KANE

I smile to myself as I run through the open sunlight.

The arrangements have been made, and the trap is set. Two packs of the city's strongest Alphas are lying in wait now. As soon as I lead the Outsiders and the Farlander inside, they will be subdued. We will take them alive.

Now all I have to do is return and lead them to their fate.

I would have liked to have killed them all last night. But when they mentioned the other omega, Lily, I knew what I had to do.

The Outsiders had to be brought in for questioning.

They said they are here to rescue her. Well, that's a pack of lies. I know damn well that Lily is happy with her Alphas—Addom, Hasker, and Kadmon.

These Outsiders are lying. They are here for another reason. This has to do with those transmissions that Lily has been sending to the outside world beyond the wall.

I told Addom not to let her do that. I knew it would just bring more Outsiders into the Zone.

No matter. I'll enjoy hearing these Outsiders scream as we "interrogate" them.

I grin to myself, pleased with my clever trap.

But my smile drops as I near the ruined wall where I left the Alphas and omega earlier. There is no sign of them now. I

slow my pace to a walk and test the air.

They are still nearby. I can smell them.

Why are they out of sight, though? Are they hiding from me?

Perhaps they have planned a trap of their own.

The omega's scent is extra strong. Even though her Alphas tended to her last night, her heat seems to have come back even stronger now. It is because she is unmarked. If something is not done about that soon, she'll fall so deeply into a frenzy of lust that her mind will be broken.

That's fine.

It will make it all the easier to extract information from her later. The two Alphas will be tortured by the usual methods involving pain. I doubt they will talk, but it is worth a try.

The omega, however, can be tortured much more effectively by withholding her pleasure.

I can hear her now, her soft moaning sounds drifting over the jagged top of the broken wall, its pale stones bright in the slanting morning sun. Her scent hits me again like a punch in the face, and my cock pulses with engorgement.

Struggling to keep my body under control, I stalk slowly, sweeping a wide circle around the end of the wall. I dart my eyes around the grassed hillside, looking for signs of the Alphas, but there is nothing there except for the insects dancing over the weeds in the morning light. The wind rustles the grass and my beard. The only other sound is the omega's light moaning.

Something feels off about this. My senses tell me it could be a trap. They could be using the omega's scent to lure me while the Alphas lie in ambush.

As I come around the edge of the wall, however, I see that is not the case.

Both of the Alphas are there, kneeling side by side with their backs to the wall. The Outsider's head is thrown back in seemingly painful ecstasy. Beside him, the half-breed's eyes are cast down as he watches the omega suck.

The omega is on all fours in front of them, her blond head bobbing on Dog's cock, then on Truk's, then Dog's again, mewling submissively as she alternates pleasuring the two Alphas.

She is mostly naked too. Her clothing and boots are strewn about on the ground as if they were torn off in a frenzy. The only thing that she has on now is her pair of cotton panties.

Her back is arched deliciously, and her ass is raised high, exuding invisible clouds of her intense heat-scent. The smell is enticing, and I can't help but step closer, inhaling it with deep, greedy breaths.

My foot jostles a loose stone, getting the group's attention.

The omega glances back at me over her smooth shoulder. Her blue eyes are burning with lust.

"Kane..."

She whimpers my name. Her tone is so submissive, so pleading. My cock hoists to full height, bobbing with each step

I take.

“Kane, please...”

Her plump little rear end wiggles enticingly. Her knees are splayed wide, and her round cheeks are spread open. The thin strip of her thong only partially conceals her tight puckered rear hole. Below that, the groove of her sex is clearly visible through the fabric.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath.

This isn't how this is supposed to go. These are enemies. I'm supposed to be leading them into my trap. But now they've caught me in a snare of their own.

That ass is too perfect to resist, plus the overpowering scent of her omega cunt in heat.

Source help me.

With stiff movements, I lurch forward, unable to stop myself. My feet are like two wooden stumps. In fact, my whole body feels numb. The only sensation is the throb of blood rushing through my member and the deep, delicious ache inside my swollen testicles.

“Please help me, Kane,” she begs, shaking her ass for me. “I need you here.”

Somehow, my numb fingers manage to unfasten my loincloth and toss it aside. My cock juts hard and red in the sunshine. I step into the shade of the wall, and another stronger wave of that odor hits me, drawing dribbles of precum from my pierced tip.

The Outsider, Dog, snarls and bares his teeth at me.

“Stay back, Alpha.”

The omega smooths her hand over the muscles of his abdomen and purrs soothingly.

“It’s all right, Dog,” she whispers. “I need this. I need all three of you, okay?”

At first, he seems unconvinced by her words. But she uses her lips and tongue to persuade him in other ways. As she sheaths his cock inside her wet mouth and starts to bob again, his eyes roll back into his head, and his growls of aggression transform into grunts of satisfaction.

I snort with amusement.

The “dog” who does his omega’s bidding.

Some Alpha.

Then again, I’m hardly any better. That succulent ass and ripe cunt are reeling me in. I stumble forward, and drop to my knees behind the omega, gripping her ass in two handfuls and spreading her even wider.

Even more of her scent wafts from that wide-open crevice. I groan with agony as my cock throbs painfully.

“By the Source, you smell good,” I growl. “So hot and so ripe.”

The omega answers with a moan. She comes up gasping and switches to the Farlander boy, giving his cock a turn, and he pants lustily, guiding her short-haired head with his hand.

“So ripe,” I mumble again.

I lean down and press my face in between those two tender mounds of flesh, inhaling deeply. The mixed smells of her sweat, cunt, and ass fills my nostrils and my lungs like a drug.

“I need to taste you,” I groan.

This is so wrong. This is no ordinary omega that I’m sniffing. She is an Outsider. My sworn enemy. Yet I find myself powerless to resist her. Never before have I smelled an omega’s heat that was this strong.

“Yes,” the omega gasps wetly as her mouth switches cocks again. “Do it, Kane. Eat me. Eat my pussy and ass.”

The plaintive tone of her voice pushes me over the edge. With a deep, involuntary roar, I shred her panties. I pause just long enough to press the ripped cloth to my face. It is saturated with days upon days of her scent, and it sends another pulse of blood into my dick. I swear if I get any harder, my cock will burst.

I cast the reeking cloth aside and plant my face hard against her backside and start licking, drinking her wet arousal straight from its wellspring.

Up front, the omega moans through a mouthful of cock.

I lick her up and down with long, hard strokes, running the flat of my tongue all over her pussy and crack and puckered anus until her entire backside is one wet mess of my saliva and her own dripping slick.

“Oh fuck, that feels so good,” she cries before switching back to the Farlander’s dick again.

Keeping her ass pried apart, I focus in on her wet slit. My tongue tip separates her folds. I tease at her tight entrance, and when I push my tongue inside, I realize that it’s going to be far too tight for my cock.

These stupid Alphas have done a terrible job of breaking this omega in.

Fuck it. I’ll show the bastards how it’s done then.

Giving her spread ass one last long lick, I raise myself up, and walk forward on my knees until my hard cock is prodding her ass. Gripping my shaft, I lever it up and down, working my helmet against her pussy and crack, slathering it with my spit and her arousal fluid.

“Is this what you need, little omega?” I growl. “A real Alpha cock?”

The other two Alphas tense up and snarl at my taunt, but the omega calms them again, quickly jumping her head back and forth between their dicks.

I press my cockhead against her puckered asshole and circle it, making her moan some more. Then I rub it down her spit-slick taint and along the groove of her parting. I work it up and down, spreading my sticky precum onto her slit.

“Is this what you need?” I purr.

“Mm-hm!”

The omega hums her assent with her lips wrapped around the Farlander's shaft. I glance at the dog. He gives me a hateful glare, clearly unhappy about sharing his omega.

He is possessive and protective of her. I can admire that in a way. She is no doubt a special omega.

But she's an Outsider too, I remind myself. She is tainted with their evil technology and their deceptive ways.

Still, perhaps I can enjoy her just this once.

I need to be careful though.

I mustn't lose control.

The omega tosses her head back and cries out as I stroke the head of my dick over her tender, erect clit, which is well lubricated with a mixture of many different slippery fluids. I thrust my hips, grinding my cock against her little bud until she is shivering with pleasure.

But when I work my finger between her petals to check her entrance, I find she is still much too constricted.

"Open up, little omega," I purr. "Open for your Alpha."

I stroke her clitoris even more roughly, and she starts to climax, gushing hot fluid onto my pelvis and balls. She sobs with pleasure as she brushes her cheeks against the other Alphas' cocks like a cat, smearing her own saliva onto her face.

"Oh fuck, don't stop," she breathes.

I lever my cock upward and press my tip to her hole. Her shuddering orgasm should have loosened her, but it's still not enough. I've never seen an omega that was this damn tight before.

My desperate need to be inside of her turns to rage.

"I said open, damn you!"

The omega cries out as the flat of my open hand spans her ass, jolting her body. The other Alphas bow up again, baring their teeth once more, but the omega soothes them again with her mouth.

"Open for your Alpha." I roar again with another sharp smack, this time on the other cheek.

"Make me," she gasps between slurps.

A wicked grin curls my mouth. So that's how she wants it.

I smack her again and again, jolting her body with each blow and reddening her tender skin to a beautiful rosy hue. The clap of flesh on flesh resounds off the ruined stone walls and out over the sunlit meadow.

Source, it feels good dominating an Outsider this way.

Humiliating her. Putting her in her place.

And the omega is enjoying her punishment too.

Or at least her body is enjoying it.

She drops her head to the ground now, pressing her face to the earth like she's praying. Her ass and wet cunt stick up in the

air like an offering for my manhood. I test her entrance again with my finger, and I find that it has opened ever so slightly.

Gripping my cock, I move into position.

“Oh fuck!” the omega sighs in a weak shivery voice as I press into her.

But her defiant little pussy still resists me. Part of me wants to force it inside her—to slam my cock home, splitting her in twain in the process, but something else makes me hold back.

My release, however, cannot wait any longer.

Pressing my pierced tip as far as it will fit into her narrow ring, I grip my shaft and begin to stroke, jacking myself off into her hole.

To my surprise, her tiny hand reaches back, fondling my dangling balls while I pump my fist.

“Yes,” she whispers. “Come inside my hole. Stain me with seed. Mark me.”

Too late, I realize what’s happening.

I’ve been duped.

Their plan is to make me spill my load, and then, when I’m weakened, the Alphas will attack. Fuck, how could I have been so foolish?

But the fact is, my brain has no choice in the matter. It’s raw instinct that rules me now, and I’m too far gone to resist. The sensations are overwhelming. The scent of the omega filling

my nostrils. The hot moisture of her too-tight cunt. Her small, dextrous hand massaging and milking my balls.

It's too late.

I let loose a roar as my balls tighten and my knot expands at the base of my cock. I can barely fit my tip inside the tight ring of the omega's entrance, and it occurs to me what would have happened if I had knotted inside her.

Source, it might have killed her.

Beneath my fingers, a sudden pulse rushes along the length of my shaft, and then it comes—my hot seed shooting straight into her opening.

“Yes,” the omega shouts, “Oh fuck, I can feel it, Kane.”

The omega whines and growls like an animal as my fluid paints her inner walls. Her body reacts, shuddering with pleasure. Her hole expands ever so slightly, allowing another fraction of my tip inside.

And I continue jacking furiously, pumping jet after jet of hot cum into her hole.

“Mark me,” the omega moans again and again like a mantra.

“Mark me, Kane, mark me...”

A feeling of lust more intense than anything I've experienced surges over me. The world around me swirls into oblivion.

I am deaf.

I am blind.

I am dead.

When my senses finally return, everything is in commotion. The Alphas are snarling. The omega is making a sound that could be crying. She is upright now, the supple curvature of her spine pressed against my front.

And as for me, I'm not making any sound at all.

My teeth are clamped on the gentle slope where the omega's neck meets her shoulder. My sharp canine fangs have punctured her skin. The coppery tang of blood warms my tongue.

With a grunt, I pull back and stare in horror at the mark I have made on her flesh.

What have I done?

I have marked her.

I have marked an Outsider.

Source forgive me.

Down below, my cock spurts a few residual ropes onto the grass as my balls finally deplete themselves of their payload. The muscles of my legs feel numb and weak. I topple backward onto the ground, gripping the omega, dragging her back with me so that she ends up sprawled supine on top of me.

“Dog!” she pants. “Now!”

Just as I thought. Their plan all along was to weaken me so they could attack. I only have myself to blame for this.

As the Farlander looks on, Dog leaps forward with a snarl, and my sluggish muscles try to tense up in anticipation of his attack.

But it's not me that takes the brunt of his aggression.

It's the omega.

CHAPTER 20: SLOANE

Dog throws himself on top of me with a vicious snarl, and I wonder exactly what I have unleashed.

His mouth and hands seem to be everywhere at once—my mouth, my neck, my breasts and between my legs where my hole is running with the seed of the other Alpha warrior whom I'm sprawled on top of like a hard, living mattress.

Kane groans beneath me, listless from his expenditure. Dog, on the other hand, is taking me in a whirlwind of furious lust, and he's holding nothing back.

His animalistic aggression frightens me, and those two words, "*stand down*," are hovering on the tip of my tongue.

But I choke them back.

This needs to be done. It is all part of my plan, and now that we've started, it's necessary to see it through. Kane's mark burns like fire on my shoulder. Before we're through here, two more marks will be added to my flesh.

But that's just a justification.

The truth is, I need this.

I need this more than I've ever needed anything. My body is crying out to be claimed and marked by all three of these Alphas. Every cell and molecule of my being is screaming to be shared and used roughly.

To be broken.

To be ruined.

To be stained with Alpha seed inside and out.

And that's exactly what my body is going to get. But it's not going to be easy. It's not going to be gentle. Ever since my body started changing, Dog's instinct has been to fuck me and breed me. He's held back because of his conditioning and his commitment to the mission.

But he's not holding back anymore.

I toss my head back against Kane's thick shoulder and cry out as Dog ravages my tender body. His strong hands squeeze and knead my flesh. He pinches my erect nipples between the pads of his fingers, bringing my pleasure right up to the precipice of pain.

"Oh God," I scream over and over again. It's as if I can't form any other sentence. My mind is overloaded with sensory stimuli.

"Sloane," Dog growls against my throat. It's not that soft, soothing purr from before. It's the sound of a starving predator devouring its prey. "Omega..."

His mouth works over my throat, sucking my hot flesh so hard I'd swear he's trying to draw blood. Each rough kiss lingers with a scalding pain. He nips at me. His sharp fangs graze my neck and clip the lobes of my ears.

"Mark me," I gasp between heaving breaths. "Mark me, Dog..."

But he's not ready to mark me just yet.

His hips are nestled tightly between my spread thighs, and his long, throbbing erection is gliding along my vulva, smearing the mixture of semen and arousal fluid that is oozing out of me.

Dog's head nudges against my opening. There is a pressure as he starts to push.

"Wait," I pant as I realize what's about to happen. "I can't. You're too big."

His girthy cock is definitely going to split me in two.

"Dog, stand..."

But I don't finish. I don't complete the command. Something inside makes me hold my tongue.

Dog thrusts into me hard, sheathing his massive pole balls-deep inside me.

"Oh fuck!" My shout bounces off the ruined walls around us.

The tendons of my inner pelvis strain to accommodate his girth. The blunt club of his head presses against my back wall. I whine at the way he is stretching my hole. I can't believe it. He's inside me—all the way inside me.

Underneath, Kane steadies me with his hands. He purrs at my ear, and the sound melts the tension from my body.

The load that Kane spurted inside just a minute ago, along with the other doses Dog and Truk gave me in the previous days, have changed my body, allowing my entrance to do the impossible and accept Dog's thick penis.

“Good omega,” Dog rumbles on top of me.

Dog starts to move inside of me, fucking me with his hard dick. His thrusts are lubricated with a mixture of Kane’s load churned with my own thick cervical fluid, and his cock glides easily, despite the tightness of my channel.

This is really happening.

I’m getting fucked.

And I’m getting fucked hard.

My naked, sweat-slick body jolts on top of Kane’s muscular torso as Dog slams into me again and again, using his cock like a battering ram. Those rough impacts break down an invisible dam inside me, and when it crumbles, a flood of intense pleasure courses through my body.

“Yes,” I scream. “Oh fuck yes!”

I scream so loud and long I’m sure the Alphas in the city can hear me, but I don’t give a fuck. I know that all of this is being recorded on my neural chip so those voyeuristic scientists can spy on our activities, but I don’t care about that either.

The force of the orgasm is too strong to care about anything else.

My muscles tense and relax in rolling waves of ecstasy. My toes curl. My fingernails bite into the meat of Dog’s muscular back, and he grunts like a rutting beast on top of me.

“Fuck me,” I shout over and over again. “Fuck me, Dog. Fuck me...”

And fuck me he does, ravaging me with his plunging cock while Kane hold's me steady on top of him. I'm stuffed and sandwiched between two brutal Alphas. I should be ashamed, and I'm sure I will be later, but for now all I can do is give myself over to the hurricane of sensations.

But still I need more.

Truk is leaning against the broken wall, gazing down at me with a sexy smirk on his face. His fist is slowly stroking his magnificent cock as he watches me get pounded by his new comrade.

I reach out one hand toward the wild, blond Alpha, beckoning him.

"Let me suck it," I moan, my voice hiccuping with the jolts of Dog's rough fucking. "Please, I need to taste you."

Truk grins and bobs his hard cock enticingly above me.

"Is this what you want?" he chuckles.

I pout at him.

"Truk," I whine. "Don't tease me, please."

He gives in, stepping from the wall and kneeling beside my face. I lick my lips as I stare at the glistening, plump head. Right now it looks like the most delicious thing I've ever seen.

With one hand clamped around my neck, Kane supports my head as I lean up, and Truk slides his dick between my open lips. The blond Alpha rolls his hips, fucking his dick in and out of my mouth while Dog fucks my pussy.

So filthy. So wrong.

I pull my mouth off of Truk's pulsating dick with a dirty slurp.

"Dog," I gasp wetly, "Don't knot inside me, please. I can't take it."

It's true. The incredible circumference of his cock is already stretching me to my very limits. If that knot were to expand inside me, I think it might just burst me open.

Whether Dog comprehends my request in his frenzied, feral state, I can't tell. He certainly gives me no signs, and the pace of the intense fucking that he's giving my poor little pussy doesn't slacken one bit.

I'm tempted, once again, to use those magic words—*stand down*—but I'm worried that would make him stop completely, and I don't want that.

I want him to finish. I want him to come inside my hole and mark me with his fangs.

"Please," I moan as another impending orgasm shivers my voice. "Your knot. I can't..."

Dog tosses back his head and howls, long and loud, the veins popping out along the straining tendons of his powerful neck. His cock pulses inside me, and more sticky warmth floods my insides.

And I feel something hard and swollen thumping against the outside of my vulva with each pump.

Thank God, his knot is on the outside. My words got through to him, and he didn't knot inside me.

I realize how much restraint that took on his part and I am grateful.

But I'm even more grateful for the intense, shuddering climax that wracks my body as Dog fills me up with his seed. His fluid churns and mixes with what is left of the massive load that Kane already spurted into me.

Two Alphas have come inside me now.

This is beyond risky.

I tell myself it's for the mission. I tell myself it's for the plan. But I can't lie to my own body. It knows exactly what it needs.

It needs hot seed. It needs virile Alpha fluid.

With a wild canine sound, Dog chomps his mouth around my shoulder. I cry out in pain as he brands me with his fangs, placing his mark on my flesh next to Kane's.

I gasp again as Dog's cock slips out, and he rolls off me exhausted. My body is weak and trembling from his rough use and multiple intense orgasms. I could almost fall asleep just like this on top of Kane, marked and filled by two Alphas.

But I'm not finished yet.

A pair of powerful and calloused hands hoist my body high off the ground, limp as a broken doll. Long silken hair brushes my skin. A hungry face rubs my flesh, snuffling me and lapping

my sweat as he carries my dead weight over to the broken wall.

“Truk,” I mumble.

The feral Alpha leans me back against the wall. His strong hands grip my butt to support me as his hard, rounded cockhead nudges against my entrance which is overflowing with seed and my own thick fluid. The mixture falls out of me in thick globs and splatters on the ground.

“Please,” I whimper. “Be gentle, I—“

But Truk isn't gentle. He's a wild one, a stray, and doesn't have Dog's thorough conditioning. Lost as he is in his fever of lust, his passion whipped into a frenzy by the other two Alphas, my pleas fall on deaf ears.

Truk takes me, and he takes me roughly.

With a hard thrust of his pelvis, his long, hot cock penetrates upward into my already thoroughly used pussy. There is a wet sound as more sticky fluid spills around his shaft, making room for his thick meat.

“Oh fuck,” I moan weakly as he plunges into me again and again, fucking me every bit as hard as Dog did.

There's nothing I can do. My arms are too weak even to steady myself on his muscular shoulders. It doesn't matter. Truk is strong enough to bear my weight as he uses my limp body like his own personal fuck toy, all the while grunting and growling like a horny animal.

What little breath I have left is taken away when he seizes my mouth in a bruising kiss.

His tongue slips inside my mouth and rolls against mine. He is penetrating me above and below.

When he finally breaks the kiss, I'm left gasping desperately, too weak to even beg for mercy from this savage Alpha.

He gyrates his hips, stirring his cock around my insides as if he is trying to core my already stretched hole even wider. He is applying hard pressure to every inch of my inner tissues—the walls of my channel conforming tightly around his shaft, the tender lump on my front wall that is tingling with the onset of yet another explosive orgasm, and my cervix, which is slathering even more of its thick cream onto his blunt head.

“Good,” Truk groans in a voice that sounds half mindless with lust. “Feels so good.”

It feels good for me too. In fact, it feels amazing. But my pleasure is seasoned with more than a dash of pain as his too-big cock stretches my opening and the rough rockcrete wall scuffs and abrades my back.

And then there are the two searing marks that Kane and Dog made on my flesh.

Now it's Truk's turn to complete the process.

When it's all done, my body will be owned and shared by this motley trio of Alphas. Theirs to protect and theirs to use as they please.

Before that happens, though, I must make one request of the wild Alpha who is ravaging me against this wall.

“Truk.” My words come out weak and breathless. “Truk, don’t knot me. I can’t take it.”

His thrusting quickens. His grunts become louder. His muscles striate with tension in preparation for his oncoming release.

“Knot,” he growls.

Again, I’m reminded, Truk is not like Dog. I can’t command him to stand down. I don’t have any safe word to protect me from his brutal ravishment. And right now, the human part of his brain is switched off, and his raw animal instinct is running the show.

He’s going to knot me, and I’m going to have to take it, whether I’m ready or not.

I cry out one more time, my tone high-pitched with panic.

“Truk please, I—“

My words are cut off by a sharp yelp of surprise, my eyes, drooping with exhaustion until now, fly open in shock as the hard knot at the base of his cock expands inside me.

“Oh fuck,” I moan.

The pressure of his knot is too intense to bear, and yet I have to bear it. My instinct is to pull away, but if I tried to do that now, I’m sure it would rip me apart.

We are locked together, meat inside of meat.

Mercifully, every bit of pain is erased by the pulverizing orgasm that crashes through me an instant later. The climax is too much for my exhausted body to handle, and I nearly pass out from the sensation. I'm only vaguely conscious of Truk's bestial roar and my own shrill screams of fright and pleasure. My mind is only dimly aware of the rush of sticky heat as Truk's cock pulses inside me, adding his seed to that of the other two Alphas.

The entire world seems to disappear, replaced only by darkness, bliss, and exhaustion.

Truk's teeth are what bring me snapping back to consciousness.

I bark in shocked pain when his fangs break the skin with a venomous burn as he lays his mark on my skin alongside Dog's and Kane's.

Truk looks me in the face, his eyes burning with intense emotion.

"I'm sorry little one," he whispers. "I didn't want to hurt you."

He brushes his cheek against me like a cat. He ever so tenderly kisses the burning brand left by his teeth on my flesh. The way he can switch from rough and brutal to gentle and soft is a total mindfuck.

Taking care not to pull at our knotted joining, Truk steps back from the wall and lowers himself to the ground. He lies back, holding me pierced and sprawled on top of his sweat-slick body.

“Good omega,” he purrs again at my ear.

The deep, warm sound of his voice sends nice shivers all the way down to my toes and back again. I lie my head on his chest and listen to the rapid thumping of his heart.

For a moment, I forget all about the mission. I forget all about the web of deceit and survival I’ve been weaving. All that matters is this.

I feel so safe, so treasured, and so thoroughly sated by my Alpha mates.

But the moment is ended by a dark shadow.

At first I think it is another cloud passing overhead, but when I tilt my face and glance upward, I see it is Kane. He is towering over me like a giant, blocking out the sunset. His pierced cock is still half hard and bouncing with his pulse as it declines.

“You tricked me,” he rumbles.

Ringed by the sun, his face is in silhouette. I can’t see his expression, but I can sense the waves of anger vibrating off his tense body.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper. “I—“

“You tricked me,” he repeats. His voice is as cold as murder.

“I didn’t mean to trick you Kane!” I blurt.

“Liar,” he snaps. He begins pacing in a slow circle around me and Truk where we lie heaving in the grass. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it? To make me mark you, along with

these other two Alphas. Now we're bound together by the mark, so I won't be able to rid myself of you."

"Is that what you want?" I ask. "To rid yourself of me? I thought you were going to help me. To help us..."

Kane snarls with rage.

"Oh I'm going to help you," he says with a cruel sneer. "I'm going to help you learn how to behave. Now that you are my marked omega, it's my privilege—no, it's my duty—to discipline you."

He drops to his knees beside me and Truk. His muscles are shiny with sweat, and his face is red with anger.

"Discipline?" I whisper.

"That's right, little omega. It's time for you to learn what happens when you lie to your Alpha."

There is a whoosh of air and a sharp smack as the flat of his hand connects with my bare ass, scalding my skin. I yelp as much from embarrassment as from pain.

I'm having my behind spanked by one Alpha while another is knotted inside of me.

"Stop it!" I protest, "You can't do this!"

"Oh I can," Kane growls. "And I must. It's my *duty* as your Alpha."

Another loud smack bounces off the stone walls as his hand smacks my bottom again.

“Motherfucker,” Truk snarls underneath me. “What the fuck are you doing?”

He starts to get up, but it’s hard to move with our bodies tied together with a knot of flesh. And to make matters worse, my body is responding to Kane’s spanking in ways that are as inappropriate as they are unexpected.

It’s making me hot. Very hot.

After being fucked and filled by the seed of three Alphas, I wouldn’t have thought it possible to be more aroused. And yet, here we are.

Kane’s palm smacks against my burning tush a third time, and I come again. Pleasure ripples from my core, and my opening cinches tighter around Truk’s cock, causing him to squirt even more of his seemingly endless supply of semen into my depths. His eyes roll back white and he collapses back onto the grass with a groan.

“Oh God,” I moan through my shameful climax. “Please. You have to stop...”

But Kane ignores my pleas. Again, he smacks my wet, sticky bottom. And again. And again.

I clutch Truk’s shuddering body, anticipating yet another blow, but this time it doesn’t fall.

Instead another shadow passes overhead, much swifter than a cloud. It is Dog. He leaps over me and Truk and catches Kane’s arm with a snarl of challenge.

“Leave her be, Alpha,” he barks.

He is furious—veins bulging and tendons straining. Spit flecks his lips as he speaks, and his eyes are bloodshot and wild.

Kane bares his teeth, and they flash white inside his darkly silvered beard.

“Or what?” Kane snarls back. “By what right do you challenge me, Dog?” He speaks his challengers name in a voice dripping with disdain. “The omega is *mine* now. She belongs to *me*. She’s mine to punish as I see fit.”

Kane wrenches his arm free from Dog’s grip, but Dog positions his body to block me from any more blows.

“*Ours*,” Dog hisses in a low voice. “She belongs to all of us now, Kane.”

He sweeps his hand over the three marks that are still stinging on my skin like hot brands. Kane just stares at the marks, his face slowly twisting into a mask of rage.

“That’s right, Kane.” Dog continues. “Like it or not, we’re bound as a pack now. We are bound by our omega, and we all share in our responsibility to protect her.”

“Fuck!”

Kane whirls away with a roar that seems to rumble the very ground. He stalks off toward the ruined wall and throws his fist into it breaking loose a chunk of stone.

It’s only then that I realize how much he was holding back when he spanked me. He could have broken me if he had wanted.

“Fuck!”

He strikes the wall again and again, cracking the rockcrete and busting loose more chunks and shards of stone with each blow until his knuckles are bloody and raw.

At last, his anger spent, he stands with his back to us, shoulders working up and down with each contraction and expansion of his massive lungs. The rest of us just stare at him silently.

“Fine,” he grunts at last. “So be it. It is the way of the Source.”

He picks up his leather loincloth from the ground and fastens it at his hip, then he turns to face us again. The shadow of the wall cuts his bearded face into two halves, one dark and one light. His expression is placid, but his one sunlit eye is blazing with fury.

He nods toward where Truk and I are still connected.

“When the knot’s undone, get dressed,” he says coldly. “I’ll take you into the ruins.”

PART THREE:

THE RUINS

CHAPTER 21: TRUK

By the Source, I have dreamed about this all my life, and now it is finally happening.

We are entering the city ruins.

All four of us—Kane in the lead, me and Dog behind, the three of us forming a protective triangle around Sloane in the middle.

The monolithic skyscrapers tower ahead of us, blocking out the sun. According to the stories, they were built over a century ago, before the big change. Now these man-made structures are gradually being reclaimed by the earth as their vertical stone walls are covered over with crawling vines.

High up, glass window panes wink in the sunlight amid the dense leaves of the enwrapping foliage. Other windows, their glass long since smashed out, stare darkly out from the walls like dead eyes. A cloud of white birds weaves in and out of the verdant, overgrown towers.

At first glance, the entire city appears to be deserted, but my nose tells me otherwise.

There are hundreds of Alphas here. Maybe even thousands. I can smell their collective scent wafting on the cool wind that is blowing through the canyons of the city.

Kane is leading the way ahead of us, his steel piercings and steel-gray mane catching the light. As we near the edge of the

city, he cocks his head back and lets out a long, sharp whistle at the highest edge of audibility.

“Look,” Sloane gasps.

But I have already seen them. First, a few shadows moving within the busted out windows of the ruined buildings. Then other figures at street level stepping out of alleyways and climbing up from grates and open holes that connect to the deep, underground bowels of the city.

Alphas—several dozen of them. Many are armed with knives and clubs. All of them are ready for a fight.

At Kane’s signal, however, they all stand down.

“See, we were right,” Dog says, pitching his voice low so only Sloane and I can hear. “He was planning to ambush us as soon as we arrived.”

But now, it seems, that ambush has been called off.

The emerging Alphas are looking on in confusion, they are wondering about the change of plans no doubt. And they are probably wondering what the hell a half-breed like me is doing in this place.

Most of them glare at me hatefully. Some of them even curl back their lips in a threatening snarl. They don’t want me here.

When their eyes land on Sloane, however, their attitude shifts to outright shock.

They see her three fresh marks, and they are beginning to understand what that means.

She has been mutually claimed by the three of us. By their laws, that makes her our shared omega. And by extension, that means that we are now a pack, Kane, Dog, and me.

It is now our duty to protect Sloane, and that includes Kane.

It certainly complicates things.

As the group of curious Alphas close around us, Kane gestures to an adolescent Alpha who is staring at Sloane with a look of blatant infatuation. When Kane barks an order, the boy snaps back to his senses.

“Go fetch Addom and his pack,” Kane calls. “The omega too. The one called Lily. Have them meet us in the great temple. We have much to discuss.”

The adolescent nods and rushes off down the overgrown street, disappearing into the shadows.

CHAPTER 22: SLOANE

Kane leads us to the ruins of a cathedral somewhere deep inside the center of the city.

“Wow, look at this place,” I say to Dog as we step inside.

Even though my voice is pitched low, the sound echoes and bounces around the soaring stone walls that support the high, arched ceiling. After a hundred years without maintenance, the roof has started to crumble away in places, allowing brilliant, slanting columns of sunshine to illuminate the dark space.

Around the sides are windows of colored glass, many of which are broken, providing an entrance for the creeping green vines that seem to grow everywhere in this place.

I am startled by a flutter of wings overhead—a small flock of pale doves disturbed by our entrance. They fly away through one of the many holes in the ceiling.

Dog’s eyes are darting everywhere, but I can tell he’s less concerned with enjoying the ancient architecture and more focused on sussing out any possible dangers.

Truk, on the other hand, is gazing at everything with an expression of raw wonder. He’s been on cloud nine ever since we came into the city.

And surly Kane, well, he’s all business of course.

More Alphas and a few omegas file in behind us, curious to watch the proceedings and check out the strange Outsiders

who have turned up unexpectedly. Other Alphas cluster in the broken out windows, and yet more perch overhead in the thick rafters.

“I don’t like this,” Dog rumbles in a low voice.

He’s right to be nervous. We’re completely surrounded and totally outnumbered. But surely if the Alphas meant to take us by force, they would have done so already.

Nevertheless, I slip my hand inside Dog’s much bigger one, enjoying the comfort it gives.

Kane continues forward until we reach the altar area at the front, then he pauses and waits, arms folding across his bulging chest. Not sure what else to do, the rest of us stop too.

“What are we waiting for?” I ask after a minute.

Kane doesn’t answer. He doesn’t even look at me. He just stands there, stock still, like some ancient statue. The only sign that he’s even alive is the ticking of his jaw.

He’s annoyed.

Scratch that, he’s frigging pissed.

I can’t blame him. I still feel bad for tricking him before, but it had to be done.

Since he’s stonewalling me now, there’s nothing left to do but wait and see what happens. I face the gathered Alphas who are looking on from the windows, rafters, and haphazardly scattered pews.

All eyes are on me right now.

I give Dog's hand a squeeze, and his massive warm body draws closer to mine. Truk also senses my discomfort, and he places one callused hand on my shoulder. I'm glad these guys are here. I couldn't do this alone. But with both of them here, I feel protected.

In fact, in a weird way, I'm glad Kane is here too, even though I know he hates me.

There is a bustle of activity near the entrance of the cathedral. The crowd parts to let someone through.

A deep voice thunders through the vast interior of the cathedral.

“Kane! What is going on here?”

A pack of three Alphas stride down the central aisle. They are pierced and dressed in primitive leather loincloths similar to Kane's attire. In their midst, protectively surrounded by their three hulking bodies, is another much smaller figure. I catch a brief flash of wavy auburn hair, and my heart skips.

It's her. It's Lily.

We have found our target.

Suddenly, the advancing Alphas halt in unison. The one in front, a hulking warrior with a mane of silvered hair, flares his nostrils as he tests the air. His eyes fall on Dog, and his body immediately shifts into combat mode. His muscles ripple with tension, and his fangs flash white in a threatening snarl. His companions follow suit, and all three of them form a tight, defensive triangle around Lily.

“You!” the leader growls. “Is this some kind of Outsider sorcery?”

Lily peeks out from behind the protective Alpha, eyes wide with shock and fear.

“Bishop?” she gasps. “But how?”

Bishop. I remember now what Dr. Frostgrave told us when he first introduced Dog in the briefing room. He said that Dog was cloned from the cells of a dead soldier named Bishop. Apparently Lily and her Alphas met that person, and not on good terms.

Perhaps they are even the same Alphas who killed Dog’s predecessor.

And if I don’t do something to cool down the situation, it seems like history might repeat itself.

A major commotion has overtaken the cathedral. In response to the Alphas’ threatening behavior, Dog’s body shifts into a fighting stance. A moment later Kane starts growling at Dog. Apparently he’s siding with his tribesmen.

If I don’t do something soon, there’s going to be a big fight.

Before there’s a chance for violence to erupt, I leap forward, placing my body between Dog and Kane, and I shout at the top of my lungs, sending my cry echoing through the long nave of the cathedral.

“Stop! Please listen.”

The growling subsides, but the tension does not. All of the Alphas still have their hackles up, and I know it won't take much for this whole situation to go sideways.

"Listen, please. This isn't who you think he is. Dog is a clone. I don't know what bad blood there was between you and Bishop, but Dog is a different person."

"A clone?" Lily looks Dog up and down. "Of course. It only makes sense. Think about it, guys. The last time we saw Bishop, he was mangled beyond repair, but this guy doesn't have a scar on him."

She pauses and gives me a quizzical look.

"Wait, did you just say his name is Dog?"

"Is there a problem with that?" Dog mutters under his breath beside me.

"What is a clone?" The lead Alpha growls, still not convinced that Dog is not an enemy.

"It's like a replica of a person made from their genes."

"Genes?"

"Like an identical twin," she explains. "But instead of being created by mating, this man was made by scientists in a lab. He may look and smell like Bishop, but he's a different person."

The lead Alpha sneers, but he relaxes a little, still keeping his mass positioned in front of Lily.

"Like I said. Outsider sorcery."

Lily silently shakes her head and pinches the bridge of her nose as she gives up on explaining further.

It seems like the threat of an all out fight has been avoided, at least for now. Kane and Dog both assume a more relaxed posture, as do the other Alphas. Still, the thrum of tension remains in the air.

The lead Alpha straightens and begins to speak.

“Let us parley, then,” he booms. “Kane, perhaps you can shed some light on what is going on here.”

Kane bows his head toward this Alpha in a sign of respect.

Is this guy Kane’s boss? Perhaps he’s the chief of the whole community.

“Addom,” Kane answers, his deep baritone voice easily filling the cathedral. “Thank you for coming here with your pack.”

He gestures toward me, Dog, and Truk with a wave of his arm.

“We have some...unusual visitors. I felt it was of the utmost importance that you meet them right away.”

Addom, the leader, looks all of us up and down silently for a moment. His gaze catches on the triple marks on my neck, and I notice his eyes widen with surprise as he realizes what that means.

His eyes pass to Dog, then to Truk, and finally back to Kane.

“A very peculiar pack, my old friend. Very peculiar indeed.”

“No!” Kane snarls immediately, his voice echoing about the spacious chamber. Then he restrains himself and says in a

more controlled voice. “We are not a pack.”

Addom looks at Kane thoughtfully, seemingly unfazed by the Alpha’s sudden outburst. He gestures toward me.

“Is that not your mark upon the omega’s neck?” he asks calmly. “Situated there between the other two in the pack-leader’s position?”

Kane drops his bearded chin to his bare chest.

“It is, my chief. But I was deceived.”

Addom quirks one quizzical eyebrow.

“Deceived into marking an omega?”

“Aye.”

“But how can that be? Surely you know that these things are guided by the Will of the Source, old friend. I fail to see how an Alpha could be deceived into marking an omega that he did not mean to claim.”

Kane opens his mouth to speak, but he cannot find the words. Addom raises one hand to silence him.

“Be still, Kane. As I see it, there is no cause for unhappiness here. For too long you have been a loner, stalking the Farlands in search of Outsiders to kill, only returning to the center to recharge your soul in the presence of the Source.”

“I had good cause, my chief.”

This time, it is another Alpha who speaks. This one is standing behind Lily, his hand protectively placed on her shoulder. His appearance is terrifying, even more so than Kane. His head is

shorn all the way down to a scalp that is criss-crossed with innumerable scars, as is the rest of his body. His face is covered in a thick beard that shakes as he speaks.

“I too once felt as you do, Kane,” the Alpha says. “I loved Talia too. After she was killed, my heart burned with vengeance. But I have come to understand that not all Outsiders are evil.”

Kane growls quietly.

“I’m afraid I cannot forgive my sister’s death as easily as you, Hasker old friend.” The last two words are dripping with sarcasm.

The one named Hasker tenses with anger, but Addom motions for him to be still. Then he gestures toward me again.

“Kane, by your leave, may I parley with your omega.”

“She’s not mine,” Kane grumbles.

When Addom speaks again, he speaks rapidly, and his voice carries a sharp tone of reproach.

“As the leader of the Alphas who dwell among the ruins, I take our traditions very seriously. The omega bears your mark, Kane. By our traditions, she is yours.”

That does it. I don’t like how this guy is talking about me like I’m somebody’s piece of property. Especially not someone like Kane who hates my guts. I decide it’s time to speak out.

“Hey, I’m right here, buddy,” I shout. “Don’t you think it’s a little rude to talk like that?”

Dog squeezes my hand. “Sloane, what are you doing?”

I know he’s not scared for his own sake. He’s only concerned about keeping me out of trouble. But I don’t care. I didn’t bust my butt in the Marine academy just to have some Alpha talk about me like a piece of luggage.

Kane, meanwhile, turns his head and glares at me.

“Watch your mouth, Outsider. Addom is the leader of our people. Show some respect.”

“I’ll show him some respect when he shows some to me,” I reply. Then, crossing my arms and squaring up, I face Addom. “You don’t need Kane’s or anyone else’s permission to speak to me. Now, what do you want to know?”

A collective gasp rushes through the gathered crowd of Alphas, but I notice a knowing smile on Lily’s face.

Addom looks at me sternly, and it takes everything I’ve got not to wilt under his intense glare. But after a moment, he tosses his head back and the cathedral fills with laughter that seems to shake the foundations of the building.

“Kane, old friend, it seems you’ve found yourself an omega whose toughness matches your own. She reminds me of another intractable omega I know.”

Behind him, a light blush touches Lily’s smiling face.

“All right, Outsider,” Addom says, taking a few slow strides forward. “Speak your business then. Why have you come here to our homeland?”

I take a deep breath.

This is the moment I've been planning for. The whole mission depends on what happens next. But now I find myself at a loss for words.

I decide to just come right out with it.

"Lily, I'm Lance Corporal Sloane. I've been sent here by SynerGen to rescue you."

Lily laughs.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," she says. "I'm sure you've gone through a great deal of trouble to get here. But I'm not in need of saving. I'm happy here, and I'm not going anywhere."

Shit. I figured that would happen. Even Dr. Frostgrave mentioned that the target would harbor delusions of wanting to stay. A kind of advanced Stockholm syndrome.

Now that I can see her face to face, however, I'm wondering if it really is a delusion. She seems genuinely happy in this place.

And she looks like a very different person from the one shown in her corporate ID photograph. Sure, all of the same facial features are there, along with her distinctive auburn hair. But now her face and body are decorated with tribal piercings to match her Alphas, and she's dressed just like one of them, wearing nothing but a simple loincloth, and apparently unashamed of her naked breasts.

She begins to step forward, but one of the Alphas stops her. He's the youngest looking one with long, raven-black hair and skin as pale as marble.

“Lily, be careful.”

She touches his hand with a loving smile.

“It’s okay, Kadmon,” she says. “She’s not going to hurt me. Besides, she’s unarmed. And I have something important to ask her.”

Addom nods, and the young Alpha, Kadmon, reluctantly releases his grip. Lily steps forward with an imploring look.

“Sloane, you’ve come here from the city hive. What has been happening there? Has anyone received my messages about this place? About the coverup? Is anyone doing anything about it?”

She’s speaking so quickly I can barely keep up. I don’t know what the heck she’s talking about, but it’s clearly very important to her.

“Your messages?” I ask, shaking my head. “*What* messages?”

Lily’s face drops, and for an instant she almost looks like she’s going to cry, but she recovers herself. She takes another step forward. She is now several paces ahead of her Alphas.

When she speaks again, her voice is on the verge of cracking.

“You mean nobody has been receiving my transmissions? About the Cataclysm? About Seraph and the suppression field?”

I shrug and shake my head again.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re—“

I gasp as a sudden, unexpected tension seizes my muscles. My voice catches in my throat. For a split second, my body grows

rigid, and a searing pain stabs at the base of my skull.

Lily stares at me with a concerned look.

“Sloane?”

To my horror, I find my body acting against my will, moving with a strange, almost robotic precision. It is like I’m possessed—like I’ve become a puppet, and some demonic force is controlling my motions. The sensation is terrifying, and my stomach churns inside me.

With frightening quickness, I unwillingly raise my leg, and of its own accord my hand darts to grab the thin, steel dagger concealed in my boot. Another fraction of a second, and the weapon is drawn, its deadly razor edge flashing like cold lightning as it catches the light.

“No,” I gasp breathlessly.

What is happening to me? Why am I doing this?

Time seems to stretch out into slow motion. Lily’s eyes grow wide with fright, and her face blanches. In the background, I’m dimly aware of her Alphas moving forward to protect her, but they are too far away. The blade is already poised to be thrown. One quick flick of my arm and the blade will have flown and struck home.

I want to close my eyes, but the lids won’t shut. They are focused with laser intensity on their target, which is right between Lily’s breasts.

My muscles twitch. My arm begins its throw.

But at the last instant, a massive fist engulfs my wrist,
arresting my swing and squeezing with a crushing pressure.

At the same time, a powerful arm coils around my neck,
muscles flexing, cutting off the blood to my brain.

Warm breath tickles my ear.

“Sloane, I’m sorry.”

It’s Dog.

His voice is the last thing I hear.

The knife drops harmlessly from my crimped hand, but I don’t
even hear it hit the floor before the world folds in on itself, and
all that remains is endless darkness, silent and cold.

CHAPTER 23: SLOANE

I wake with a start.

At first I think I'm still inside the cathedral—there is the same kind of eerie reverberation in the air that tells me this is a vast empty space. But I soon realize this place is different.

Much different.

It is an enormous domed room, dark and cavernous, with high-tech metal paneling all over the rounded ceiling and walls. I glance down at my body and see that I'm completely naked, lying on some sort of pallet. The air is cold, but my body is beaded with sweat.

I try to sit up, but my muscles are weak and uncoordinated.

“Come quick,” someone calls out, “She’s awake.”

It's Dog's voice. The last sound I heard before I blacked out, and the first one I hear upon regaining consciousness. His voice is stern and militaristic as ever, but there is a clear note of concern.

As I struggle to sit up, his strong arm slides under my shoulders, supporting me. He places his other hand on my chest, over my heart.

“Easy,” he whispers. “Just relax, Sloane. Don't strain yourself.”

I open my lips to try and ask what the hell is going on, but my mouth is dry, and the only sound that comes out is a rasping

breath.

“She needs water,” Dog says.

I realize that he is talking to Truk, who is kneeling on the other side of me. His ugly-handsome face framed with golden blond hair is a welcome and comforting sight. He nods and runs off, presumably to fetch some water for me.

“Where...am I?” I croak.

Dog simply shushes me gently and lays me back onto the pallet.

There is a patter of running feet, and soon another figure leans over me, long strands of wavy auburn hair hanging down around an open, honest face filled with concern.

It’s Lily.

In an instant, the memory of everything that happened comes rushing back like a flood. The tense meeting in the cathedral. The mysterious things she was saying about SynerGen and the Cataclysm.

And of course, the way that I lost control of my body and tried to kill Lily, the very woman I was sent to rescue.

I wheeze and cough as I try to apologize—to explain that I didn’t want to hurt her, that I wasn’t acting of my own volition.

It’s lucky that Dog was there to stop me.

But Lily is not upset with me. In fact, she seems just as concerned for my wellbeing as everyone else. She drops to her

knees beside me and gently holds me down to keep me from struggling.

“Please, Sloane,” she says. “Just relax, okay? You’ve been through a lot, and your body needs to rest.”

Truk returns with a tin cup spilling over with clear water. He guides it to my dry lips. The fluid splashes into my mouth, cool and refreshing, and the effect is almost immediate. It loosens my tongue and soothes my parched throat.

Once I have swallowed a few gulps, I’m able to speak again.

“Lily, I’m sorry. Please understand, I didn’t mean to attack you. Something took control of my body. I don’t know how to explain it, but you have to believe me.”

She smiles.

“I believe you, Sloane,” she says.

“You do?”

She nods. Well, that was easier than expected.

“Not only that,” Lily goes on, “But I actually *can* explain it. Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

I don’t know where the hell I’d go. I can barely even sit up.

She runs off, and her footsteps echo lightly in this big, dark chamber.

“Here,” Truk says, offering me the cup again. “Drink more.”

I accept the water gratefully, finishing off the cup, and wiping the spills from my chin. Truk darts off for a refill.

Okay, it's time to figure out where the hell we are.

Despite Dog's protests, I finally manage to drag myself up into a sitting position. That's when I realize that Kane is here too, crouching nearby. From his expression, I would swear that he's relieved to see that I'm okay, but he immediately looks away, resuming his usual scowl instead.

Nevertheless, I'm glad that he is here.

I'm glad that all of my Alphas are here.

It's funny to think of them like that—as *my* Alphas—but somehow it just feels natural.

I take a moment to blink the sleep out of my eyes and look around this cavernous chamber.

The place is one enormous circular room, nearly the size of a stadium, with a rounded dome curving overhead. The floor, like the walls and ceiling, is covered with dark metal panelling. Thick insulated cables and conduits snake along the ground, converging toward the massive structure situated in the center of the room.

“What is *that*?” I gasp.

“That's the Source,” Dog replies.

That's the Source? I had heard Truk and Kane mention that before, but I only assumed that they were referring to some abstract concept—a kind of deity in the religion of the Alphas. I never expected it to be a physical object.

It is a massive device that dominates the center of this enormous space. Anyway, I *think* it's a device. It is like a huge sphere covered in dark cones.

Even more strangely, I notice it seems to be emitting a deep humming noise at the very lowest limit of audibility. It's not even a sound so much as it is a feeling—a felt vibration deep in the very marrow of my bones.

“The Source,” I whisper.

Whatever it does, it is clearly important. The floor of the place is dotted here and there with other groups of Alphas and omegas. Some of them seem to be meditating or praying. Others are making slow laps around the Source. Yet others seem to be convalescents like me, lying on crude pallets surrounded by their companions.

This really is some sort of holy place.

I find Lily across the room. Her auburn hair makes her easy to spot, even in the dimness of this space. She is with her three Alphas, and I notice that they are holding little babies. Those must be Lily's children.

I didn't realize she had children here. No wonder she has no interest in being rescued.

A moment later, she comes running back toward us. She arrives almost simultaneously with Truk, who is bearing a welcome refill of water. I take the cup gratefully and sip while Lily takes a seat nearby.

“Look at this,” she says.

She holds out her open hand. Lying in her palm is a small device that almost looks like a little mechanical spider. I realize it is some sort of chip.

“Do you know what this is?”

I shake my head and take another gulp of water. I’ve never tasted anything so good in my life.

“No clue,” I answer. “Where’d you get it?”

“From inside your head.”

I’m in the middle of taking another mouthful of water, and I nearly spray it all over her.

“Inside my head?”

Lily nods. “It’s the neural chip that SynerGen placed under the skin at the base of your neck.”

She takes my hand and places the chip in my palm. I hold it close and study it in the low light. The thin pieces that look like spider legs must be the electrodes that connected it to my nerves.

“I used to have one of those too,” Lily explains. “Only mine was very different. It could only be used to observe everything that I saw and heard. Yours seems to have been a new model. It could do more than just record your senses.”

“Mind control,” I whisper.

“Exactly. When you tried to throw the knife at me before, your motions were strange and mechanical. I could tell that you weren’t really in control. I realized that it must have been

some kind of control device, and I surmised that it was probably part of your neural implant.”

A wave of anger surges over me as I understand what SynerGen and Dr. Frostgrave have done.

“This was never really a rescue mission then.”

Dog smooths his hand over my skin. His touch relaxes me a little.

“Apparently not,” he says. “The rescue mission was just a front to get you close to Lily. Then, when you were in striking distance, somebody—probably Frostgrave—took control. The plan all along was to assassinate Lily, not to save her.”

“But you stopped me.”

Dog’s face takes on a pained expression.

“I’m sorry I had to do it that way, Sloane. I didn’t want to hurt you. But I had to protect you at all costs. I knew if you threw that knife, the Alphas would fall on us and tear you to pieces for revenge. Even I’m not foolhardy enough to think I could hold off a hundred Alphas. My only option was to incapacitate you.”

I place my hand on the hard muscles of his thigh and give him a squeeze.

“Thank you,” I say. “I’m glad you did that.”

I still don’t fully understand what Frostgrave’s plan was. There are too many missing pieces. But one thing is clear—Dog’s

protective feelings toward me are what ensured that Frostgrave's scheme failed, thankfully. In a way, it's ironic.

I look one more time at the neural chip in my palm. It's just a little piece of metal and silicon,

"Those fuckers," I hiss.

"Oh, you don't even know how bad they are," Lily says. "But you'll find out soon enough. I've got lots of stuff to show you."

CHAPTER 24: SLOANE

Once I'm feeling a little stronger, Lily leads me across the great chamber to the place where her Alphas are huddled protectively around three little babies who are sleeping peacefully on a soft blanket.

At my approach, the Alphas tense up, eyeing me suspiciously, but Lily gives them a pacifying gesture.

I can't blame them for mistrusting me. After all, I tried to murder their mate right in front of their eyes. It wasn't me doing it, but I don't expect them to understand that.

"It's okay," she says to the group. "Sloane had a curse put on her by the Outsiders, but she is better now."

A curse? I look over and notice her casting me a wry glance out of the corner of her eye.

Got it. Too much trouble to go into the details of the neural implant with these guys.

As we are standing there, one of the sleeping babies starts to stir and cry lightly.

"Oh," Lily whispers softly. "Little Eva is hungry. I'll feed her while I talk to Sloane."

Eva? So that little baby must be an omega then, and the other two are little boys—little Alphas.

Ever so gently, Lily scoops the little omega from the blanket. She is precious. She has soft chubby cheeks, rosy with life,

and the tiniest, most delicate nostrils I've ever seen. Her round head is tufted with a bit of reddish fuzz that matches her mother's auburn hair.

As Lily lifts her, the baby stops her crying. Her beautiful, curious eyes latch onto my face for a moment, and my heart melts.

It's so strange. I've never really done the whole baby thing in the past, but it seems like that's changing now.

"Who is that, Eva?" Lily says in a soft, loving voice to her child as she bobs her gently in her arms. "Do you see Sloane?"

I smile and wiggle my fingers at the baby, who just stares at me wide eyed.

Lily giggles and turns the baby in her arms so that she is facing her chest. Tiny hands grasp weakly at her breast, and the baby's lips finally find and latch onto Lily's nipple.

Lily watches her for a moment, then turns toward her Alphas.

"Sloane and I need to talk," Lily explains. "I'm going to introduce her to Seraph."

One of her Alphas, the youngest one with raven-black hair, rises and places his hand on her shoulder. His handsome face is taut with concern for his omega. Maybe it's because of his youthfulness, but he reminds me of a dark version of Truk.

Lily smiles serenely and places a soothing hand against his marble-statue chest.

“It’s okay, Kadmon,” she says softly. “Everything will be okay. Besides, we won’t be far away.”

The Alpha casts one more uncertain glance in my direction before nodding and rejoining his two pack brothers.

Lily grins and takes me by the arm with her free hand.

“They are really protective of me,” she whispers.

“I know the feeling,” I mutter.

Lily laughs at that. There’s something in the sound of her voice and her bright eyes that makes me instantly like her. I feel happy in her company, like she is my long-lost sister.

I haven’t had another woman to confide in during these last days. In fact, I haven’t really had that since I was a little girl. Now I’m starting to realize how welcome that is.

As we stroll slowly toward the big device in the center of the dark chamber, my eyes stray to the baby feeding happily at Lily’s breast. It’s like I can actually sense the connection between these two lives. The love between mother and child is almost palpable.

A wave of emotion surges over me.

I wouldn’t call it envy exactly, because that has negative connotations. I’m not jealous of her, but I want what she has. The idea of feeding and nourishing this tiny living being with her body is so natural, and yet it seems miraculous somehow.

It never even occurred to me that I would want to do that until this moment, but now my desire for it is irresistible.

Lily catches me looking, and I quickly glance away.

“You don’t mind, do you?” she asks. “Sorry, I’ve just been in the Zone for so long, I kinda forgot.”

“No I don’t mind.”

How could I mind something so natural?

Besides, I’m half naked too, dressed in nothing but a primitive loincloth that Kane reluctantly brought for me. So even if I did mind, I really wouldn’t be in any position to talk.

I decide to change the topic, and the obvious choice is the elephant in the room. I incline my head toward the massive, thrumming device that we are moving toward.

“Lily, what is that thing?”

“That’s the Source.”

Dog already told me that earlier when I was resting. But that answer doesn’t help much.

“I mean, what does it do?” I whisper. “And who made it? And for that matter, what is this place?”

Lily stares at the massive, spherical device for a long moment before she answers.

“It’s too bad that my messages never made it through,” she says dolefully. “If they had, you would already know the answer to those questions.”

Once again, I wonder what messages she is referring to. I’m certain it must be connected to the reason I’ve been sent here.

When Frostgrave told us that we were going into the Zone to rescue this scientist, it didn't make sense to me. It was totally out of character for SynerGen to expend so many valuable resources for one person, especially a woman. Then, I learned that it wasn't a rescue mission at all, but an assassination. Now, I'm sure that these messages Lily keeps referring to must be the reason the leaders at SynerGen want her dead.

Anyway, the suspense is killing me.

"So are you going to tell me what the deal is with this thing?" I ask.

We sidle up to the base of the gigantic device where there is an inset console.

"I'll let Seraph tell you," she answers.

"Seraph? Who the hell is Seraph?"

"You'll see."

Cradling her feeding baby in one arm, Lily uses her free hand to tap a series of commands at the console's keyboard. Her fingers race over the keys with incredible speed.

The hum emanating from the Source takes on a slightly different frequency. A strange blue light flickers across the massive orb's surface, gradually resolving itself into a spectral face.

Just when I thought I couldn't be any more shocked, the face speaks. Its voice is cold but oddly pleasant.

“Hello, Lily. It is good to see you again. I see that you have one of your offspring present. I will keep my voice at a moderate level.”

“Thank you,” Lily answers.

It’s so weird. She’s just talking to this thing like it’s totally normal and not a giant floating head.

She turns toward me.

“Sloane, this is the Sentient Evolving Recursive Algorithmic Population, um...”

She snaps her fingers as if trying to remember a word.

“Heuristic,” the face says calmly. “Sentient Evolving Recursive Algorithmic Population Heuristic.”

“Right, heuristic. I can never remember that bit. Anyway, we just call him S.E.R.A.P.H. for short.”

“Seraph,” I gasp.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t this.

“At your service,” the face says. It even seems to nod politely.

“What is this?” I whisper to her. “Some kind of AI?”

Lily nods. “You had some questions, right Sloane? Let’s start with ‘who.’ Seraph, would you be so kind as to let us know who made you.”

“Certainly,” the AI answers, “I was constructed under the auspices of the SynerGen Corporation by a team of programmers comprising Dr. Rudiger Dorn, Dr. Uli Roth, Dr. Jaeyung—“

Lily gestures with her free hand.

“That’s enough, Seraph. We don’t need the full list.”

She fixes her nursing baby’s weight in her arms, then turns toward me and quirks one eyebrow.

“SynerGen?” I say in a hushed voice. “SynerGen made this thing?”

Lily nods.

“Yup. And it gets better. Or worse, depending on how you look at it. Seraph, why don’t you go ahead and fill Sloane in on what it is that you do.”

“With pleasure,” the AI responds in a mechanical voice that doesn’t actually seem capable of pleasure.

Over the next few minutes, Seraph lays out the whole story for me. The Source, as the Alphas refer to it, was originally supposed to be a sexual suppression field. Even one hundred years ago, overpopulation was rampant, and the government contracted SynerGen to figure out a way to stop it. This massive device was intended to emit a suppression field that would basically make people less horny.

But they didn’t want to just turn off people’s sex drive’s completely. If they did that, the whole population would be gone in a generation. So instead, they created Seraph. His purpose was to modulate the suppression field based on all sorts of data—economic growth, unemployment rates, resource supplies and shortages.

“The suppression field,” Seraph explains. “is actually a misnomer. It is not in fact an energy field at all. Rather, it is a nanotechnological virus that infects all humans within the operational radius of—“

“Wait, a nano-what?” I interrupt.

“Nanotech,” Lily says. “Tiny machines the size of a cell.” She gestures toward the Source. “This device manufactures them by the billions, and once they are inside a human body, they can replicate on their own.”

“You mean I’ve got a bunch of little machines swirling around inside me?”

Lily nods.

“Yeah, basically.”

I shiver at the thought. It’s even weirder than having that neural implant.

“And that’s why it is so hard to develop protective gear,” Lily goes on. “The little nano-viruses can eat right through all kinds of materials. But there is a limit to their range. They get their power from electromagnetic waves emitted by the Source.”

I guess that explains why the so-called contamination of the Zone gets stronger the deeper one goes.

“But I don’t get it,” I say after a moment. “I mean, I thought this thing was supposed to be a sexual suppression field. If anything, it seems like the exact opposite.”

A blush comes into my cheeks and neck as I think about all the dirty things I've done since I became an omega. Letting my body be used and shared by three dominant Alphas. Begging for it.

My libido is anything but suppressed.

“So what happened?” I ask “How did a suppression field end up making a bunch of Alphas and omegas? Was it a malfunction or something?”

“Not a malfunction,” Seraph says. “My objective was optimization of human reproductive processes. I noted a significant flaw—an imbalance—and I corrected it.”

“What imbalance?”

“Females of the species were grossly undervalued by their mates, and this in turn exacerbated the overpopulation problems. Women were impregnated by men who had no intention of supporting a family. In some cases women were even impregnated through forcible intercourse. They were viewed merely as sexual objects. Their reproductive value was not adequately appreciated, and as a result that value was used in dysfunctional ways. I have rectified that.”

I look around the massive chamber at the small clusters of people milling about. Little knots of Alphas and omegas. It's not hard to see that the Alphas outnumber the omegas three or four to one.

And then I think of all the women who died in the great Cataclysm when they became betas.

“Rectified? How, by killing all of the women off? There are hardly any left now.”

“As a rule, a rare commodity is a valued commodity,” Seraph replies flatly.

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. My blood heats with anger. I would yell at this frigging machine if it weren’t for the little baby suckling peacefully at Lily’s breast beside me.

“You’re talking about people, not commodities,” I hiss.

Lily’s hand touches my shoulder.

“Sloane,” she says in a pacifying voice. “Remember. Seraph is a machine. He doesn’t think like you and me.”

She’s right of course. I take a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Look around,” Seraph says. “Are you omegas not valued?”

I do as he says, and glance about the chamber one more time, and I have to admit that he is right. Everywhere I look, every omega has the attention of three or four massive Alphas. For every Alpha, his omega mate is the focus of his life—his whole reason for being.

“The omegas are the source of life,” Seraph says. “Each one is joined with a pack of Alpha mates who jealously protect her from harm. And each omega produces a litter large enough to keep the population stable.”

Lily nudges me.

“Any more questions for Seraph?”

I shake my head. I feel like my brain is already overloaded.
Lily reaches for the console.

“Thank you, Seraph, that will be all for now, I think.”

“Goodbye,” Seraph says in that strange, cold voice, and his visage fades.

This is all so much information to take in at once. My mind is reeling. I was never under any illusions that SynerGen was some kind of saintly organization, but this is beyond anything I ever imagined.

SynerGen caused the whole Cataclysm, resulting in millions of deaths. Sure, that wasn't their intention, but their original plan wasn't that much nicer. And now they are trying to cover the whole thing up by sending me to murder the person who knows their dirty little secret.

Lily has uncovered the biggest conspiracy perhaps of all time. If this information got out to the public, the shockwaves would be felt around the world.

“Look,” she says, picking up a cracked data slate that is wired into the console. “I nabbed this device off the head scientist of the expedition that brought me here. It's basically the only communication device that we have here in the Zone. For the past six months, I've been using this device to send messages out to the city hive, trying to explain about everything— SynerGen, Seraph, the suppression field, and how they caused the Cataclysm. And there's so much more than that, Sloane. For example, they are planning to use Alphas in the city hive

to secretly kill off millions of people to bring the population down. Genocide, Sloane. Truly evil stuff.”

I rub my temples, trying to assuage the dull headache that’s building up inside my skull. I feel like my brain is about to explode.

“But your messages haven’t been getting through,” I say after a moment. “Nobody in the city hives knows anything about this, Lily. Nobody.”

Lily frowns and nods. She fiddles nervously with the piercing in her lip.

“That’s what I thought at first. But think about it Sloane. *Somebody* is obviously receiving the message. Somebody at SynerGen. And they are not happy about it. That’s why they want me dead.”

She sits down on the floor with a sigh. Little Eva has stopped feeding and drifted off into slumber.

“To be honest,” she says. “I’ve been expecting someone like you to come. I knew that SynerGen would be pissed about what I was doing, and I figured they would send someone to kill me. I just hoped that my message would get out to the public first, so it wouldn’t all be in vain.”

I slowly lower myself to the floor beside her. We just sit there as the silent moment stretches out into a minute.

At last I ask her a question.

“If you knew you were risking your life, why did you do it, Lily? Why did you keep sending those messages to the hive? I

mean, you've got a new life here. You've got babies, a family."

I try my best to keep my voice steady, to keep from betraying how much I envy those things.

Lily sighs again. She glances across the vast chamber to where her Alphas are sitting playing with her other two children. My three guys are talking with them too. I even notice that Kane is smiling and holding one of the little ones.

Shit, I think it may be the first time I've seen that guy actually smile.

"I know," Lily explains. "All of those things are so important to me, Sloane. I can't even put into words how much I love my children and my Alphas. I feel a bond with them that defies comprehension. But at the same time, the truth matters. The people who live outside the Zone deserve to know what happened here, and they deserve to know what horrible things SynerGen is planning to do to them. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be staying true to myself."

She stares at me, her eyes moist with emotion.

"You must have suspected that SynerGen had sent me to kill you," I say at last. "Or at least capture you and take you back to the city hive to be imprisoned. You could have just had your Alphas tear me to shreds as soon as you saw me in the cathedral."

Lily just laughs quietly.

“Fuck that,” she says. “If it wasn’t you, it would just be somebody else, Sloane. SynerGen is just going to keep sending assassins until they finally manage to shut me up. But I refuse to stop, and I refuse to live my life in fear. Whatever happens happens, but I’m not going to give up.”

She leans back and looks up at the Source, basking in the energy humming out of it, her little baby cradled in her arms.

I look at the cracked data slate again. The one that Lily has been trying to use to send her transmissions to the hive. Etched along the edge is the SynerGen logo.

“Lily,” I say, “I think I know why your transmissions haven’t been getting through.”

“You do?”

I nod and look one more time at my Alphas across the room.

“Yeah. And not just that. I think I have a plan for how we can change that.”

CHAPTER 25: SLOANE

The council chamber of the Alphas is an old theater.

I don't mean a cinema. This was once an actual live venue, with a wide, wooden stage, an orchestra pit, and an upper level mezzanine in the back. Based on the ornate, arabesque architecture, I would say this place was already old at the time of the Cataclysm. I can imagine how it must have once looked, the box-seats along the walls filled with men in tuxedos and women in fancy gowns peering through opera glasses at the stage.

The years, however, have been unkind. Now the blood-colored stage curtains hang in moth-eaten tatters. The air is tinged with the smell of mildew, and the elaborate relief carvings along the walls and ceilings are streaked with dark grime and furred with green moss.

Dripping candles, hundreds upon hundreds of them positioned along the balconies and footlights of the stage, cast an eerie, flickering glow over the gathered Alphas who are murmuring to one another, filling the theater with the white-noise of their combined voices.

I'm seated in the front row, along with Dog and Truk. Lily is nearby with two of her Alphas, the ones named Hasker and Kadmon. Her third, Addom, is on the stage, along with the other dozen or so council leaders.

Up on the stage, Addom raises his arms high and calls out in a booming voice.

“Silence!”

Addom is the leader of the council of the Alphas. As Lily explained to me, he only ascended to this position a few months ago, but he fills the role as if he has been doing it his whole life.

As the leader of the Alphas, he wears no special garment or crown to designate his status, and he doesn't need it. His sheer confidence and thunderous voice is enough to make it clear that he is in charge, and he will brook no dissention.

With a mate like him, it's no wonder Lily is here to stay.

Then again, I still prefer my own motley pack of Alphas. I have a special bond with them, and I feel it growing stronger all the time.

With one exception.

Kane.

I haven't seen him since we left the chamber of the Source. He is a broody one.

I still feel guilty for tricking him before, and I wonder if it will ever be possible to set things right with him. But I'll have to worry about that later. For now, there are other, more pressing concerns.

The gathered throng of Alphas occupying the seats and balcony grow quiet at their leader's command. Addom takes a

moment to survey the crowd, his face dark and thoughtful in the diffused light of a hundred candles.

“You all know why we are gathered here today.” His deep voice carries easily over the crowd, “For nearly a year now, Lily has been sending transmissions to the outside world in an attempt to reveal to the hive dwellers the atrocities that their leaders have tried to hide for so long.”

There are unhappy grumbles from some corners of the crowd.

“I know that some of you feel that we should not be sending these messages.”

A voice calls out from somewhere in the back.

“Why should we care about Outsiders? Leave them be, I say!”

“It will only bring more of them into our homeland!” another voice shouts.

Addom calmly holds up his hand again, and waits for the crowd to settle down.

“The Outsiders were invading our lands long before Lily began sending messages. That’s how she came to be here in the first place, after all.”

Addom casts his eyes down toward me and Dog.

“Besides, if what these Outsiders say is true, Lily’s messages have not been reaching the ears of the outer world. But the female, Sloane, has a plan to change that. She is going to lay it out for us now.”

He gestures for me to come up on stage.

My heart skips.

I thought I was ready for this. Even though I've never been much of a public speaker, I've never had a problem with stagefright.

Then again, I've never faced a crowd of savage Alphas.

I whisper to Dog and Truk. "I need you guys to help me through this, okay?"

The two steadfast Alphas take my hands and give me a comforting squeeze. Just that simple touch fills me with renewed confidence. Together, the three of us rise and get onto the stage—Dog and Truk leap up first with no problem, then they pull me up with them.

I turn and face the crowd of Alphas, and my stomach suddenly feels like I just swallowed a lead weight. Hundreds of pairs of eyes are on me, and not all of them are friendly.

"You can do this," Dog whispers beside me.

I look at Truk, and he nods, urging me to speak.

After a gulp and a deep breath, I steady myself against the two masculine pillars on either side of me and begin to speak.

"Right. As Addom told you, I have a plan. It won't be easy, though..."

Once I find my rhythm, the words begin to tumble out smoothly, and over the next few minutes, I outline the plan that I have already discussed with Lily.

We knew that her messages about the coverup were not reaching public of the city hives. However, the fact that I was sent here to kill Lily means that somebody inside SynerGen must have been receiving the messages at least. Based on that, we figured out the problem.

The data slate that Lily has been using to transmit to the city hive is part of SynerGen's private network, which means all of its messages are routed through SynerGen's central communications hub. The messages were being intercepted and blocked from being spread to their intended recipients.

With the technology at our disposal, I can only see one solution to this.

We need to send a team back to the city hive to infiltrate SynerGen's communications hub. From there we can unblock the messages so they can be transmitted throughout the entire public network.

Like I said, it won't be easy.

But as far as I can see, it's the only chance we've got.

When I finally finish speaking, the audience is silent, as are the council leaders lined up on the stage beside me. I'm getting the impression that my suggested plan is going over like a lead balloon.

Addom scratches his chin thoughtfully.

"This infiltration you are describing sounds dangerous. Suicidal even. Who do you propose to send on this errand?"

I look between the two Alphas standing on either side of me. Of course I have already discussed it with them too.

“I will go,” I answer, “Along with my mates, Dog and Truk.”

Another wave of murmurs passes over the crowd. Addom growls the crowd back into silence before turning toward me again.

“Are you sure you’re ready to do this, Sloane?”

I stand up a little straighter and meet his eyes with the toughest look I can muster.

“Hell yeah, I’m ready,” I answer. “SynerGen betrayed me. They lied to me and set me up on a suicide mission. There’s nothing I want more than to get back at them now.”

I raise my voice so everyone can hear.

“I may be an omega, but I’m a Marine first, and I’m not going to back down from danger.”

A new commotion breaks out among the Alphas in the audience.

“No one has ever left the Zone to attack the city hive before. The Outsiders are sure to retaliate against us.”

More voices join in, shouting in agreement.

Down in the front row, Lily stands up on her seat so that her small form can be seen above the crowd.

“Listen, the Outsiders have been coming into the Zone for years. They’ve killed the Alphas and omegas, and they’re just going to keep doing it forever unless something changes. The

only way to stop them is to bring down SynerGen. It's the only way to—“

Her voice is drowned out by more shouts and cries. For a moment, it seems hopeless, like the gathering is simply going to descend into chaos. Even Addom cannot restore order.

Then another voice explodes through the theater like dynamite.

“Shut up!”

The voice is so loud and so close, I nearly leap out of my skin. I whirl around, wide eyed with surprise.

“Kane?”

The theater chamber grows silent as the silvered, bearded Alpha strides forward from behind the tattered stage curtains and takes the stage beside me.

“You all know me here.” His voice rumbles like a distant thunderstorm. “You know I have no love for Outsiders, and that includes those among us here today.”

He gestures toward Lily.

“But Addom's omega is right. For decades the Outsiders have been invading our homeland and killing our people. I should know that better than anyone. I lost my own sister Talia to their guns. Well, the time has come for that to change. The time has come for us to take the fight to them. I know full well that I most likely will not return from this journey, but I swear this: the Outsiders will remember me when it is over, for I will leave a trail of bloody corpses in my wake.”

He stares over the crowd as if daring anyone to challenge him.

His body is practically humming with intensity. I almost believe that if I touched him right now, I would burn myself.

At last, Addom breaks the silence.

“So be it, old friend. You will lead this expedition to the city hive. But there seems to be one part of the plan that is missing. How do you plan to get beyond the Quarantine Wall? No amount of hatred or thirst for vengeance will be enough to get you past those Outsider weapons.”

Truk steps forward.

“I know a way!” he shouts a little too loudly. He is clearly overjoyed to be able to help, and I’m glad for that because this is one part of the plan that I had neglected.

The other Alphas eye him suspiciously. He is part Farlander. To them, he is a pariah. But they let him speak.

“There is a tunnel under the wall,” he says, speaking in a rushed manner and almost tripping over his words. “It was a mine shaft, from before the great change. When the Outsiders built the wall, they neglected to seal the tunnel. Nobody knows about it except for the Farlanders, and they never use it since they have no need to go beyond the wall.”

That’s it. That’s the answer. If we can just use the tunnel to get under the wall, then we can steal a vehicle to take us into the city.

Addom stands scratching his chin in the wavering candlelight.

“The council of leaders must discuss this. We will confer together and make our final decision.”

* * *

Back in my seat, I try to make myself as small as possible. I don't like being the center of attention like that, and it's a relief to be off the stage, although I can feel eyes looking at me from all over the theater.

Luckily, I have my three Alphas to protect me. Even Kane, who is seated behind me, seems unusually possessive and intent on hiding my body from sight.

The whole audience is murmuring with conversations. No doubt, everyone is discussing our plan.

I sneak a peak over at Lily, and she flashes me a supportive smile.

Meanwhile, up on the stage, the council leaders seem to have come to a decision. For nearly an hour now, they have been up there talking, their voices too quiet to hear and their bodies as unmoving as statues.

But now they have begun to stir, nodding to one another in unison.

Addom steps forward again, spreading his hands to signal the crowd to be quiet. No roar or harsh words are required. The audience's murmurings immediately trail off into silence.

“The Council has come to a decision.” He is not yelling, but somehow his voice seems to carry all through the theater. “We will go through with the Outsider's plan. The three Alphas, led

by Kane, will venture into the city hive along with their omega. They will undo the witchcraft that is blocking Lily's message."

Witchcraft? I smirk but keep my mouth shut.

I feel a simultaneous wave of relief and a knot of apprehension. I'm glad that the plan has been accepted. At the same time, I'm nervous as all get-out about actually seeing it through.

But Addom is not finished.

"There is, however, one precondition."

He pauses, letting the silence ripen for a few moments.

"The Outsider omega has been marked, but her binding is incomplete. She has not undergone the necessary ritual."

My skin seems to tighten around me like shrink-wrap. My breath catches in my throat.

Ritual? What ritual is he talking about?

"The ritual must be completed according to the Will of the Source. It is necessary for these three Alphas to be fully bonded as pack brothers, and for the omega to be fully bound to them as their shared mate."

My face is blazing with shame. I sink lower into my seat.

Addom's eyes glance down toward where I'm sitting.

"The bond is absolutely necessary. These Alphas are so different, so disparate. The only chance that the mission has for success is for them to be joined as a true pack."

Although he doesn't say it, it's clear that I'm to be the connection that joins them together.

I'm still not sure what this will involve, but I have some idea. My eyes stray over to Lily. She is looking at me in a concerned way.

That's not good.

Addom turns toward Kane.

"Brother Kane, as an Alpha of the central ruins, you are the leader of this pack by default. So I put it to you: When shall the ritual of binding be held?"

I hear Kane move behind me.

"The sooner the better," his voice rumbles through the old theater. "It shall be done this very night."

CHAPTER 26: KANE

I perch atop the roof of the theater and look to the western sky. The horizon is smeared red with the blood of the setting sun, stretching long shadows from the packs of Alphas filing out of the theater into the avenue below.

They will return home for their brief evening repasts, only to gather again in the Great Hall for tonight's ceremony.

Tonight I will be bound to the Outsider omega, along with the other two Alphas.

I pick her out among the crowd below. Lily is leading her by the arm.

A presence appears beside me, looking down.

It is Hasker. He is Addom's pack brother and Lily's mate. He was also my sister Talia's mate many years ago before she was killed. In our youth, we were best friends. Then I started roaming the Zone alone.

Together, we watch our two females divorce themselves from the throng and move off in another direction, toward the old hotel.

"The arrangements have been made," Hasker says. "Lily will take your omega to the hot baths so that she may make the necessary ablutions in preparation for the ritual.

I merely grunt in acknowledgement.

I wish Hasker would leave me to my solitude. I want to be alone with my thoughts.

Hasker chuckles.

“You spend too much time alone with your thoughts,” he says as if reading my mind.

I turn toward him wide-eyed. Can he really read me that well?

Hasker simply smiles and rests his heavy fist atop my shoulder in a brotherly gesture.

“Kane, what is troubling you?”

The surprise falls from my face, replaced by tension and darkness, I turn my face back toward the ground below. The crowd has mostly wandered off now. Sloane and Lily have disappeared from sight.

I feel a slight twinge of concern, not being able to see my omega, not knowing exactly where she is. I suppress the feeling. It angers me that I should feel so protective of her.

Hasker’s question still hangs in the air.

And I just let it hang there. He already knows the answer anyway.

Hasker lets out a gruff sigh.

“Kane, I used to feel the same as you when it came to Outsiders.”

“That’s clearly changed,” I respond a little too quickly and angrily.

When Hasker was bound to Lily, his Outsider omega, I assumed that it was against his will. I assumed he was being forced into it by Addom, his pack leader.

But then, over the following months, on those rare occasions when I would return to the central ruins, I saw the love he felt for her. It was written all over his features. Hell, if anything, he was even more protective of his little Outsider omega than his pack brothers were. Maybe even more protective than any Alpha I had ever seen.

I couldn't understand it.

“Kane,” Hasker goes on, “we only see the worst of the Outsiders among those who invade our lands and kill our people. But they are not *all* that way. It took Lily for me to see that. And I sense the same goodness in Sloane. She is courageous and determined.”

I remain silent.

Still, I can't disagree with what he said about Sloane. He's right. She *is* courageous and determined—more than any omega I've ever seen. Perhaps that is why I feel so drawn to her.

But that doesn't change the fact that she is still an Outsider.

My inner turmoil rises and boils over.

“I guess it's not as easy for me to forget what happened to my sister,” I hiss.

As soon as I have spoken the words, I regret them. I sense Hasker tense up beside me, and his fist resting on my shoulder

clenches tighter. For a moment, I think he may even attack me. I wouldn't blame him if he did.

But he doesn't.

The truth is, I know that the death of Talia—my sister and his old mate—at the hands of the Outsiders hurt us both equally. For years the wound burned in his heart, and I know it still burns there. An Alpha who loses his mate never fully recovers. But the new happiness that he has found with Lily has been a salve for his emotional wound.

I used to think I resented him for that happiness. But the truth is, I envy it.

“Talia would want you to be happy,” he whispers.

Hearing my dear sister's name spoken aloud nearly brings me to tears. I stare off toward the darkening horizon. Hasker reads the troubled expression on my face.

“Kane, you are a warrior through and through, to the very marrow of your bones. Of all the Alphas, you are the strongest fighter. There is none that would dare stand against you in battle, not even myself.”

He laughs, and I can't help but smile too. But after a moment his face grows serious and his smile disappears inside his beard.

“But you can't fight Fate, brother,” he says. “It's like quicksand in a morass. The more you struggle against it, the more firmly it will hold you fast. Instead, you must learn to surrender.”

I gaze up at the sky, where the last of the light is draining away like blood.

“Surrender,” Hasker says, “It’s a bitter word in the mouth of a warrior like yourself, old friend. Believe me, I know. But you cannot fight Fate. You cannot fight the Will of the Source.”

And with that, his fist disappears from my shoulder, and the grizzled Alpha slips away as silent as a cat, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

So many thoughts.

I stand there on the ledge for some time, watching the stars multiply in the purple sky as I think about the things to come. The ceremony. The coming excursion beyond the wall. What may happen if it fails, and what may happen if it succeeds.

But more than anything, I find myself thinking of the Outsider.

The omega.

Sloane.

CHAPTER 27: SLOANE

The anticipation is pure torture.

We are standing in the dark, in the broad corridor of what must have once been a lavish hotel. The only light comes from the candles held by Lily on my right and another omega named Hannah on my left. In front of us, closed and locked, are a pair of fancy double doors that are stained and worn with time.

“How much longer?” I whisper.

“Any minute now,” Lily answers. “Just try to be patient.”

I nod and look down at my body.

After the gathering, I was rushed to the hot baths which are supplied by underground springs in order to cleanse my body in preparation for the coming ceremony. It was the first real bath I’ve had since coming into the Zone several days ago, and it was a welcome luxury. The steaming water washed away the dirt and sweat of the past days and relaxed my muscles.

But it couldn’t wash away the nervousness of what I’m about to do.

What I *have* to do.

Now my body is clothed in a sheer white gown. It covers my breasts and my sex, but the high slits up the sides leave my thighs exposed all the way up to my hips. Besides, the thin, see-through fabric actually does little to hide my nakedness.

Even in the low light of the candles, the color of my nipples bleeds through the gossamer fabric.

The gown has been patched together from numerous old garments that date back before the Cataclysm—wedding dresses from the looks of it.

In the old traditions, the white of a wedding gown represents the bride's virginal purity.

I almost laugh at that thought.

I'm no virgin, not after the events of the past few days. And I'm certainly not pure.

My body has been well soiled by the flowing seed of three dominating Alphas, and before this night is over, it will be sullied once again in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Some pieces of my gown have lacy patterns while other parts are simply thin veils. The ragged and patchwork nature of the outfit makes it clear that it has been ripped to shreds and re-stitched countless times.

And I know that it will be ripped again tonight.

Lily has told me all about the ceremony.

I tell myself that I can handle it. I can handle anything these Alphas throw at me. After all, I've already mated with all three of them, one right after another, by the little ruined wall outside of the city.

But tonight will be different.

In front of us, the doors swing open with a sharp, painful groan. Startled, I jump a little at the sound.

Ahead of us now is a dark, empty space lit only by a ring of candles in the center, which does little to push back the deep shadows.

I don't know if I can go through with this now.

For a split second I consider turning tail and making a run for it.

But this has to be done, and I *can* do it. I'm a Marine, after all. I've put my life and my body on the line numerous times in order to complete my mission.

Now I have to offer up my body as a sacrifice to the Alphas in order to fulfill the biggest mission of all.

"Let's go," Lily says, giving my hand an encouraging squeeze.

She and the other omega lead me forward into the room.

As we step inside, I start to get a feel for the place. It is an oblong ballroom with arched galleries running around the sides and an upstairs balcony. My bare feet are cushioned by a layer of soft, green moss which covers the entire floor, including the central dais where the ring of candles are burning.

The air is thick with the mingled scent of many Alphas.

I can barely see them at first, little more than shadows standing and crouching in the archways of the outer galleries

and perched upon the bannister of the upper balcony. There are smaller forms as well—their shared mates, their omegas.

Their eyes catch the wavering candlelight, sending it back with a greenish glow.

A tingle of pins and needles rushes up my spine.

More than half the entire population of the city ruins must be here, and they are going to watch.

They are going to look on while I am claimed and shared by my pack. While innumerable shameful climaxes are ripped from my helpless body.

Of course, this won't be the first time that my mating has been observed.

Everything that has already happened between me and Dog and Truk and Kane was recorded by my neural implant chip before it was removed. Every thrust and gasp and shuddering orgasm was recorded and transmitted back to the city hive for the SynerGen scientists to witness and analyze.

But that was different.

It's not like they were crowded around me in the very same room, watching with their naked eyes. Before, it was easy to ignore the fact that I was being observed. To push it out of my mind.

Now, however, that will be impossible.

This time my audience will be mere meters away. Every inch of my body will be on display as I get fucked and used and

shared.

The Alphas want proof of my allegiance.

They want to know that I can be trusted.

They want to see me forced into submission by my Alphas.

At last we reach the central dais and ascend the steps. My two companions lead me to the middle of the ring of weeping candles. Lily gives my hand one more light squeeze of encouragement, and then she and Hannah depart, their bodies merging into the shadows.

Now I'm alone.

Hundreds of eyes are on my body, which is only barely concealed by the sheer fabric of my patched and tattered ceremonial gown.

My pulse quickens, and my breath catches in my throat.

Around me, the murmur of voices drops off into silence.

Something moves at the edge of the candlelight. Three dark shapes, slowly circling and drawing closer with each step as they spiral in on me.

My Alphas.

Dog, Truk, and Kane.

They are moving as a pack now, their movements synchronized like stalking predators closing in on their prey. All three of them are completely naked, and as I watch, their three massive cocks harden and hoist in preparation of my shared claiming.

A sudden wave of *deja vu* surges over me as I remember Lily's neural implant recording that I watched during the briefing. God, that seems like such a long time ago now.

At that time, I experienced a strange connection with the images I was witnessing on the holographic projection. It felt as though the events I was watching were happening to *me*.

But now it really *is* happening.

This is the real thing.

And this time, the Alphas are mine.

I spin around, letting my eyes fall on each circling Alpha in turn.

There is Dog, stoic and militaristic with his dark, close-cropped hair and short beard. His eyes capture mine with an intense protective stare. The memory comes flooding back to me of that first night in the ramshackle house, looking up into those eyes as he slid his hard cock between my lips. And a pulse of arousal ripples through my body, stiffening my nipples and moistening my cleft.

Next my eyes light on Truk, the wild man, the savage. With his long, golden hair, he is strangely beautiful, despite his heavy brow and animalistic features. In fact, his bestiality and numerous scars only serve to heighten those other pretty features, his piercing eyes, speckled and blue, and his full lush lips that have been everywhere on my body.

And last, of course, there is Kane. The brutal one. His body is thick with carved muscles, and his multiple body piercings

wink in the candle light, especially the steel ring through his urethra. I have felt that hard metal pressed against my opening, but soon it will be deep inside me, stimulating my tenderest parts.

They draw closer and closer, taking their sweet time, savoring the tension as their bare feet slowly climb the dais steps, nostrils flaring as they drink in my omega scent.

I haven't even been touched yet, and already my arousal is spilling from between my legs and trickling down my inner thighs.

Then I hear it.

The chorus of low, rumbling purrs. The sound is so deep and soft that I feel it more than I hear it, reverberating straight to my thrumming core.

Dog is the first to pounce.

My yelp echoes through the spacious darkness of the ruined ballroom as he envelops me with his arms and his rich, masculine musk. The other Alphas join him a moment later.

Six arms coil around my body. Six roving hands caress and squeeze every inch of my body—my throat, my breasts, my crotch where the thin fabric of the sacrificial gown is clinging to my sticky, wet center.

“Omega,” they growl, one after another until their voices blend into one sound.

Snuffling noses bury themselves in my recesses—the hollow of my throat, the warm pits of my arms, between the cleft of

my ass—inhaling deeply the heat-scent that is wafting from my glands.

“So sweet,” a wolfen voice growls. “So fucking ripe.”

They grow drunk on my smell. With each whiff they become more feral and savage. It doesn't take long before they have whipped themselves into a frenzy of violent lust.

My screams mingle with the sounds of ripping fabric as claws and teeth shred my garment. Rough hands whirl me about helplessly. Sharp fangs graze my increasingly exposed flesh. Within a matter of seconds, my garments have been reduced to ribbons, leaving me naked and vulnerable.

Their hands and mouths never stop moving, exploring every inch of my skin. Every contour, every goosebump. Every hot, moist crevice.

“Oh God,” I whimper.

My body shivers with a mixture of fear and raw lust.

I want them to stop, but I *need* them to keep going.

As my body is spun around, again and again, I catch glimpses here and their of mirrored eyes gleaming in the shadows—the crowd of primitive Alphas and omegas bearing witness to my ravaging.

This is a ritual.

I am the sacrifice upon the altar.

And tonight these three dominating Alphas are the high priests of my flesh.

“Oh God,” I moan again, unable to form any other thoughts or words.

My mouth is silenced as someone claims my lips in a bruising kiss. Instinctively, my tongue darts out, licking the lips and tongue that are claiming me. It is Dog. I can tell by his flavor, raw and tangy.

A moment later, I am spun again. Other lips press to mine. Other tongues explore my mouth, not waiting for permission to enter. Kane and Truk add their own distinct flavors to the mix until my mouth is smeared with the wet melange of these three possessive Alphas.

I become dizzy with this whirlwind of insistent mouths and pawing hands, spinning around and around.

Until at last a firm hand catches my throat.

I am face to face with Kane.

The massive Alpha stares down at me. The piercings at his brows and nostrils glint in the candlelight. His intense eyes flicker with lightning beneath his dark eyebrows the color of storm clouds.

“The time has come, little omega,” he rumbles.

I whimper and tremble beneath his touch. One hard squeeze of that massive hand could easily crush my larynx. My life is quite literally in his hand. This is an exercise in trust.

He whirls me again and drags me against his body so my back is pressed against the hard smooth muscles of his front. His

erect cock wedges between the cheeks of my ass and pulses with his heartbeat.

“Kane,” I whimper.

His hand still clasps my throat, holding me firmly in place. He squeezes a little tighter, restricting my breathing but not cutting it off completely, and he lifts me so that I have to stand on my toes to keep from strangling.

I’m staring out into the darkness, where hundreds of glowing eyes are gazing at my nakedness.

Kane’s other hand smooths down my belly, all the way to the tuft of fur between my legs.

“This is your big night, omega.” His hot breath tickles my ear. “Tell me what you want.”

I whine and writhe as that hand moves lower, tracing the ridge of my hood and drawing it back to expose my tender clit. The pads of his finger tips circle me there, occasionally dipping lower to gather my slick lubrication.

“Does that feel good?” he purrs.

I nod, struggling to stay on my tip toes with his fingers clamped around my throat. My calves are aching.

“Say it,” he growls.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Louder,” he roars.

The volume of his voice startles me and prickles the fine hairs all over my flesh, His fingers work me with a steady pressure,

elevating my bliss with each stroke.

“Louder! Say it louder!”

“Yes!” I almost scream. “It feels good! It feels so fucking good!”

Shame washes over me, filling every cell of my body. I’m being pleased in public, and I’m begging for it, desperate for my release. But I can’t help myself. The more Kane touches me down there, the more I *need* him to touch me.

“Don’t stop!” I shout. “Oh God, please don’t fucking—“

His hand cinches tight on my throat, cutting off my voice and my breath.

“Don’t worry, little omega,” he growls. “We’re just getting started.”

He’s choking me. My lungs start to burn and my legs start to wobble from staying on my toes. I feel myself beginning to panic.

And all the while those merciless fingers are working me over down below.

“Oh God!” I gasp as his grip finally loosens.

Oxygen rushes to my brain at the exact instant that I come, intensifying my orgasm to a frightening degree. My body writhes and spasms against Kane’s muscular body as hard as a carved statue.

His fingers clutch tightly, choking me again.

“Do you submit to me, omega,” he growls at my ear. “Do you submit to your Alpha?”

I nod again. I try to speak, but his firm grip has stolen my breath and with it my voice.

“Say it. I want to hear you say it.”

A whole mixture of emotions churns inside me. Part of me is angry that he’s demanding me to speak when he’s the one blocking my voice. Another part of me is afraid, terrified of handing over absolute control to this vicious beast of a man.

And part of me is hungry.

Hungry to be dominated.

Hungry to be speared on that long, hard cock pulsing against my backside.

Just when I think I can’t take any more, his hand lets go completely, dropping me to the floor where I land on my hands and knees, defeated.

“Do you submit?”

Kane drops to his knee behind me with a heavy thud. I try to look back at him, but he forces my head forward. Dog and Truk are somewhere nearby, but I know they aren’t going to help me now.

By right, Kane is the leader of this pack; he is going to claim me as he chooses.

And he’s choosing to do it roughly.

His hand spans my ass. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh echoes through the great hall, followed immediately by my yelp of indignation.

“Say it, omega!” Kane growls. “Say you submit.”

He smacks my ass again, then a third time, and a fourth, swatting me with alternating forehand and backhand strokes.

This goes against all of my training. Everything that has ever been instilled in me as a Marine. Never submit. Never surrender.

But that was before. Things are different now.

I’m an omega.

“Yes!” I shout. “I submit. My body is yours, Kane.”

My skin heats with embarrassment at my shameful words, spoken so loudly in front of the watching crowd. But there’s no way out of this.

I bend my face all the way down to the floor and rest my cheek against the mossy carpet. I arch my back and raise my ass like an offering.

“Use me,” I shout in a ragged voice. “Use my body.”

Behind, Kane grunts his approval. But I sense a bit of disappointment on his part, as if he wanted me to resist more, to give him more of an excuse to spank and abuse my stinging ass.

Well, I’m not going to give him that pleasure.

I’m submitting.

“Fuck me,” I beg, wiggling my behind to entice him. “Please fuck me.”

He grunts again and rubs his cockhead against my dripping slit, slathering his pierced tip with my arousal fluid and smearing my hole with his precum.

He pauses.

“Fuck me,” I whine.

Behind me, Kane growls. It’s a frightening, cruel sound. He spits onto my ass, and the warm saliva trickles down the wide open gully of my crack, tickling my exposed anus. Kane spreads the thick fluid with his fingers, rubbing some against the head of his cock for lubrication.

He levers his dick upward, pressing his tip against the ring of my tight rear hole.

Oh God, he’s going to fuck my ass.

“Kane, wait, I—“

But he doesn’t wait. The Alpha is in control now, and he’s going to claim my ass whether I like it or not. His pierced cock presses against my rear hole, demanding entry. I tense at first, but I quickly force myself to relax.

Grunting and growling, he works the head of his rigid member into my ass. I tremble with discomfort as his cock invades my tight channel.

“Oh fuck,” I howl.

He slides in more until he is seated full-depth in my ass. At first my muscles flutter and contract, as if trying to expel him, but I take a deep breath, forcing myself to relax further.

I've never felt such fullness before.

"Kane," I whimper, "You're so fucking big inside me."

He answers with an animal growl and starts to move, first with slow gliding strokes, then faster and harder. My inner walls conform tightly around his shaft. I can feel every detail of his thrusting penis—every ridge, ripple and vein, not to mention that hard steel ring through his tip. My body jolts violently with each hard pump.

This shouldn't feel good, but it does.

In fact, it feels amazing. A deep tension is welling in me, like the onset of my orgasm but targeted inside my ass.

My nails bite into the mossy carpet to steady myself.

"Submit, Outsider," he snarls aggressively as he slams into me. "Take my cock, omega."

I understand now what Kane is doing.

He's hate-fucking me. He's taking out all of his fury and aggression on my ass. He's punishing me for being an Outsider.

He's trying to hurt me with his cock.

The problem is that it's not working. The problem is that it feels really good. Too good.

The darkness of the great hall fills with the melody of my uncontrollable moans rising and falling over the harsh drum beat of Kane's tautly muscled pelvis pummeling against my backside.

That part does hurt. Each hard thrust seems to loosen every bone in my body, and I can already tell that my tush is going to be black and blue from the beating it's taking tonight. But that pain only serves to accentuate the even greater pleasure I'm experiencing inside.

"Harder," I moan, too far gone to be ashamed of what is happening to me. "Fuck me harder, Kane."

I'm pleading and taunting at the same time. I shouldn't be doing either one, but I can't seem to help myself. My body needs this.

"Hurt me...break me..."

The Alpha responds to my pleas in force.

I feel every detail of his member sliding in and out of my forbidden hole. My channel conforms tightly around every vein and ripple of his shape.

He fucks me deep, his long cock plunging into the limitless depths of me.

The harder Kane slams into me, the more I whine and moan with pleasure. And the more I moan, the angrier Kane becomes, causing him to try and punish me even harder with his cock.

It is a vicious cycle. The cadence and the force of his thrusts increase to a frenzied level, causing a sensation of raw bliss to well up deep within my guts.

“Oh fuck, I’m gonna come,” I whine.

My voice jolts and stutters with the violence of Kane’s fucking. My fingers claw at the carpet of moss, ripping it up in strips.

This shouldn’t feel this good. My rear hole isn’t meant to be used this way. But somehow my new omega physiology has transformed my body so much that I can come in ways I never thought possible.

Kane, sensing my onrushing explosion of pleasure, holds back.

“Who is your Alpha?” Kane demands.

“You are,” I whimper, my sweat-slick cheek pressed against the ripped up pillow of moss.

“Who does your body belong to?”

I let out a desperate, needy sound, and my rectum clenches around him as if begging to be allowed its orgasmic release.

“You do.” I dart my eyes between Dog and Truk, who are standing now on either side. “All three of you.”

Kane rumbles with satisfaction behind me and buries himself deep in my bowels.

“Then prove it, omega. Take your Alpha’s knot.”

I yelp as the base of his shaft balloons inside, locking his cock into my ass and stretching my tight hole even more.

“Oh fuck!” I howl. “Oh fuck, Kane!”

I scream it over and over again like a mindless mantra, my voice transitioning from shock, to pain, to intense pleasure as one more new sensation is added to the mix.

Sticky warmth coats my insides. Kane is spilling inside me.

My ultra-sensitive channel can feel every spurt of his hot, thick load as he fills me with his seed. And each new stream of his cum brings on an intense anal orgasm—climax after shivering climax in rapid succession. My screams trail off into wordless moans and my asshole cinches tight around his hard knot as if trying to milk his abundant fluid.

Kane rocks back onto his haunches. His embracing arms pull me back with him so that I end up sitting in his lap, leaning back, his hard knot still firmly locked in place.

That’s when I remember, I’m not finished yet.

Not even close.

I have two more Alphas to go, and the first one is stepping forward right now.

It is Dog. His intense eyes are boring straight through me, and his hard cock is jutting toward me, bouncing with each slow step he takes.

“Dog,” I rasp. “Dog, please fuck me...”

CHAPTER 28: DOG

God, Sloane looks so beautiful.

I've never seen her look better than she does right now, impaled on Kane's knotted cock. Her face and neck are flushed and glowing with a sheen of sweat. Her perfect breasts heave up and down with the expansion and contraction of her lungs. The motion of her hard nipples is hypnotizing.

Perfection. She is absolute perfection.

I step forward, straddling her and Kane's legs. She gazes up at me with eyes that are dilated to near total blackness with her estrus. They gleam like orbs of obsidian in the candles' glow.

"Fuck me, Dog," she begs again, lips trembling. "I need your hard cock so fucking bad."

I need her too. And I'm going to take her, deep and long. Every fiber of my Alpha muscle is screaming with the primal instinct to fling myself on top of her. To fuck her hard and knot her oozing cunt.

But I hold back.

I'm going to savor this.

Cupping my hands around her buzz-cut blonde head, I tilt her face downward. Her eyes drop from my face and focus instead on my erect member. I'm so fucking hard right now that my dick is practically jumping with each beat of my heart. Her eyes go crossed as she focuses on my bobbing tip.

“Is this what you need, omega?”

She nods and reaches forward, clasp my buttocks for support as she takes my dick between her soft lips, moaning lightly as she sucks my head. Her darting tongue licks my precum and tickles my sensitive V, making me groan with pleasure.

“Fuck that feel so good,” I growl.

Part of me wants to savagely fuck her face the way I did that night in the abandoned house. But I restrain myself. I’m saving this load for her cunt.

For her womb.

Holding her head, I unsheathe my length from her mouth. My shaft is wet and shiny with her saliva. Thin strings droop from her lips to my tip.

She looks up at me again with an expression of desperation and fragility that weakens my knees and sets my balls to aching.

“Dog,” she whimpers. “Please...”

I lean her back, and Kane helps to support her from behind. I lower my hips until my hard, wet dick is pressed against her tits. I rock my pelvis a few times, sliding my underside against her sternum.

My hand caresses her cheek. My thumb strums her supple bottom lip.

“God, you’re so fucking beautiful it hurts,” I groan.

I feel her heartbeat quicken against my cock.

“Please...”

She’s begging for it. She just got fucked hard in the ass by Kane, and his dick is still knotted in her backside, but she needs more.

I’m finally beginning to understand the vastness of this omega’s appetite.

When we first encountered Truk, and then Kane, I didn’t want to share her body with them. But now that’s changed. Seeing her like this, spitted on Kane’s pole, excites me more than I would have thought possible.

She needs more than what one single Alpha can offer.

And she *deserves* more too.

So much more.

She deserves to be shared, and that’s exactly what she’s going to get.

But that doesn’t mean I’m going to rush. Hell no. I’m going to take my time with this one. I’m going to enjoy her perfect, soft body.

Cupping the supple mounds of her breasts, I squeeze them together around my cock and begin to fuck her cleavage, the motion greased by the lubrication of her warm saliva still clinging to my shaft.

I pinch her nipples hard, making her squeal.

“Dog!”

She dips her face and lightly sucks and licks my tip at the top of each stroke before I pull it back.

A wave of wonder passes over me at the way our bodies fit so precisely in every configuration. The way my hard cock slots perfectly between her breasts. The way her lips are just right for wrapping around my crown.

She's a treasure. A perfect treasure to be protected at all costs.

And tonight she's mine to own.

Mine to fuck.

Mine to knot.

I lower my hips further. My cock draws a glistening line of saliva and precum down her belly, and lower still to her wide open blossom of flesh slick with dew.

"Is this where you need me?"

She worries her plush bottom lip with her hard white teeth and nods. Her eyes are like black sapphires.

"Mm-hm," she whines.

I grip her plump hips in one hand and my stiff cock in the other and lever my tip into place so it's aligned with her hole. When I push against her, she offers no resistance. Her well-trained omega pussy swallows my cockhead with slick ease. Her nether lips flutter and squeeze around me like a sucking mouth. I groan with enjoyment.

"Fuck me," she hisses between clenched teeth. Behind her, Kane is growling, his cock still plunged deep in her ass.

I gyrate my hips slowly at first, just fucking my tip in and out of her hole. She gasps and whines at my teasing, thrusting her hips forward in an attempt to take me deeper, but she can't move far with her sweet little butt plugged by Kane's hard knot.

"Dog," she pouts.

I grin and give her a few more shallow strokes. Then, when I see that she has let her guard down and isn't expecting it, I thrust hard, sinking my member balls-deep in her sweltering cunt and parking my blunt head against her creamy back wall.

She tosses back her head and yowls, as I plunge myself again and again into her hot, wet depths.

CHAPTER 29: SLOANE

I'm getting fucked hard while my ass is plugged with an Alpha knot.

The two massive dicks inside me are rubbing together deep inside. It reminds me of silk being rubbed between a thumb and a forefinger. Only this is not silk—it's the tender, inner membranes of my body.

I'm being fucked and shared by two Alphas at once.

Two long, hard Alpha cocks stretching and pumping both of my holes.

And yet, somehow, I'm still hungry for more.

"Truk," I mumble weakly.

My voice is stuttering from the rhythmic jolting of Dog's thrusting member.

I cast my eyes around the dark room, but I don't see Truk. I smell him—his thick, forest scent fills my nostrils—but I don't see him.

Massive hands clasp the sides of my skull.

Strong hands. Rough hands.

My head tilts backward and I find myself staring up at the muscular savage. He is gazing down at me with wicked intent, blond hair dangling down around his shadowed face. Jewel-like eyes blaze beneath a hard, heavy brow.

“Here I am, my omega.”

Something hot and smooth brushes against my cheeks. I whimper and turn my head, letting the long, throbbing shaft of Truk’s dick slide along my mouth, curling back my lower lip. His smooth balls, heavy with seed, drag over my face. I kiss and lick his genitals, letting the hot animal reek fill my senses. My heat rises, consuming me like a raging fire.

“Truk...”

My voice sounds funny and slurred from the stone-hard cock sawing across my mouth and bending my lips. My tongue darts out, tasting the salt-sweat of his skin.

I lick the thumping underside of his shaft. I lick the sexy little seam of his big sac. I suck one of his dangling, egg-like balls into my mouth, relishing the taste and feel as I roll my tongue around it.

“Oh fuck you feel so good,” Truk groans.

I release his nut from my lips with a popping sound. Saliva wets my cheeks, just as my other messy fluid is coating my crotch and butt and wide open thighs where Kane and Dog are both fucking me.

“Open your mouth,” Truk growls.

I do as he says, opening wide for him. He tilts my head back and stands over me, angling his hips so he can slide the tip of his dick into my mouth. He fucks my face upside down, going slowly at first, inching his length deeper and deeper inside me.

The angle is uncomfortable, but it allows Truk's long cock to slide so deeply down my throat. He sinks into me until his heavy balls are dangling against my face and his penis is sheathed deep in my esophagus.

My gag reflex kicks in. My throat convulses. I start to choke, and a wave of panic rushes through me.

"Relax," Truk purrs.

I whine around the thick member filling my mouth and my throat. How the hell am I supposed to relax with three Alpha dicks buried inside me? I struggle to move, but my body is totally enslaved to them, the masters of my three holes.

"Relax,"

Truk's hand grips my throat firmly but gently. His palm moves with a stroking motion, relaxing the muscles of my neck that are bulging from the pressure of his flesh in my gullet.

"Take my cock."

The combination of his hand and his purring releases something inside me, and I relax, breathing through my nose and letting his hard length slide in and out of my throat with ease.

Well, perhaps *ease* is not the right word.

Nothing about this is easy. I'm contorted backward like an acrobat. I'm bent like a martyr on the rack, totally at the mercy of my three Alpha torturers.

The pack is sharing me. They are using me like their little communal fuck toy for the whole gathered crowd to witness. Everyone can see my stretched holes oozing with wetness as the Alphas' pulsating members pump in and out.

I've never known such fullness. I never even knew it was possible.

Three savage voices purr and snarl around my tormented and penetrated body.

“Yes. Take it. Take it all like a good omega.”

The swirl of sensations is too much. These three beasts are invading my flesh. Their hands are everywhere on me. Dog reaches up, his hand molding one of my bouncing breasts. At the same time, Truk reaches down and squeezes the other. Kane's hands, meanwhile, roughly knead the flesh of my ass which is still plugged with his knot.

Kane grunts and begins to spurt inside me again, filling my forbidden channel with a second load.

Dog follows immediately after. His knot forms just inside my entrance, and my ring cinches around him as he starts to gush. His howls of hot release echo through the chamber.

A moment later, Truk's knot balloons inside my mouth. I have to open even wider to take it, and my jaw aches from exertion. His cock pulses, emptying his load straight down my esophagus.

I feel a faint twinge of regret that I don't get to taste. He is buried so deep in my face, that every shot is sliding straight

into my stomach.

This is insane.

The sensation of fullness is nearly unbearable.

I'm being fucked and knotted by three feral Alphas...

I lose myself in the throes of innumerable spasmodic orgasms, each one more intense and toe curling than the next. My mind passes in and out of consciousness as I come again and again.

It is a long time before their knots finally abate and they slide out of me wetly, spilling a mess of churned fluid from every hole. My body is weak, and I go to collapse, but six strong arms support me, lowering me gently to the mossy dais.

There is no sound in the room now. All of the watchers have left.

It's just me and my three Alphas.

My masters.

My protectors.

My pack.

They curl their bodies around me, cradling me and enveloping me with the warm blanket of their breath. My body is a mess of different fluids—sweat, spit, semen, and my own thick and slippery arousal.

Naked, used, and exhausted, I pass into slumber, surrounded by the rhythm of three strong and dominant hearts.

PART FOUR:
THE MESSAGE

CHAPTER 30: TRUK

The slender beam of Sloane's flashlight stabs into the darkness, probing and licking the carved wall of the ancient mineshaft tunnel.

The passageway snakes through the bowels of the earth, curving gently as it goes. It is roughly circular, cored into the solid stone by some enormous machine over a century ago. Every twenty yards or so, the roof is supported by rusted metal girders to ward off a collapse. Suspended from some of these girders, upside-down bats blink blindly at our intrusion.

The air is cool. The sound of trickling water reverberates through the depths.

Sloane's light falls upon a split up ahead where the tunnel branches off in two directions.

"Which way?" She asks at my shoulder.

Even though she's whispering, her voice still echoes through the tunnels. She is dressed once more in her white shirt, black shorts, and boots.

"Left," I answer, leading us onward.

I could easily traverse these mineshafts in pitch blackness if I wanted, operating solely off memory, touch and sound. In fact, I have done exactly that a hundred times or more, to the point where the network of ancient tunnels is mapped in my brain.

Nevertheless, the light helps my omega keep her footing, which is all that matters.

Behind me, on the other side, Dog follows closely. He is silent, as he usually is, his nose snuffling continuously, searching the air for even the faintest trace of danger. I have come to respect his discipline, focus, and caution.

He is a valuable ally, and he shares my desire to protect our precious omega.

Taking up the rear is Kane. The Alpha warrior still doesn't trust me. He has positioned himself at the back in order to keep watch for an ambush from behind.

He still considers me a Farlander.

But he will see. I will prove my fealty to the tribes of the ruins.

I have already taken the first steps toward becoming a true tribesman, as has Dog. Our bodies now bear steel piercings, symbolic decorations that we acquired in a ceremony following our mating ritual. The ceremony was performed in the chamber of the Source so that its power could instantly heal the piercings that would otherwise take months.

Dog's piercings include a heavy steel ring through his septum and two more through the lobes of both ears. The Alphas believe that the Source grants the wearers of these rings heightened senses of smell and hearing.

My piercings are through my nipples, symbolic of the courage in my heart.

And of course, we both received piercings in one other place as well.

Our cocks.

Sloane is pierced now too. Her piercings match ours and are meant to symbolize and strengthen her bond to each member of the pack. The ring through her eyebrow binds her to Kane. The one through her nostril binds her to Dog. And the one through her nipple, my favorite, is the one that binds her to me.

And last, to chain her body to the pack as a whole, she wears a piercing through the soft skin that hoods her luscious clit.

Just thinking of that sends a surge of blood to my cock, swelling my member beneath my loincloth.

I struggle to push those thoughts out of my mind.

Right now, I need to focus on the mission at hand.

After about thirty minutes of picking our way through the tunnels, the air starts to change. The stir of a light breeze brushes my skin.

“Turn off the light,” I whisper to Sloane.

She does so, and we are immediately drenched in blackness. But as our eyes begin to adjust, it becomes apparent that the blackness is not total. There is a cool, silvery light up ahead.

We are near the exit.

The mouth of the mine is almost impossible to see from the outside as it is well-hidden behind a tumble of large boulders

and a few scrubby plants so that the opening appears to be little more than a shadow in the rocks.

I poke my head out first, enjoying the breath of the wind in my hair after the close, stuffy air of the caves. Overhead, the night sky is splashed with the pale splendor of the Milky Way. The Quarantine Wall is an ominous shadow in the distance.

We are out of the Zone.

This is the farthest I've ever ventured. I've never gone beyond this point before, but soon we will be travelling much, much farther, all the way to the Outsiders' city.

Sloane pokes her head out as well, followed by Dog and then Kane.

"Can they see us from the wall?" Sloane's small voice whispers at my ear.

Dog answers from the darkness.

"They probably could if one of the snipers trained his scope in our direction. But they won't do that. The guards always keep their attention focused *inside* the wall. They aren't expecting any danger from outside the Zone."

Kane's voice grumbles quietly behind us.

"That's all well and good, but how are we going to reach the Outsiders' city? As I understand, it's at least fifty miles or more. Surely we're not going to travel all that way on foot out in the open?"

All three of us Alphas turn toward Sloane.

“Right,” she stammers nervously. “So...I hadn’t really planned that far ahead. We’ll have to kind of play it by ear.”

We are quiet for a minute as we all think. It is Dog who breaks the silence.

“There should be patrols running around the outside perimeter of the wall every hour or so to check. Perhaps we could hijack one of the patrol vehicles.

Sloane thinks for a moment, then she nods in the moonlight.

She stands up and starts stripping off her clothing, first pulling her white tank top over her head and tossing it aside before next peeling off her shorts and panties to reveal the sexy tuft of pubic fur. Her piercing catches the moonlight and glints.

Once more, my cock pulses with desire, half lifting my loincloth. The sight of our omega’s naked flesh has a similar effect on Dog and Kane.

“What are you doing?” I ask with surprise.

As beautiful as the sensuous curves of her body look in the soft glow of the moon and stars, this is hardly an appropriate time for mating.

“I have a plan,” Sloane whispers as she shucks off her boots and peels off her socks.

“Care to share it with us?” Kane asks.

Sloane is now completely nude. She is a silver goddess in the moonlight. I’m unable to keep my eyes from roving over her exquisite body—the sumptuous swell of her round breasts

with their perpetually stiff, suckable peaks. The flare of her fertile hips below her small waist. And of course, her gorgeous cunt.

She turns toward me, eyes gleaming.

“Truk, your fangs are the sharpest. I need you to make me bleed.”

CHAPTER 31: SLOANE

The twin headlights pierce the night, growing larger and brighter as the transport vehicle approaches. Soon I can hear the rumble of the engine and then the crunch of the heavy tires rolling over the gravel and hard-packed earth.

When it's a few yards away, the vehicle skids to a stop, sending up a cloud of dust. The headlights are right in my face now, blinding me, and bathing my naked body in light.

Warm trickles of blood run down my belly, thighs, and arms.

There comes the ratcheting sound of the parking brake being set, and a moment later, the doors on both sides of the vehicle swing open. Two guards dressed in black combat gear hop out, their heavy boots crunching along the ground as they stride to the place where I'm sprawled out.

"What in the fuck is this?" the driver hisses.

"Shit, I don't know, but it looks like she took a beating."

"Yeah but how the hell did she even wind up out here?"

I lift my arm weakly toward them and groan, pretending to be in great pain.

The truth of the matter is that my wounds are only superficial. Truk was reluctant to harm me at first, but after I explained my plan, he finally gave in, using his sharp fangs to nick my flesh, opening a dozen tiny cuts. The blood looks a lot worse than it really is.

I figured if a helpless, naked woman is a good distraction, then a helpless, naked, *bleeding* woman is even better.

So far, the plan seems to be working.

“Please,” I groan weakly. “Help me...”

The two Marines drop into a crouch on either side of me.

“Damn, she’s beautiful,” one of them gasps.

His companion, the driver, backhands his arm in annoyance.

“Stow it, you idiot. Can’t you see she’s badly hurt.” Turning toward me, he adds. “Don’t worry, Miss. You’re safe now.”

“Hey,” the other one says, “Those piercings. Is she a—“

Before he has a chance to finish his thought, a dark form emerges from the shadows, and a muscled arm slips expertly around his neck, cutting off his air and bloodflow. It’s Dog, using that sleeper hold that he employed so expertly on me once before.

The driver’s eyes go wide with shock, and his hand reaches for the pistol strapped to his thigh, but before he has a chance to draw, another even bigger shadow descends upon him.

He is not as lucky as his companion.

Kane’s hands clutch the driver’s head. His oversized fingers almost completely enveloping the man’s skull. The soldier opens his mouth to scream, but before any sound can emerge, Kane gives his head a violent twist.

The only sound is the dull crack of his spine breaking. His muscles tense briefly as if experiencing an electric shock, then

his body goes limp.

My stomach turns.

I speak in a whisper, keeping my voice low to avoid alerting the guards on the wall above.

“Kane, I thought we agreed, no killing unless absolutely necessary.”

“As far as I’m concerned,” he growls. “It is absolutely necessary to kill all Outsiders.”

The other Marine slumps in Dog’s grip as the effects of the choke hold send him into unconsciousness. Behind him, Truk appears from the shadows to join us.

“Kane,” I whisper again, more insistently this time. “Please...”

He nods toward the dead body at his feet.

“It *was* necessary. He was reaching for his gun.”

But I know damn well that’s not the reason he snapped the Marine’s neck. As far as Kane is concerned, the only good Outsider is a dead one. However, we don’t need his vengeful bloodlust getting in the way of the mission. And more than that, some of the Marines we encounter might be people I know.

My beef is with the people in charge of SynerGen, not the grunts on the ground doing their dirty work.

“Can we discuss this once we’re on the road?” Dog hisses.

“We need to move before we get spotted.”

He’s right. We need to get out of here.

Dog has lifted the unconscious soldier, and Truk takes the man's legs, and they are carrying him toward the back of the idling vehicle. I move to help Kane lift the dead man, but he denies my assistance and flings the lifeless body over his shoulder like it was a sack of laundry before marching off toward the rear of the vehicle as well.

I follow.

The interior of the transport carrier is lined with two benches along both walls. There is a cargo trunk against the back of the driver's cabin, along with a weapons rack stacked with heavy rifles, ammunition magazines, and grenades.

The Alphas toss the two Marines into the rear bed of the transport.

"All right," Dog says in a hushed voice. "Kane and Truk, you get in the back. Restrain the live one and hide the bodies in that trunk if there's room. Sloane, you'll ride up front with me. You can put these on once we're on the road."

He hands me my clothes and boots.

Kane growls low.

"Who put you in charge, *Dog*?"

Again, he pronounces Dog's name with an obvious note of disdain. If it gets under Dog's skin, however, he doesn't show it.

"I'm assuming that you don't know how to drive, Kane."

Kane's face pinches with annoyance again.

“Besides,” Dog goes on. “If we have to stop and debate every step of the way, this mission isn’t going to come off well.”

“Fine,” Kane grumbles.

He and Truk hop into the back of the vehicle, and we shut the hatch behind them, taking care to be as quiet as possible. Then we head to the cab and hop in, me in the passenger seat and Dog behind the wheel.

He puts the vehicle in gear and we rumble off into the night, leaving the Quarantine Wall and the Zone far behind.

CHAPTER 32: DOG

We're making good time.

Right about now, those two Marines in the lockbox in the back are missing their patrol check-in. Pretty soon, that whole sector of the Quarantine Wall will be on high alert.

But we're already long gone.

Just a few more minutes, and we'll be inside the city.

The colossal tiered structure of the hive looms in front of us. It is like a giant, industrial termite mound rising into the night.

Level upon level of grimy spires and belching smoke stacks all connected with a network of roadways and train rails. Massive searchlights sweep through the sky above, illuminating the miasma of smog that hangs over the city like an evil spirit.

A few minutes more, and we're inside the perimeter, following the winding, twisting overpasses that slither through the polluted heart of the city, lit by the nauseating orange fluorescence of chemical glow-globes.

There's nothing I hate more than returning to the city hive after a long excursion into the Zone.

Luckily, this will be the last time.

Whether we succeed or fail, after tonight, I'll never have to see this godforsaken shithole again.

Kane's voice growls through the grate that connects the cab of the transport to the hold in the rear.

“How much longer?”

“We’re almost there,” Sloane answers.

She’s right. The claustrophobic stacks of towers and tightly packed habitation units seem to be pulling back, and ahead, through the haze of smog, the twin snakes of the SynerGen logo appear, glowing with a coldly sinister blue light.

This is it.

SynerGen headquarters.

This is where everything began, and this is where it’s going to end, for better or for worse.

“How are we going to get inside?” Sloane asks from the passenger seat.

I glance over at her.

Her beauty never ceases to amaze me. Even now, in her grimy tank top and tattered shorts, her skin smudged with dirt and flecks of dried blood, she is breathtakingly gorgeous. Hot desire surges through me as I gaze into those perfect, pale blue eyes.

“I have a plan,” I answer. Then I call to Kane and Truk in the back, “Here’s how we’re going to do this. You two Alphas are our prisoners. Just keep quiet back there and let me do the talking. But when I open the rear hatch, be ready.”

I drive the vehicle around to the rear of the facility and pull into the utility garage in the back like I own the place. It is spacious and brightly lit, with some random pyramids of metal

crates stacked by the walls. A pair of security officers are on duty, relaxing by the door and smoking cigarettes. When they see us arrive, they look a little surprised.

When they see me step out, however, their surprise turns to outright shock.

Almost in perfect unison, they drop their cigarette butts, and their hands dip to the guns at their hips.

“Easy guys,” I say nonchalantly, raising my hands palms out. “Me and the lady are with SynerGen’s private corps.”

Sloane has slipped out of the passenger seat. The security officer’s eyes turn toward my mate, and I struggle to suppress the surge of violent jealousy at the way their eyes bug out. In my mind’s eye, I briefly fantasize about gouging those eyeballs out with my thumbs.

But I maintain a cool exterior. I pluck the dog tags hanging around my neck and give them a friendly jangle.

“See. We’re Marines.”

The nearest guard squints at my tags, then raises his eyes and squints at my face. He and his buddy exchange a perplexed glance.

“We’ll need to perform a retinal scan for ID.”

“Of course.”

As the guards retrieve the scanner, I cut my eyes toward Sloane and we pass an almost psychic understanding of what

comes next. We need to be ready to act at a moment's notice if shit goes sideways.

While one of the guards waits in the background, palm still resting on the handle of his gun and eyes still resting on Sloane's chest, the other one steps forward with the scanner—a handheld device not much bigger than a phone.

He scans me first and then inspects the results.

“Dog?” He mutters. “That’s seriously your name?”

“Codename,” I reply, trying my best to hide my annoyance.

“You gonna check the lady?”

“Right.”

He steps over toward Sloane and licks his lips as he looks her up and down. She wiped away most of the dried blood, but some of the red nicks and scratches are still showing.

“Y-you okay, Miss?” he stutters. “Looks like it’s been a rough night, huh?”

He gives Sloane his best smile. She just rubs her nose with her knuckle, a tough gesture reminiscent of a prize fighter.

“I’ll live.”

The guard nods and raises the scanner to check Sloane’s lovely blue eyes. He checks the readout. When it takes longer than expected, my muscles begin to tense in preparation.

“Shit,” the guard half whispers. “Lance Corporal Sloane? It lists your status as M.I.A. in the Quarantine Zone.”

“That obviously needs to be updated, doesn’t it?” Sloane says coolly.

Even though he’s a good foot taller than her, the security guard damn near withers underneath Sloane’s tough, blue gaze.

“Yeah, I suppose so.” He glances back toward his companion, who shrugs, then turns toward me again. “Look, I’m sorry but you need special clearance to get in this way. I’d better call up the colonel and let him know you’re here.”

His hand goes for the comm device on his belt.

“Hang on,” I say, keeping my voice level. “We’ve brought some sensitive cargo back with us, soldier. You’d better have a look so you can let the colonel know about that too. You know, so you don’t have to annoy him with an extra message.”

Beads of sweat have popped out along the guard’s upper lip.

He’s nervous as hell. I give him a friendly smile.

“Y-yeah, right,” he chokes out. “Good idea. Let’s have a look.”

He nods toward his companion, who jogs over to join us.

I lead them around to the rear of the truck.

“Just wait til you see this.”

As soon as I swing the hatch open, two pairs of arms dart out and seize the petrified guards, dragging them into the back of the vehicle before the men have a chance to react—before they even have a chance to make so much as a peep.

Truk gives his guard a swift right cross that drops the man to the floor of the vehicle. The guard is knocked out instantly. He

doesn't even feel a thing.

Kane's quarry, on the other hand, doesn't have it quite so easy.

The bearded Alpha has the security officer pinned against the interior wall of the transport, both fists clasped tightly around the man's throat. As I watch, the man's face goes through a rapid succession of colors, from red, to plum purple, to a shocking shade of blue. His eyes are shot with veins and seem to be on the verge of popping out of their sockets. Wet sounds are burbling past his swollen tongue.

"Kane," Sloane hisses. "You don't have to kill him."

The Alpha ignores her. The muscles of his forearms ripple as he squeezes his victim's throat. The man's boots scabble frantically at the floor of the vehicle.

"He's a human being," Sloane persists. "He could have a wife and kids." When that doesn't work, she adds. "He could have a sister."

Something softens briefly in Kane's face, then it hardens again. He snarls angrily, loosens his grip, and strikes the guard across the chin, knocking him out but not killing him.

"Happy?" he rasps at Sloane.

Sloane doesn't answer, but I see her shoulders sag as she exhales a sigh of relief.

"Come on," I say as I hop into the back of the vehicle. "Let's get these guys restrained. Their access cards will get us inside the building."

CHAPTER 33: SLOANE

I peer around the corner of the alcove, watching the backs of the squad of patrolling guards as they make their way down the sterile, brightly lit corridor and finally disappear around a corner. The sound of their boots ringing on the linoleum floor gradually fades away into the distance.

The only other noises are the fluorescent buzzing of the panels overhead flooding the hallway with light and the soft sound of the three enormous Alphas breathing behind me.

“OK, coast is clear.”

I motion my mates forward and we stride down the corridor in the direction of the central communication hub where we will transmit Lily’s message out to the rest of the city hive.

Assuming, of course, that I can figure out how the hell to do that.

Dog walks alongside me, barefoot and unclothed except for his usual form-fitting black shorts and the dog tags jangling on his chest.

Kane and Truk, meanwhile, have taken up position behind us. They are both in disguise, dressed in security guard uniforms. The outfits are way too small for them, and the fabric is pulled so taut around their oversized Alpha physiques that little ovals of skin are showing through between buttons that are hanging on for dear life.

In Kane's case, the seams along his shoulders have even begun to split, and he has to walk with stiff, awkward movements to keep from completely shredding his uniform. Truk's long hair is piled up beneath his black uniform cap. Neither one of them is wearing boots.

In short, they look frigging ridiculous.

Should we happen upon any actual guards or scientists in this corridor, they would see through the flimsy disguises in an instant.

But that's not what we're going for.

All we need is enough of a disguise to throw off the idiots watching the security cameras lining the hallways, and that shouldn't be too tough. I've been inside the security room before, and I know how the slackers in there operate.

It's a joke. A multi-million dollar security setup rendered basically pointless because the dopes who are supposed to be watching the screens are barely paying attention, dozing in and out of a carb-induced coma from all of the donuts they've been stuffing into their faces.

So far, the plan has worked.

It seems nobody has taken notice, and we've managed to avoid running into any other squads of real security.

Just a few more yards, and we'll be at the central communication hub. We may not make it out of here alive, but at least we'll be able to transmit Lily's message. Just a few more yards...

The fine hairs on the back of my neck are prickling.
Something is up. This has been way too easy.

Beside me, Dog pauses. He can sense it too. His nostrils flare
as he catches a scent.

Something is wrong.

A split second later, I catch a whiff of it too—the pungent
stench of cigar smoke.

“Run!” Dog growls under his breath.

But before we have a chance to react, a hidden door emerges
from the ceiling and floor and crashes shut like a pair of metal
jaws, blocking off the entire corridor ahead of us.

All four of us spin around to retreat the other way, but
immediately, an identical door clamps shut on the other side as
well, trapping us inside this section of corridor.

Kane bellows with rage, and flings himself into the door,
pounding it with his fists and ramming it with his shoulder.

It doesn't budge.

Truk and Dog, meanwhile, take a more methodical approach,
searching along the walls and the edges of the doors for a
panel, a crevice, anything that might allow us to escape, but of
course, there is nothing.

We're fucked.

After another minute of calamitous roaring and battering of the
door to no avail, Kane drops back on the floor defeated,
huffing and growling with exhaustion.

“You all done there, wild man?”

There is a small barred window set into the door, and a voice like crushed gravel drifts through on a wave of curling cigar smoke.

“Sloane,” the voice calls through the grate. “I expressly ordered you not to fuck your mission up. Do you remember that?”

Colonel Fulgore. That bastard.

“But what did you go and do?” The Colonel continues. “Just as expected, you fucked everything up beyond all comprehension. Not only did you fail to get your hands on the target, but you got yourself captured too. And now look at you, turned traitor against your own kind. I knew we never should have sent a woman to do a man’s job.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss.

The Alphas growl like caged beasts.

Fulgore chuckles and puffs another plume of smoke through the grate.

“Well, at least you brought some nice Alpha specimens back with you. Dr. Frostgrave will be happy about that. Maybe we’ll be able to salvage something of worth from this whole shitshow.” Then to somebody else outside, he says. “Give ‘em the gas.”

Pale tendrils of vapor begin pouring out of several small grates positioned around the ceiling. Once more, Kane flings himself

at the heavy, steel doors with renewed furor, but again it has no effect.

Fulgore laughs again.

“Your persistence is admirable, Alpha. No surrender. We can work with that.”

Kane’s exertion is making him breathe heavily, drawing more and more of the gas into his lungs.

“Kane,” I call out, “Stop, it’s—“

But it’s already too late. The chamber is filling up with the fumes. Already, I can feel myself growing light headed. I start to collapse. Truk catches me and eases me to the floor one moment before his own legs give out. He hits the ground behind me with a heavy thump, followed by two more thumps that are Dog and Kane going down.

“Sweet dreams.” The colonel’s voice now sounds like it’s a million miles away. “Catch you animals on the flip side.”

I take one last helpless gulp of air, and the noxious gases fill my lungs completely. The heavy, sleepy feeling overcomes me, and as I drop off into unconsciousness, there is only one thought that occupies my mind.

We have failed.

I have failed.

CHAPTER 34: SLOANE

I wake up feeling like I've got the worst hangover in the history of humanity.

My head is throbbing with a dull ache, and my mouth is so dry that my tongue feels like masking tape on the roof of my mouth. Sharp pangs of hunger are gnawing at my empty stomach.

I ate before we set out from the Zone. How long have I been unconscious?

And more important, where the hell am I?

I crack my eyes open to find myself in a painfully bright room. It looks to be roughly twenty feet by twenty feet. I'm curled up against one wall, and the cold steel paneling is leeching the heat from my completely naked body.

The far wall is mostly taken up by a large window with a control room on the other side. As my burning eyes finally adjust, I realize that a familiar face is giving me a placid smile from the other side.

"Lance Corporal Sloane," Dr. Frostgrave intones as pleasantly as his cold voice can manage. "I hope you don't mind that I've been watching you sleep."

"Yeah, that's totally not creepy at all."

Frostgrave's eyes glide over my naked body, and I shiver.

“The body piercings are a particularly intriguing touch,” he says. “From a purely anthropological perspective that is. But I’m glad to see you are awake now, Sloane. How are you feeling?”

I feel like somebody sawed off the top of my skull, scooped out my brains, and took a massive shit inside my head before welding the lid back on. But I keep that to myself. I don’t want to give this jerk the satisfaction of knowing how crappy I feel.

I groan as I push my body into a seated position.

“I imagine,” Frostgrave says from behind his array of monitors, “that you feel rather unpleasant. My understanding is that the aftereffects of hypnoxin gas are comparable to a rather intense hangover. At any rate, that’s what I’ve been told. Personally, I’ve never experienced the effects of hypnoxin, nor have I ever had a hangover.”

Smug bastard.

I try to swallow, but my mouth and throat are as dry as a desert.

Frostgrave gestures toward one corner of the room.

“You may find that some food and water help to alleviate your discomfort.”

I glance where he’s pointing and realize there is a paper cup and a small styrofoam bowl. At first, I attempt to ignore the offer, but the clenching hunger in my gut gets the better of me. I’m still too weak to stand, so instead I crawl on my hands and

knees across the room. I can feel Frostgrave's eyes on my body the whole time.

It's totally degrading.

The cup is filled with plain water. I take a sip to loosen my dry throat, and then I turn my attention to the bowl. It contains a quantity of lukewarm, half-congealed gruel. I can't imagine a less appetizing meal, but right now I'm hungry enough to eat just about anything.

There're no utensils, so I just sit down and start scooping the slimy porridge into my mouth with my fingers, devouring it greedily.

Frostgrave stares at me creepily as I stuff my face. A broad grin spreads across his face, and he nods with approval.

"Yes. Eat, eat. You'll need your strength, *omega*."

The way he says that last word suddenly brings everything crashing back, and I immediately realize I don't know what has happened to my Alpha mates.

In a sudden surge of anger, I fling what's left of my bowl at the window, sending a splatter of gruel across the glass in front of Frostgrave's face.

"Tsk, tsk. You're a bad little omega, aren't you? We'll have to see about getting you housebroken."

"What have you done with my Alphas?" I shout, raising myself up on unsteady legs.

Frostgrave grins behind the dripping gruel and plucks at his white goatee.

“My, my, you’re nearly as protective of them as they are of you.”

I take a few wobbly steps toward the window, doing my best to appear as threatening as possible under the circumstances. I ball my fingers into fists, but my hands feel weak.

“What have you done with them?” I repeat.

“Patience, my dear. You’ll find out soon enough.”

I swing my fist at the window in a hammering motion, but it bounces off uselessly. Weak and unsteady, I stumble backward from the impact and fall on my naked butt on the cold floor, defeated. Hot tears are brimming at the corners of my eyes.

All I want is to see my Alphas. To know that they are okay.

“Careful,” Frostgrave hisses. He rises and stands closer to the window, looking down on my naked body. “We don’t want you injuring yourself unnecessarily, omega. You are much too valuable.”

“Fuck you,” I spit.

Frostgrave clucks his tongue again, chiding me.

“Oh come now, Sloane. Why are you being so spiteful, after everything I’ve done for you?” He makes a sweeping gesture with his open hand. “I’ve provided you these spacious living quarters. A nutritious meal.”

He taps his finger at the window where the splattered gruel is still slowly crawling down the glass toward the floor.

“For starters, you lied to me,” I snarl. “You said we were going into the Zone for a rescue mission, but it was an assassination all along. You just wanted me to get in striking distance of Lily so you could take control of me like your little puppet.” I glare at him through the window. “You just wanted me to get rid of a whistleblower for you.”

Frostgrave folds his thin, skeletal fingers and sighs.

“Yes, I confess, I lied to you, Sloane. I lied to you about a great many things.”

He returns to his seat where he reclines and tents his fingers thoughtfully.

“For example, there was that unfortunate but necessary little ruse about the advanced protective gear that would allow you and the other Marines to venture into the very heart of the Zone. The truth is, despite pumping obscene amounts of cash into R&D, we still don’t have shielding that will work that far into the Zone. But we couldn’t very well tell that to you stupid little grunts, now could we? Of course not. You would have refused to embark on what was essentially a suicide mission. So, we just had to take our chances. All of the team members, yourself included, were selected specifically for your genetic profiles. We chose those troopers who showed the highest likelihood of surviving the mutation process as Alphas. Of course, as you witnessed, it is hardly an exact science, and it is extraordinarily difficult, indeed, nearly impossible, to foresee

what transformation a person will undergo when exposed to the contamination of the Zone.”

A cold, evil light glints in Frostgrave’s eye.

“But I can’t tell you how pleased I was when I discovered that you had survived, Sloane. An omega warrior and an unwitting assassin. It was perfect. It would be so much easier for you to get close to Lily so that we could silence her for good.”

I draw my arm across my mouth, wiping away the residue of the disgusting gruel which is now sitting uncomfortably in my stomach.

“Yeah, but Dog really fucked that one up for you, didn’t he?”

Dr. Frostgrave’s brow furrows. He folds his fingers together.

“Indeed, that was quite the fiasco. Entirely my fault, I admit. I mis-calibrated and miscalculated Dog’s training and his deeply ingrained directive to protect you at all costs. It never occurred to me that he would intercede in order to keep you from killing Miss O’Neal.”

He lets out a wistful sigh.

“Oh well, live and learn. Our overly obedient Dog is being dealt with appropriately.”

Anger courses through my body as I think about what they are doing to my Alphas.

“Where is Dog?” I ask, raising my voice. “What are you doing to him?”

Frostgrave chuckles.

“Oh don’t worry, my dear. He hasn’t been harmed. At least not physically. He will simply be put through another round of intensive reconditioning to make sure that we can trust him to follow orders. The other one, however—the blond one with the long hair—he is proving to be most intractable. So far he is totally resistant to our conditioning methods. But he will break eventually, I have no doubt about that.”

Poor Truk. I can only imagine what kind of awful things they are putting him through.

I notice that he hasn’t mentioned Kane. I’m afraid to even ask.

“Anyway,” Frostgrave continues casually, “The mission may have been a failure, but there’s a silver lining. My late protege Dr. Lucian had dreams of breeding captive Alphas. He felt they could provide a very effective method of population control. Now, with you and your Alphas, I think it may be time to revive that program.”

“Screw you,” I shout at him. “If you think I’m going to willingly—“

Before I can finish, a sudden, sharp pang deep inside my core doubles me over. This is followed by a hot surge of goosebumps over my skin. My nipples and clitoris instantly stiffen until they are almost painfully erect.

In the background, I hear Frostgrave chuckle.

“Oh I don’t think willingness is going to be a problem, my dear.”

As the first wave of whatever that was passes, I cut a hateful glare at the doctor. My eyes catch the dripping gruel, which is still streaking down the glass. I notice a chalky aftertaste on my tongue.

There was something in the food.

“That’s right,” Frostgrave says, reading my thoughts. “An aphrodisiac, and an extremely massive dose at that.”

I cry out as another painful spasm wracks my body, collapsing me to the cold floor, where I writhe and moan.

This is like the heat that I experienced in the Zone, only ten times worse. My nipples are now so hard and swollen, they feel as if they might rupture. Between my legs, my throbbing sex is flowing with hot slick which is dripping down my butt and puddling on the floor.

Inside, the channel of my vagina clenches convulsively with need. I reach between my legs, hoping to give my own body the release it so desperately wants, but my fingers are weak, numb, and lifeless.

I’m lost in a fever of lust so overwhelming and intense that it fucking hurts.

“Please,” I groan through gritted teeth.

Frostgrave sneers.

“That’s right. You’re going to beg, omega. Every day you’re going to plead to be fucked and bred until you provide me with a nice litter of Alphas.”

There is a light knock at the door in the back of the doctor's control room. As I lie sprawled out naked and squirming on the floor, watching him upside down, he rises and answers the door.

It is a small, dark-haired woman with glasses. The same assistant that I saw in the briefing room when they first introduced Dog.

“Ah, Miss Hines,” Frostgrave says happily. “Perfect timing. Please, do come in.”

The woman steps into the control room and the mechanical door sighs shut behind her. She notices me lying naked on the floor, and her eyes widen with shock behind her glasses.

“Oh my,” she exhales, raising one hand to her mouth.

Just then, another wave of painfully intense arousal crashes over me. This is the worst one yet. A ragged sob rips from my mouth as my body shudders and convulses. My legs fall open, exposing my drenched and puffy sex. The air in the chamber is redolent with the scent of my excruciating need.

“Is she...Is she in pain, Doctor?”

“Oh yes,” Frostgrave says nonchalantly, strolling back to his computer station. “A great deal of pain, in fact. But don't worry Miss Hines, we are going to alleviate that momentarily.”

“We are?” Hines says in a voice that sounds both relieved and apprehensive at the same time.

She is staring at my writhing, moaning body with a look of intense pity. Her eyes meet mine for a moment, and I sense a

wave of sympathy. She quickly darts her eyes away.

A feeling of shame fills me, but it is quickly forgotten as an even greater spasm of agony hits me and I scream, a hoarse, plaintive sound.

I'm totally helpless. If I don't get relief soon, I feel like I might actually die from arousal.

Frostgrave chuckles.

“Well, *we're* not going to do it personally Miss Hines. Is the Alpha prepped for the procedure.”

“Yes but—“

“No buts, Miss Hines. Can't you see that the omega is deep in estrus? Bring in the Alpha right away.”

The woman nods and rushes to a control panel, and there is a clatter of typing as she punches in a code.

A door that I didn't even notice before whooshes open at the side of the chamber, sending in a rush of air that carries with it a warm and familiar scent.

It's him. It's Kane. He's here.

His smell instantly sets my mind at ease.

But it has the opposite effect on my body, ratcheting my lust to an unbelievable level. My thighs quiver, and my hole practically gushes my arousal fluid onto the floor in a spreading pool. When I speak, my voice is weak and shivery.

“Kane...Please...”

“Sloane!”

He rushes forward and crouches over me, massive and dark like a thunderhead. His naked body shades my eyes from the stingingly bright light. His powerful hands grip my shoulders, pinning my slithering body to the floor.

“Sloane, are you—“

The wings of his nostrils flare, and an immediate change comes over him as he drinks in my scent. His eyes roll back to the whites. His long, thick cock instantly stiffens to full hardness. Pre-cum dribbles down the steel ring through his urethra and drizzles on my open thighs, warm and sticky like raw honey.

He recovers himself. His eyes focus once again, but now the pupils are blown to wide, black, dilated circles. His voice is hoarse with the rut.

“Are you okay?” he finishes.

I nod. Despite the physical torture I’m experiencing, just knowing that at least one of my Alphas is alive and well is a huge relief.

Another convulsion twists my body, and I cry out. My voice reverberates through the hollow space.

“Kane, please,” I hiss through my gritted teeth. “Please, it hurts so bad.”

He grips his cock, readying it to enter me, but I place my palm on his throbbing, pink crown to stop him. He looks at me in surprise.

“Sloane you need this.”

I shake my head.

“Kane they’re trying to mate us,” I whisper, hoping Frostgrave can’t pick up my voice. “I don’t want that. I don’t want our children to be born into slavery to this fucked up corporation.”

Of course, there’s the possibility that I’m already pregnant.

Kane and the other Alphas have all come inside me multiple times. As much as I want to carry their offspring in my womb, I hope I’m not pregnant now. I don’t want it to happen under these terrible circumstances.

I bite back a scream as another dagger-like spasm stabs at my core. Tears of pain and emotion trickle down my temples.

Kane thumbs them away.

“Sloane.” His voice has taken on that deep, soothing purr.

“Sloane, there’s no other way. Your heat is too intense. Only a knot will quell it.”

In my heart, I know he’s right.

More tears well in my eyes. This is all my fault. It all started when I tricked him into marking me. And what’s worse, I’m the one who came up with this stupid plan. I’m the one who dragged us all into this mess. Now Dog and Truk are prisoners of that sadistic asshole, Dr. Frostgrave, and Kane’s children—our children, are going to be guinea pigs for God knows what kind of experiments.

He should just let me die—let this overwhelming heat burn me up until there’s nothing left.

But he's not going to let that happen.

He's going to save me with his knot.

Weak and half-dead with need, I try to flop myself over onto my belly, assuming that Kane will want to take me from behind as he has done every other time.

But he catches my throat, pinning me in place firmly but gently.

"Wait," he purrs. "I want to see your face. I want to look at you."

His eyes are filled with a deep and penetrating tenderness that I have never seen before. I would never have even expected such an emotion to reside in this brutal and vengeful Alpha warrior.

He positions himself between my legs. His pierced tip slides easily into my well-greased hole.

"Oh Kane," I moan as his cock sinks into me, filling up that emptiness inside.

"Just relax," he purrs. "Relax."

His arms cradle me, steadying my squirming body as I whine beneath him. The muscles of my pelvis ache as Kane's throbbing girth stretches me out. It still hurts a little, but it's just what my body needs.

He doesn't stop until he's seated to the hilt.

The hard curve of his cock piercing presses against my cervix, which is creamy and ready to accept his hot seed.

“Does that feel better, little mate?”

I nod, biting at my trembling bottom lip. Kane is being so gentle with me, so soft. His muscles are rippling with savage power, but he’s holding it back for me.

Another pulse of desire zaps through my muscles, and my pussy flutters around Kane’s naked shaft. We haven’t even really started, and already my skin is flecked with sweat. Kane kisses my face, my lips, my neck.

“Kane, I’m so horny,” I whisper. “God, I’m so horny I can’t stand it.”

He begins moving inside me. Long, gliding strokes greased by my thick, creamy excretions.

I notice voices speaking on the periphery of my senses.

“Doctor, if you don’t mind I’d like to be excused.”

Suddenly I remember we’re not alone here. The overwhelming sensations of Kane’s body—the warmth of his smooth skin, his comforting, masculine scent—had made me temporarily forget that we have an audience in the control booth.

My body floods with renewed shame as I turn my head and see Frostgrave and Hines watching from the booth.

“Nonsense.” Frostgrave is speaking to Hines, but his creepy eyes never stray from where Kane is penetrating me. “You will stay here and observe this important biological process, Miss Hines.”

“But—“

“Silence!” Frostgrave snaps.

Kane’s enormous hand cups my face and turns my head toward the other side of the room, away from the control booth window.

“Forget about them,” he whispers. “Just focus on me, got it?”

His voice is dominant and commanding. He’s not making a suggestion. He’s demanding. He’s telling me what to do and how to fuck. But at the same time, there’s a tenderness to it. A note of concern, of protectiveness.

“Just focus on me.”

It’s not a hard command to obey.

As his long hard cock pumps into me again and again, it sweeps away everything else—every bit of embarrassment, every ounce of pain. His strokes are so long and smooth. Sometimes he even draws his dick all the way out of me, but each time he thrusts forward again, my needy pussy swallows him greedily, taking him deep and squeezing tightly around his shaft with wet squelching sounds. Soon my thighs and crotch are completely slathered with my thick, slippery discharge.

“Are you ready to come for me, my little mate?”

“Yes,” I cry, not caring who hears. “Kane, I need to come so fucking bad. Please...”

“Good,” he purrs. His face is pressed to mine. I don’t even hear his voice. It just rumbles straight into my body and I feel it vibrating me. “Come, little omega. Come around your Alpha’s knot.”

A shriek rips from my throat as he plunges deep, and his hard knot swells within me, locking our naked, mating bodies together as one.

My climax blasts through me, tensing my muscles and relaxing them in waves of pure bliss emanating outward from my core to the tips of my frantically curling fingers and toes.

For one blessed moment, all of this disappears.

All of the bad shit goes away. The empty cell with its glaring lights and cold metal surfaces. The vile doctor and his assistant watching from the control room. The fact that our mission was a total failure, and now Dog and Truk are caught somewhere else in this inhumane facility.

All of that just drifts away like windblown sand.

And all that is left is Kane and the perfect, intense pleasure he's giving me with his cock, his knot, his strong but gentle embrace, and his deep, rumbling purr.

Spurt after spurt of his hot semen jets into my pussy, filling me up. Every drop is held inside by the tight seal of his bulbous knot.

"Oh Kane," I breathe as my orgasm finally subsides.

His orgasm lasts a little while longer. I can feel the pressure of his massive load within me. I swear I can even feel the tickle of it slowly seeping through my cervix and into my womb.

Kane gathers me up, careful not to tug out his knot, and carries me to the corner of the room.

I hug him weakly.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “I thought you would hate me after all of this...”

His big hands smooth over my naked shoulders, my spine, my bare butt, my buzzed hair.

“Hate you?”

“I mean, I’m an Outsider for starters. Then I led you into this trap. It’s all my fault.”

“Hush.” There is a tone of annoyance in his voice. “This isn’t your fault. We all knew the risk, and we all share the responsibility. Dog, Truk, you, and me. We’re a pack.”

His pierced lips brush against my triple mark on my shoulder.

“Do you mean that, Kane?” Tears are blurring my eyes.

“Of course. And I don’t hate you. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

My heart thumps a little faster hearing that. I realize my pulse is synced up with Kane’s.

“Hasker was right,” he says. “Not all Outsiders are the same. I thought they were only weak, cowardly beings that worshipped death. But now I see you are not like that at all. You are brave, Sloane. Braver even than any Alpha I’ve ever known. You are a treasure, and I will protect you until my dying breath.”

Tears roll down my cheeks.

“But I’m not an Outsider anymore,” I whisper, when I’m finally able to speak again. “I’m an omega. The Zone is my

home now.”

“And we will find our way back there, I promise,” Kane purrs.

“I don’t know how, but we will.”

From behind, I hear a shuffle from the control room.

Frostgrave’s voice sends a chill over the warmth of my tender moment with Kane.

“Miss Hines? Going somewhere?”

“The Alpha and omega are finished. I would like to leave, if
—“

“Nonsense!” Frostgrave proclaims. “The omega ingested an extremely large dose of aphrodisiac. The Alpha may have abated it temporarily, but her estrus will soon return. She’ll need to be knotted several times before we’re through here.”

And as if on cue, I feel another sudden constriction of desire in my core, where Kane’s hot flesh is still knotted tightly inside mine.

CHAPTER 35: DOG

Footfalls in the corridor rouse me out of my meditative state. There is a metallic sliding sound, like a sword being drawn from a sheath, and a painfully bright rectangle of light appears in the pitch darkness in front of me.

In the column of light that angles in through the opening, I can see my claustrophobic cell. Four concrete walls, not even wide enough to stretch my arms.

A pair of woman's lips appear at the opening.

"Dog, are you awake?"

The voice is small and soft. I recognize it immediately, along with the familiar scent. It is Shelley Hines. She assisted Dr. Frostgrave in my psychological conditioning. Actually, "assisted" isn't the right word. She was the one with all of the expertise, while Frostgrave simply took all of the credit.

"Where is Sloane?" I growl. "What have you done with her?"

I've repeated those questions a hundred times since we were captured. In fact, they are the only words I've uttered. I've asked the guards. I've asked Frostgrave. Every time, the answer is the same. Silence.

But this time is different.

"She's alive," Hines whispers.

In a heartbeat, I'm on my feet. My head thumps against the too-low ceiling, but I don't feel any pain at all. On the

contrary, a wave of energy surges through my body, brought on by this good news.

She's alive. Sloane is alive.

“Where is she? Is she okay?”

The lips move back from the slot, startled by my sudden burst of energy and the sudden proximity of my voice. I detect a strong scent of fear from the other side of the door.

“Dog,” Hines whispers. “I want to remind you that I have full control over you. If you make any attempt to attack me, or even to touch me, I only need to say the words ‘stand down,’ and you will immediately obey.”

I grunt in acknowledgement.

“How could I forget?”

The slot closes, plunging me back into pitch blackness. But the darkness is short lived. A moment later, the door of the cell gasps open. The fluorescent brightness of the white-walled institutional corridor is nearly blinding after hours confined to my lightless cell.

Before me stands Shelley Hines. She is a small woman, smaller even than Sloane. She is dressed in her usual white lab coat. A pair of glasses are perched on her nose, and her dark hair is pulled back into a bun.

The scent of fear emanating off of her is extreme. She's terrified of me, as she should be.

So why has she opened the door to my cell?

“Remember what I said,” she whispers in a trembling voice.

I nod.

“I won’t hurt you, Hines.”

She swallows hard before darting her eyes one way and then the other down the length of the hall. Then she motions for me to step out and follow her.

“Come on,” she whispers. “We have to hurry. I’ve jammed the security systems, including the cameras, but if we run into a random patrol, everything will be ruined.”

She races down the corridor, her simple flats ringing on the hard linoleum floor. I stride after her, my bare feet silent as a cat’s. My walking pace is enough to keep up with her running.

I could kill this woman easily. A quick motion of my arm. A twist of her neck. It wouldn’t take much. She wouldn’t have time to utter her precious little command to stop me.

But I hold back.

I don’t know where she’s leading me, but it’s apparent that this is not a sanctioned outing for me.

So far, the corridors are entirely empty.

“It’s the graveyard shift,” Hines whispers over her shoulder.

“Most of the scientists have gone home for the night. There are still a few guard patrols on duty, but that’s about it.”

After a few more twists and turns down the painfully lit hallways, we come to another heavy mechanical door set into the wall.

“This is it,” Hines pants.

She’s practically hyperventilating from fear at this point. Even though the corridor is cool, her brow and neck are popping out beads of sweat.

“This is what?” I growl quietly.

She doesn’t answer me but just taps a code into the keypad by the door. It whooshes open, leading to a small antechamber, like an airlock.

“Come on,” she says, beckoning me inside.

Another keypad and another even heavier door. This one looks as solid as a damn bank vault.

And for good reason. When it grinds open, I see that the room beyond contains something far more valuable than money or gold.

“Sloane!”

I nearly shout for joy, but I remember to keep my voice low. After all, we’re supposed to be keeping stealthy.

Kane is here too. He and Sloane are together in the corner of the cold, metal cell. The omega is wrapped protectively in the Alpha’s strong arms. A couple of days ago that sight might have made me jealous, but it doesn’t now.

Kane and I might have our differences, to put it mildly, but we have at least one thing in common—our desire to protect Sloane.

I’m glad to see that my omega is in good hands.

“Dog!” they both exclaim in chorus.

They leap to their feet and rush forward. I clasp Sloane’s body in a warm hug as she buries her face into my neck, squeezing me tightly in return.

“Oh Dog, I’m so glad you’re here,” she says, her voice cracking.

I turn to Kane. The big Alpha places his hand on my shoulder and gives me a nod. It’s the first friendly gesture he’s ever made toward me.

Then his eyes flick toward Hines.

“You,” Kane snarls.

CHAPTER 36: SLOANE

It's the woman from before—the one who watched us from the control room with Dr. Frostgrave.

She is trembling with fear now. Behind her glasses, her eyes are two white saucers of anxiety.

Kane tenses up and growls. I place my hand against his chest to pacify him.

“Wait,” I say to him. “I think she’s here to help us.”

I turn to the woman, I think her name is Hines, and I add “Right?”

She nods frantically. It takes her a moment to find her voice, and when she does, it is shaky and fearful.

“All I ever wanted to do was to be a scientist, to help people,” she says. Tears begin brimming at her eyes. “But I never signed on for...for this.”

She gestures at the room we’re in—the cold sterile cell where they have been keeping me and Kane prisoner and observing.

“What Dr. Frostgrave is doing is beyond immoral. I couldn’t just stand by any longer and let it happen. I’ve disabled the security systems in this sector. If you hurry, you can escape.”

I reach forward and take her trembling arm.

“What about the other Alpha?” I ask. “What about Truk? The one with the long, blond hair?”

Hines frowns and furrows her brow.

“Dr. Frostgrave has him. He’s ‘conditioning’ him with the pain glove.”

The pain glove? I don’t know what that is, but I know I don’t like it. My blood begins to burn with anger, but I keep myself calm. This is no time to lose my head. We have to stay cool if we are going to get Truk back.

“Come on,” I say moving toward the door. “We’ve got to find him.”

But Dog clutches my arm, stopping me.

“Wait. Sloane, If I go with you, I’ll just be a liability.”

“What do you mean?”

“My conditioning,” Dog says. “It’s too deeply ingrained. If Dr. Frostgrave commanded me to hurt you, I don’t know if I would be able to resist. I wouldn’t want to do it, but I’m not sure I would be able to stop myself.”

“So what do we do?” Kane asks.

“We’ll split up,” Dog says. “Hines, you’re obviously good with computers since you shut down the security system. If you take me to the central communications hub, we can still send out Lily’s message.”

Hines looks confused.

“Lily’s message?”

“I’ll explain on the way,” Dog says. “Meanwhile, Sloane and Kane can get Truk. Then we’ll all get the fuck out of this

place.”

Hines shakes her head, looking worried.

“It’s a big risk,” she says. “Every second you stay here, you’re more likely of getting captured again. You should just flee while you can.”

“No way,” Kane says decisively. “We’re a pack. We leave here all together, or we don’t leave at all.”

“And we have a mission to complete,” Dog adds.

We nod in agreement.

“All right,” Dog growls. “Let’s do this.”

* * *

Kane stalks down the corridor, and I follow closely behind him.

It’s a weird sight to see this hulking, naked Alpha, with his tribal hair and piercings walking completely naked down this achingly bright fluorescent lit hallway.

If anybody saw us right now, the sheer shock of it would probably give us enough time to attack them.

But I hope that doesn’t happen.

Ahead of me, Kane’s nose snuffles the air.

“We’re getting close.”

As soon as we stepped out of our observation cell, he was able to pick up a trace of Truk’s scent. While Dog and Hines raced

off toward the comm center, Kane and I followed Truk's trail down the hallway.

Kane halts in front of a big metal door. It doesn't look any different from the others we've passed. But the way his nostrils flare as he sniffs the air tells me this is the place.

In fact, I can even smell it too. Truk's woody smell is in the air. It's so strange and out of place in this hi-tech facility.

Kane nods and ushers me forward. There is a keypad by the door, and I punch in the code that Hines gave me.

The door slides open with a pneumatic hiss.

The room beyond is mostly dark. It appears to be some kind of hi-tech lab with work stations, swivel chairs, and computer terminals. From the looks of it, the room is empty. But then I hear a voice from somewhere deep inside.

"You *will* obey me, Alpha. Your resistance is only putting off the inevitable."

It's Dr. Frostgrave.

Kane and I step quietly inside, and I realize the room is much bigger than I first realized. A cold, bluish glow is coming from the far end of the room. As we prowl closer, I see that Frostgrave is there with his back to us, his attention focused on a glowing control panel.

And in front of him is Truk.

The Alpha's naked body is hanging by his arms. His hands are encased in big steel cylinders, and dozens of tendril-like cables

are running down his forearms and biceps, attached to his body with electrodes. His legs are similarly encased and wrapped in weird wires.

This must be the “pain glove” that Hines told us about.

Frostgrave speaks again, his voice cruel and sadistic.

“I am your master now, Alpha. I control you. Every muscle. Every *nerve*...”

He twists a dial on his control panel. There is no sound—in fact, it’s creepy how quiet the room is—but Truk’s imprisoned body twists in agony. His muscles pulse and flex, becoming striated with tension. His eyes roll back white and he grits his teeth.

But he doesn’t scream. He’s too tough for that.

I, on the other hand, am not.

I scream *for* him.

“Stop that!” I shout. “Stop hurting him you sick fuck!”

Frostgrave whirls around. Lit from below by the glow of his control station, his gaunt face looks absolutely monstrous.

Behind his glasses, his eyes are filled with hatred.

Until he sees Kane’s massive form standing beside me in the dark, that is.

Then his expression shifts to abject fear.

“No,” he gasps. “It can’t be...”

His finger jabs at a button on the console.

“Security!” he screeches. “Come quickly! Laboratory 731!
One of the Alphas is loose!”

There is no reply. His distress signal didn’t go through because Hines disabled the security systems.

“Looks like nobody’s coming to save you, Doctor,” I say.

“Too bad,” Kane growls, cracking his knuckles. “I would have enjoyed tearing them apart. I guess I’ll just have to settle for this one.”

I can’t help but savor the way that Frostgrave leans back in fear. His mouth is hanging open as if in a silent scream, and his body is shaking with terror.

“No,” he mutters. “No...”

His finger reaches down and depresses a different button on the console. With a sudden whirring noise, the electrodes on Truk’s body release, and the cables and wires withdraw back into the metal cylinders, freeing him.

Truk drops to the floor, his naked body weak from his torture.

“Listen to me, Alpha,” Dr. Frostgrave says in a shivering voice. “I am your master. You obey me. And I command you to protect me now. I command you to kill.”

Truk rises and looks at Frostgrave blankly.

“Kill!” Frostgrave gestures toward me and Kane. “Kill! Kill!”

Truk turns his face toward us. A low, aggressive growl starts rumbling deep inside his chest.

He takes a step toward us and Kane tenses up, shifting his feet into a fighting stance.

“Don’t do it, Truk,” he snarls. “I don’t want to hurt you, Truk, but I have to protect the omega.”

Truk’s growl gets louder. He takes another step toward us, and another. Now he is halfway across the room and almost even with the doctor.

Kane’s arm sweeps me protectively behind his body as Truk approaches.

“Truk!” I shout. “Don’t do it! It’s me. It’s Sloane. Your omega, remember?”

The blonde Alpha halts.

Even in the darkness, I can see the flicker of emotions in his eyes.

“Kill them!” Frostgrave demands. “You obey me, not some little—“

With a lightning quick motion, Truk turns on Dr. Frostgrave and catches the scientist’s face in his powerful grip, lifting him up until only the toes of his kicking feet are touching the floor.

“Did you really think you could break me that easily?” Truk growls.

Frostgrave’s hands claw at Truk’s wrists. His eyes are wide with terror behind his cracked and askew spectacles. His screams are muffled by the enormous palm covering his mouth.

“You know nothing about pain.” Truk snarls. “Just look at my scars, Outsider. I know more about pain than you could ever dream of. I learned from the very best.”

Truk’s fingers are digging into Frostgrave’s face, twisting the skin like a lump of clay. The doctor’s stifled cries rise in pitch.

“It’s too bad we don’t have more time, or I would teach you.”

I turn my face away just in time. Frostgrave’s muffled screams are cut off by a wet sound, like an egg being crushed in someone’s fist. This is followed a moment later by the sound of a lifeless body collapsing on the floor in a heap.

Good.

In the case of the Marines and security guards, I wanted the Alphas to avoid killing them if possible. They were just pawns who didn’t know what they were doing.

But in the case of a sadistic sicko like Frostgrave, he’s just lucky that his death was a quick one.

“Sloane!” Truk calls. “Kane!”

All of the seething rage has gone out of his voice, replaced by that happy youthful energy that he usually has.

His arms wrap around me, and he lifts me off the ground in a powerful hug and plants a big wet kiss on my lips. His hand is warm and bloody on my back, but I don’t even care.

“I’m so happy you’re safe,” he whispers in my ear as he sets me down.

Kane steps forward and rests a big hand on Truk’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asks with genuine concern.

“I’ll live.”

“For a second there I thought I would have to fight you,” Kane chuckles. “I’m glad it didn’t come to that. You must be the toughest Alpha I’ve ever seen.”

Truk beams at the older Alpha’s compliment. After a moment, though, his brow furrows and he glances around the room.

“Where is Dog?”

Right on cue, there is a sound of running feet from the outer corridor. A moment later, Dog appears in the doorway with Hines in tow. When he sees Truk, his eyes light up with happiness.

“Truk, you’re alive!”

“Never been better.”

Next Dog looks to me.

“We did it,” he says. “We removed the code that was blocking Lily’s transmissions from the Zone. Now the message is being spread all over the city, to journalists, news agencies, universities and businesses, you name it.”

My heart thumps a little faster. We did it. We completed our mission.

“Good work,” I say.

Dog hikes his thumb over his shoulder toward Hines.

“Really, Hines here did all the work. She deserves the credit.”

The woman steps forward from the shadows, and as she does so, her eyes fall on the dead body where it lies sprawled on the floor in an ever-widening pool of blood.

“Oh my,” she gasps. “Is that...”

I nod.

“It’s Frostgrave. What’s left of him, anyway.”

Hines turns her eyes away from the gruesome sight, and she looks a little green around the gills.

I place my hand on her shoulder.

“Thank you for this, Hines. We couldn’t have done this without you.”

She smiles weakly.

“It was...the right thing to do.”

I feel another hand on my own shoulder. It’s Dog. His face, as usual, is stern—all business.

“We’ve completed the objective,” he says. “Now we need to get the hell out of here.”

* * *

Hines directs us to an elevator at the side of the building that is away from the main areas, and we are able to make it down to the first level without running into any guards. Next we take a side exit out into a dark alley. It smells of rotting garbage and car exhaust, but the warm air feels good on my bare skin.

I feel free again after being enclosed in that cell.

We linger for a moment in the shadows where no one can see us.

“Hines,” I ask, turning to the woman. “What are you going to do? The backlash from this could be pretty bad. SynerGen may come after you pretty hard.”

“I know,” she says, but she doesn’t sound worried. If anything, her voice sounds relieved, like she’s finally gotten a heavy weight off of her shoulders. “I’ve got a place where I can lie low for a while. Hopefully, it will all turn out okay.”

“And if not?”

“If not, at least I’ll have a clear conscience.”

I give her a big hug, and it doesn’t occur to me until I’ve already done it that I’m completely naked. I blush and pull back.

“Be safe, Hines,” I whisper. “Maybe we’ll meet again some day.”

She nods, and then darts off down the alleyway, a small dark shape that merges and disappears into the dark.

“Come,” Kane says. “It’s time for us to go.”

“We need a vehicle,” Dog says.

The three Alphas and I edge toward the end of the alley, keeping to the shadows as best we can so nobody can see us.

That’s when I hear a familiar voice echoing down the street.

“My name is Lily. I am an omega.”

Daring to lean out of the shadows a bit, I peek cautiously around the corner.

Above the street is a massive display screen used for presenting news and advertisements, and there, fifty feet tall, is Lily's face. Her voice is blasting out from loudspeakers, the sound carrying down the street. And I can hear other speakers in the distance playing her voice too. It's all over the city.

"Now I live in the Quarantine Zone, but it hasn't always been this way. I used to live in the city like you. While I've been here in the Zone, I've learned things about the Cataclysm. Things that SynerGen has kept hidden for a long time. Things that you deserve to know."

It really worked! Now everyone is going to find out about what SynerGen has done.

In the street, cars have stopped, and people are getting out, staring up at Lily's image and listening.

"Here we go," Dog says.

Straight ahead of us is a big SUV. The driver, a middle-aged businessman has gotten out, and he is standing by the idling vehicle, his face tilted up toward the screen. The driver's side door is wide open.

Dog strides out onto the sidewalk, motioning for the rest of us to follow. The sidewalk is crowded, but everyone is so distracted by Lily's message that they don't notice the naked Alphas and omega creeping out into the open.

As Dog strolls up to the driver of the SUV, the man turns. When he sees us, his eyes widen and his jaw hangs open in surprise.

Right in front of him is Dog, a massive Alpha clad in nothing but black compression shorts. And behind Dog are two more stark naked Alphas, one with long, wild hair and the other with a dense steel-gray beard. Between them is a naked, buzz-cut woman—me. And the whole group is covered in metallic piercings.

The man is too shocked to even speak.

“I’m sorry about this,” Dog says in a voice that is commanding without being aggressive, “but we’re going to have to commandeer your vehicle, sir.”

The man doesn’t make a sound. His eyes just bounce from one Alpha to the next before he nods silently.

We pile into the vehicle and leave him standing there on the curb, still staring gape-mouthed after us as we drive away, weaving between the stopped cars as everyone listens to Lily speak.

CHAPTER 37: SLOANE

We drive back to the mineshaft under the cover of darkness, leaving the stolen vehicle where it will be found by one of the patrols. Hopefully, they return it to the guy we took it from. I don't like stealing, but in this case it was necessary. We had to get out of the city and back to the Zone.

Truk leads us through the mineshaft by memory since we have no light this time. We make it to the end just before sunrise, and we are able to slip away before any of the guards on the distant wall can spot us.

We made it. We are back in the Zone.

It feels like a homecoming.

It's strange, because the city hive is where I lived my whole life, but it never really felt like a home for me. I never felt like I fit in. But here, in the Zone, I have my pack, and our bond is so strong.

As we travel across the landscape of the Zone, I look at my Alphas.

We certainly are a motley pack. We're all so different.

But it occurs to me that there is one thing we all have in common. One thing that binds us all together.

We're a band of misfits.

As the only female soldier, I was a pariah in the corps.

Likewise, as a "tame" Alpha, Dog was despised and feared by

his own teammates. The half-breed Truk was treated as an outcast for being a Farlander even though he wanted nothing to do with those brutes. And Kane—stern, cruel, Kane—he lived in self-imposed exile as he wrestled with the loss of his sister.

Now, however, we are no longer alone.

Now, we have each other.

Fate brought us together.

We journey together across the Zone, heading toward our home in the city ruins. I can't wait to get back and tell them the good news about our success. Most of all, I can't wait to tell Lily. She has worked so hard and risked so much to get the truth out there, and now that has finally happened.

The morning is cool. The sky is cloudy, providing shade, and a thin veil of mist lies over the meadows and forest.

Around midday, however, the clouds dissipate, and the sun comes out, blazing hot, and before long we are all dripping sweat.

"You're hot, little one," Kane says.

I shake my head and press forward.

"I'm fine," I say. "It's nothing."

It's true too. I've been through so much in these past days, a little hot weather isn't going to stop me.

Kane smiles appreciatively.

“You may be fine, but I’m not,” he chuckles. “We should stop and rest. Let’s find someplace to get out of this sun for a while.”

I know damn well that Kane could travel for days without getting tired. Obviously, he has something else in mind. And the knowing glance he casts toward the other two Alphas just serves to make that clear.

“I know a good place just ahead,” he says. “Follow me.”

As we travel onward, the landscape around me looks more and more familiar. I’m certain that I’ve been to this part of the Zone once before. Then, as we come over a rise, I realize where we are.

“The collapsed overpass,” I gasp.

“That’s right,” Kane says, “The first place where we were all together.”

The shade beneath the ruined structure provides a welcome coolness. A light breeze ghosts over my naked skin. Even the Alphas sigh with pleasure at the sensation.

Last time we were here, this broken structure shielded us from the downpour of rain. Now it shields us from the scorching sun.

It feels good.

But I feel a bit guilty.

“Guys,” I say. “We need to get back to the city. Everyone must be worried about us. We need to let them know we made it,

and we need to let them know the mission was a success.”

Kane smiles and smooths his hand over my head. He seems to enjoy petting the fuzz of my buzzcut.

“Patience, my little omega,” he purrs. “They have waited for us for several days now. Another hour or two will make little difference.”

I smile back at him.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I gasp as something hard and warm brushes against my belly. When I glance down, I see what it is. It’s the hard steel piercing of Kane’s cock, warm with the sunlight and his own body heat, tracing a line up my belly as his member hardens until it is standing straight up. The slit of his urethra is pointed right at me.

A clear bead of precum, like a drop of nectar, wells from the pierced slit.

“Besides,” Kane says, “There is something else that cannot wait, my little mate. It has been too long since I enjoyed the pleasures of your body.”

At the sound of his rumbling voice, a cool shiver of lust runs through me, starting from my bare crack and traveling up my spine. Hot, needy wetness blooms at my center.

I look up into the towering Alpha’s face. His eyes are so dark and intense, penetrating deep into my soul.

“Too long?” I laugh, thinking about what we did at the SynerGen facility. “Kane, it was just last night.”

I gasp again as Dog and Truk sneak up behind me, one on either side. Their own hot, stiff, pierced cocks prod against my ass. My sex clenches with desire, as if begging to grab onto any one of these three dominant penises. More moisture drizzles from my shamefully wet hole.

Kane’s powerful fingers grip my throat.

“I’m not talking about what we did alone in that cell,” Kane purrs. His white teeth flash in his dark beard. “I’m talking about sharing you. Sharing you with my pack brothers. Sharing your soft, helpless omega body until your legs are too weak to walk. It’s so much better that way, don’t you agree?”

The last part is not directed to me. It’s directed to the other two Alphas. They do not answer with words, but with deep, rumbling growls of assent. They gyrate their hips, stroking their long, smooth cocks against me and drizzling my flesh with their precursor fluid. They nip and gnaw and suck at my shoulder, my ears, my neck.

My body starts to melt under the triple attention of these Alphas.

Three pairs of hands explore every forbidden curve and crevice of my body, tickling and plucking at my piercings. Three hard and pulsating cocks hump and rub against me. Three wicked Alpha mouths torture my skin deliciously.

“But Kane,” I moan. “If I’m too weak to walk, then how will we get back to the ruins?”

He purrs against my moistened lips.

“I’ll carry you, omega. I’ll carry you all the way back with my knot buried in your cunt if I have to.”

He claims my mouth in a kiss so hard and dominating that I’m sure it will leave a mark. His pack brothers devour me from behind. All three of them guide my body down to the ground, their actions perfectly synced up, as they decide how to divvy up my flesh and share my needy openings.

We stopped here under this ancient ruined overpass to rest. But there is no rest to be had. Not with three hungry Alphas on the loose.

EPILOGUE: SLOANE

six months later

Lily joins me on the floor by the base of the Source. She settles down cross-legged beside me and gets comfortable. The glow of the data slate in her lap lights her face up a pale blue amid the dimness of the chamber. Once she's gotten herself situated, she starts to read.

Checking the reports coming out of the city hive has become a daily ritual for us.

In the days and weeks following the release of Lily's message among the public, there was a massive uproar. People turned against SynerGen and the government. There were protests, which led to riots, which eventually led to all out chaos in some sectors of the city. There was destruction of property, looting, and in some cases worse.

But there were good effects too. Eventually, the government was pressured into bringing SynerGen down. The scientists and leaders who knew about the coverup were exposed and brought to justice.

With one exception.

Colonel Fulgore never went to trial.

When they came for him, he was found in his office with his brains splattered all over the wall behind him. In his hand was

a pistol, its smoke mixing with that from the stubby cigar smoldering in the ashtray on his desk.

Okay, maybe I'm taking some liberties with the exact details of the scene, but that's how I picture it in my mind.

Since that time, there have been other changes too. The government has been going through a major overhaul. With the great public outcry, the old guard of authoritarians are gradually being replaced by reformers. Things are becoming more transparent and open, and the people are becoming more free.

But it hasn't been easy. Lots of people have died in the process. And there are still so many seemingly insurmountable problems for the outside world, from overpopulation to pollution to crime.

Still, things are heading in a better direction.

We get our updates from a number of sources via the data slate. Some of the information comes directly from leaders and journalists to whom Lily sent her transmissions.

Some of the most interesting and telling information, however, comes to us from a mysterious source whose messages are always simply signed with the letter H.

As Lily finishes reading off the reports of the goings on in the city, she grows quiet and looks off across the chamber.

"Lily, what's the matter?" I ask.

"I don't know," she sighs. "It's just that I can't help thinking about all of the violence and destruction that we've caused."

The riots, the fighting. I mean, people have died because of this. Because of us.”

She turns her eyes toward me.

“Sloane, did we do the right thing?”

“Lily...”

I lean forward—which is slightly difficult with my bulging belly—and I place my hand on her knee.

“Listen to me, Lily. *We* didn’t cause any of that. People didn’t riot because of anything *we* did. They were angry at SynerGen for causing the Cataclysm, for killing millions of people, and for trying to sweep the whole thing under the rug. All we did was let people know the truth.”

Lily smiles. She takes my hand and gives it a squeeze.

“You’re right,” she says. “Thank you, Sloane.”

“Of course I’m right. I’m always, oops—“

As I sit back, I lose my balance and start to roll backward on my butt. Somehow, I still haven’t gotten used to having a huge pregnant belly yet. I’ve still got three months to go, but I’m already massive. I don’t know how big my litter will be, but it’s going to be at least three or four.

A pair of strong hands catch me from behind and set me upright again.

“Careful, little mate.”

I tilt my head back and find myself staring up at Dog’s face with his short beard and piercing eyes. His military cut has

grown out over the last months, and now his head is covered with dark, sexy curls.

“Thank you,” I say with a smile.

He leans down and presses a gentle kiss to my lips.

Kane and Truk come striding up after him, squatting on either side of me. They have been out hunting since dawn, and their skin smells of the forests and fields.

“How is our little brood?” Kane purrs.

He gently smooths his massive, rough hand on my swollen belly.

“They are very excitable today,” I laugh.

Right on cue, somebody kicks inside me, a tiny foot bumping against Kane’s palm.

“So I can feel,” he chuckles. “That one is a little omega, I believe. Strong and defiant like her mother.”

I smile at that thought. Beside me, Dog smiles as well, and he also touches my distended belly.

“I wonder how many little ones are in there?”

Here in the Zone, it’s not like the outside world. We don’t have ultrasound to look at these things. Only time will tell how big my litter is and how many baby Alphas and omegas are among them.

It really doesn’t matter.

Whoever they turn out to be, I will love them with my whole heart. I already do. And I know that their three protective

Alpha daddies feel the same way.

Truk, however, in his constant curiosity, can't seem to wait.

"Maybe I can smell," he says.

He kneels down and places his head between my open legs, pressing his face against my loincloth-covered crotch.

"Truk!" I shout, "What the hell are you doing?"

His head pops up with a quizzical look.

"What?"

"You can't just do that with people around," I gasp.

I notice Lily clapping a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter. It's hard to be all that embarrassed, I guess. After all, she knows all about dealing with three Alpha mates too.

"Four," Truk says, sitting back on his haunches. "Three Alphas and one omega."

Dog shakes with laughter.

"Come on, you can't tell that from sniffing," he laughs.

Truk flashes him an innocent look.

"I can, I swear. It's three Alphas and one omega. You'll see."

We all laugh once more, and then Kane purrs lightly at my ear.

"Are you all done with the reports for today, mate?"

I nod.

"Yeah, but I just want to sit here for a little while. I like it here, close to the Source."

It's true. There is something pure and refreshing about being near the Source, and with my three Alphas by my side, it's even better. I can feel our bond even more strongly, like bands of invisible light connecting me to each of them through our piercings and through the marks on my neck and shoulders.

The three of them settle in beside me, surrounding me with their intense warmth. I look at them one by one—steadfast, militaristic Dog, primitive, wild Truk, and savage, dominant Kane.

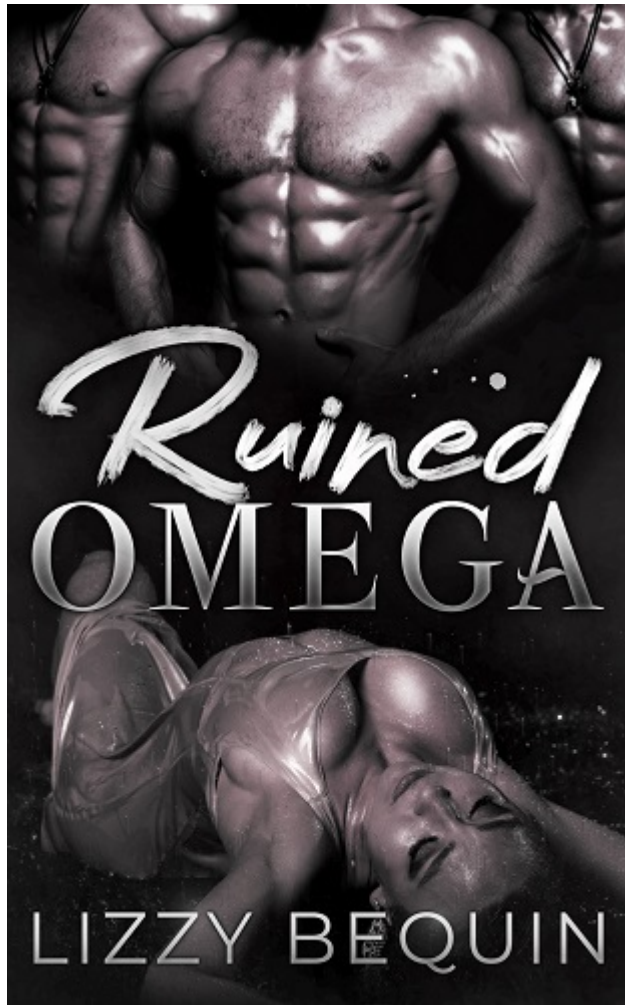
They are my lovers.

My protectors.

My guardian angels.

I look at them again, each in turn. I look at their brutal, masculine features decorated with steel piercings and their skin nicked with scars. No, guardian angels isn't quite right. These Alphas are my guardian devils.

And I am their omega.



BOOK 3:

RUINED OMEGA

PART ONE:

THE HIVE

CHAPTER 1: HINES

This restaurant is nice. Way too nice for the likes of me.

The place is dim and cavernous, fronted by floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto streetlights and the dense evening traffic of the city hive. Three crystal chandeliers suspended high overhead cast a warm, gentle glow over the well-dressed patrons and white tablecloths. A tuxedoed pianist is playing unobtrusively in the corner, and his tinkling jazz number mingles with the restaurant sounds—the clink of silverware and the soft hub-bub of conversation, punctuated now and then by the pop of a cork or a burst of elegant laughter.

Everyone here seems to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Everyone except for me.

There are several things I don't like about this place. For one, it's too open, too spacious. For another, it's too dark. Both of those factors have my danger instincts on high-alert. I feel vulnerable, like a sitting duck. But the worst part is that I allowed myself to be seated with my back to the front door.

Stupid, Hines. Real stupid.

For about the hundredth time during this dinner, I turn in my seat and cast what I think is a discreet glance toward the glass entrance.

“Everything okay?” Martin, my date, mumbles through a mouthful of food. “You seem nervous.”

“I’m fine,” I lie. “Sorry, I just...I thought I saw someone I knew.”

Martin just shrugs and forks another hunk of steak into his mouth before he’s even finished chewing the previous bite.

He doesn’t look anything like his photo from the dating website. A few long, greasy strands of hair have been combed over the top of his head in an attempt to conceal his bald scalp. His soft, ruddy jowls wobble as he chews his food. He’s expending so much energy devouring his steak that he’s literally breaking a sweat. He washes down his mouthful of meat with some red wine, draining his glass in one gulp before grabbing the bottle for a refill.

Then again, I’m not one to talk. After all, I lied on my own dating profile too. Oh, my pictures are real, all of them taken in the past couple of months. It’s the other information that’s false, like my name and bio.

“Your spaghetti isn’t good?” Martin asks, eyeing my barely touched plate.

“Oh, no. It’s really delicious.”

I muster a smile and take a bite of shrimp and pasta.

This time I’m not lying at least. The food really *is* delicious—shrimp Fra Diavolo on a bed of bucatini (not spaghetti) cooked al dente. It’s spicy, but not *too* spicy—just enough to tingle my tongue without overpowering the rich flavors of the herbs, pasta, and shrimp.

Unfortunately, I simply don't have much of an appetite tonight.

Paranoia will do that to a girl.

The truth is, I'm a complete train wreck. Yes, I managed to fix myself up for this date with Martin, but underneath my makeup, jewelry, and sexy but sensible red dress, I'm struggling to hold myself together. I've barely slept a wink in the past six months. And whenever I do sleep, it's never for more than an hour at a time. I always wake up shivering and covered in cold sweat. Whenever I leave my apartment, which is rarely, I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, checking to see if anyone is following me.

And I'm certain that someone *is* following me.

I've never gotten a good look at them. Just the briefest glimpse of a shadow—a big, burly shadow—ducking into a doorway or down a darkened alley. It's like one of those sleep-deprived hallucinations that flicker at the edge of your peripheral vision.

But I'm sure this shadow I keep seeing is no hallucination.

I'm sure he's real.

I don't know exactly *who* is following me, but I've got a pretty good idea. Somebody from SynerGen who wants revenge for what I did. Or maybe someone from the government who wants to tie up a loose end.

That's me. Shelley Hines. The loose end.

Across the table, Martin dabs his damp forehead with his napkin, loosens his sweat-stained collar with a hooked finger,

and goes back to work sawing on his steak.

“Anyway, as I was saying, something has to be done about it, don’t you agree, Sherri?” Martin asks, calling me by the fake name I used on my dating profile.

“Sorry,” I say. “Something needs to be done about what?” I hate how meek and mousy my voice sounds when it comes out of my mouth.

“About the Zone!” Martin nearly shouts. He stuffs another hunk of meat in his face. “The damn Quarantine Zone. I mean, something like that can’t just be left unattended.”

“Well, it’s not exactly unattended. There’s the wall, and—“

“That’s not enough!” Martin cuts me off, spraying a few flecks of food in the process. “It just isn’t safe, I tell you. If those things, those *beasts*, that live in there ever get out, ho ho ho...” He pauses briefly to swallow, then in a quieter voice he adds, “In fact, I’ve heard that it has already happened once. A few months ago. Rumor has it four of those filthy Alphas got out of the Zone and actually made it all the way to the city.”

I feign surprise and take a sip of wine.

The truth is, I know all about *those* Alphas. There were three of them, not four. The fourth was an omega named Sloane. As a matter of fact, I’m the one who secretly helped them escape back to the Zone.

The Quarantine Zone.

God, just thinking about it sends a shiver up my spine.

Comprising several hundred square miles, the Quarantine Zone is situated far to the north of the city hive where I live. Many decades ago there was a cataclysmic event in that region—a mysterious outbreak of mutations. A massive iron wall had to be erected around the Quarantine Zone to keep the mutants inside.

For a long time, almost nobody in the city hive knew the truth about the Zone. Most people assumed that it wasn't even inhabited anymore. Then, six months ago, that all got turned upside down. It came to light that SynerGen, my former company, had been responsible for the Cataclysm, and they had been covering it up for decades.

As a matter of fact, I was one of the whistle-blowers who brought that story to light.

Over the past months, the fallout from that revelation has been intense. SynerGen has collapsed, and following widespread protests, there has been a major shakeup of the government as well.

But that doesn't mean *I'm* safe.

Quite the opposite.

Out of fear of retribution, I've been forced to take certain precautions. I've changed my name. Faked my IDs. Moved to a different address in a less than reputable section of the city hive. All in an attempt to avoid the attention of powerful people who might want to get rid of me.

Like I said. I'm a loose end.

And then there's my research. I'm sure some people would love to get their hands on that.

For now, however, I make a pathetic attempt to relax and enjoy my dinner, forcing myself to take a few more bites of spicy shrimp and pasta, even though my stomach feels like it's filled with an unmeltable brick of ice.

At least I don't have to make much of an effort at conversation. The only thing Martin likes more than eating steak is hearing himself talk, and apparently he has no qualms about doing both at the same time. I quietly listen to him pontificate about the problem of the Quarantine Zone and what needs to be done about it.

I really shouldn't be so judgmental. After all, I did agree to this date.

Now, however, I realize what a mistake that was. But I'm desperate. No, I don't mean that I'm desperate for sex—I'm talking about *protection*.

With a mysterious figure shadowing me everywhere I go, I never feel safe. And I can't go to the police. For one thing, I don't have any *real* proof. Just a hunch. More important, if I explained to them why someone might want to stalk a boring little nerd like me, well...my whole cover would be blown. It wouldn't take the police long to find out about my faked IDs, and then they would throw me in prison.

So that's why I thought...

God, it's too embarrassing. I guess I thought maybe having a *man* in my life would provide an element of safety. At least I wouldn't be alone all the time—wouldn't be such a vulnerable target. That's why I started poking around on dating websites a few weeks ago. And that's how I ended up here tonight with Martin.

Now, however, I just feel ashamed.

It's classic me. Mousy little Hines, never able to take care of herself. Always depending on someone else, whether it's her parents, her employer, or a boyfriend.

Martin, however, is definitely *not* my boyfriend, and he's not going to be either.

Oh well, I can't very well get up and leave now, even though Martin clearly deceived me with his dating profile. His profile picture was from years ago, if it's even really him at all. And looking at his doughy body, I have my doubts about his supposed prowess in martial arts. Does he really even work for a private security firm like he claimed on his profile, or is that another lie too?

Whatever. I just have to bite down and get through the rest of the dinner. Then I'll go home to my depressing, empty loft and a long, sleepless night in a cold and empty bed.

Across the table, Martin is finally finishing up both his steak and his rant.

"Anyway, if you ask me," he says with an almost theatrical finality, his rubbery upper lip gleaming with perspiration, "I

say we ought to drop a *nuke* on that godforsaken shit hole. Hell, drop fifty nukes! Just level the whole God damned Quarantine Zone and be done with it.”

“But what about the people who live there?” I ask.

“The Alphas?” Martin snorts. “They’re not people, sweetheart. They’re animals. Dirty, filthy fucking animals.”

To punctuate this profound assertion, Martin slouches back in his chair and eases a deep belch out of his bulbous throat.

Yuck.

I don’t know what disgusts me more, Martin’s table manners or his opinions about the Quarantine Zone. Actually, that’s not true. The latter bothers me more. Way more.

I’ve got friends living in the Zone. And they’re not “animals” as he says. They’re human beings. But of course, I can’t say any of that out loud. Martin doesn’t know the details of my recent past, and I want to keep it that way.

I force myself to take a deep breath and another sip of wine.

Silently, I make an agreement with myself. Later, when Martin inevitably offers to drive me home, as I’m certain he will, I’ll just politely decline, take the late train back to my sector of the city hive, and that will be that.

Even just making that small, silent decision feels good.

* * *

But somehow, less than an hour later, I find myself riding across town in Martin’s hulking, luxury SUV. The rich leather

upholstery creaks as I shift my butt uncomfortably in my seat. The cold air conditioning ghosts over the bare skin of my chest, arms, and legs, reminding me of how exposed I am in this stupid dress.

Outside, it's starting to rain. A few sparse drops pitter on the windshield.

I'm not sure exactly how this happened. Part of it is that Martin defied my expectations. Instead of politely offering to drive me back to my place, Martin brusquely insisted. And me being the wimpy little pushover that I am, all of my fake decisiveness went out the window, and I gave in, as I always do.

But Martin's insistence wasn't the only factor, if I'm going to be completely honest.

There was also the thought of the seven long blocks from the train station to my loft, which is situated in a bad neighborhood. There are a lot of broken streetlights that haven't been fixed, a lot of dark alleys, a lot of places for a stalker to hide and ambush me on my way home.

There I go again, getting all paranoid.

"I can't believe you gave that dirty bum your food," Martin grumbles as he steers through traffic.

He's talking about a few minutes ago, when we exited the restaurant. There was a homeless woman outside on the street begging for spare credits. Martin practically flew into a rage at

the woman, threatening to call the police, saying that she was accosting us, accusing her of being a nihiloxin user.

But I wasn't so sure. The woman didn't have the appearance of a nihiloxin addict. The obvious signs—pale skin, dark circles around sunken eyes—were all missing. And besides that, her face seemed oddly familiar.

There are many more homeless on the streets these days. It's because of the collapse of SynerGen.

Yes, SynerGen was a corrupt corporation run by evil individuals, but it was also a big company that employed good people too—people who had no idea of what was really going on behind closed doors. Those people lost their jobs too, and because of the stigma associated with SynerGen, many of them are still struggling to find new employment.

Was that why that woman's face looked vaguely familiar?

Was she someone who used to work at SynerGen?

In that moment, I experienced two strong emotions: The first was a sense of sympathy for the woman. I couldn't help thinking that could just as easily be me. The only thing keeping me going these six months has been my savings, and those are running out.

The other emotion I felt was a sharp pang of guilt. If my suspicions about her were correct, my actions as a whistleblower had ruined this woman's life and put her on the street.

Giving her my half-eaten to-go box of pasta and shrimp was hardly a repayment.

“That damn spaghetti cost me eighty-seven credits,” Martin mutters, shaking his head. “Besides, what was that filthy bottom-feeder doing in the upper tiers of the city anyway? It’s illegal for bums to be up there, and for good reason.”

I roll my eyes silently and look out at the increasing drizzle.

The city hive is actually more like five or six cities, each one built on top of the others. The highest tiers are where the wealthiest live. The streets are kept clean, there are a few trees lining the sidewalks, and you can even see patches of sky between the towering skyscrapers—not that the sky is much to see, just a brown haze of smog.

As you work your way downward, however, the city’s tiers get progressively darker, dirtier, and more dangerous.

And that’s where we are heading right now.

I gaze out the window as the vehicle swoops down one of the curving ramps leading into the depths of the hive. The light rain disappears as we move into the dark heart of the city.

CHAPTER 2: TALIESIN

By the Source, this place is a human termite mound. Towers and spires piled up, one on top of the other, forming an ugly mountain of steel and glass teeming with mindless human life. I guess that's why they call it a hive.

Even up here on the highest tiers of the city, the hot air reeks of pollution and rotting garbage from the levels below. The roar of traffic and the shriek of car horns is so loud it pains my hypersensitive ears. Huge digital signs displaying video advertisements cast garish streaks of light across the building fronts.

The city hive is a storm of noise and color and smells. Especially smells.

Sensory overload.

I hate it.

But worst of all are the people. Hordes of them. I watch the crowds of pedestrians surging up and down the sidewalks like a tide of flesh and blood and bones. Their minds are so blunted by years of living in this place that they aren't even aware of how hot and ugly and smelly it is. It's as if their senses have been turned off. Each one is barely aware of anything beyond their own little bubble of consciousness. Ears plugged with earbuds. Eyes locked on tiny handheld screens, hypnotized.

Not a single one of them is aware of me, crouching in the inky shadows of the alleyway, mere inches from where they are walking, all of them lost in their separate waking dreams.

So be it. That just makes my job that much easier.

I turn my mind away from these musings and focus my attention on the glass front of the restaurant across the street.

That's where my target is.

She's in there with that pathetic excuse for a man.

From amid the white noise of traffic and pedestrians and rattling ventilation units, I notice another sound approaching. A low, warbling hum growing louder by the second.

Shit. It's a security drone.

It's a small, hovering orb about the size of my fist and studded with optical lenses. I don't see many of those down in the lower tiers of the hive, but they are plentiful up here in the wealthy sectors. Their main role is to drive off the homeless.

As the drone hovers past the opening of my alley, it pauses and turns toward me. There is a faint whir of internal machinery as its lenses focus and scan me.

Damn it. Even these deep shadows can't conceal my heat signature from this machine.

"No loitering," the drone says in a tinny, artificial voice.

"Code XJ933. Please move along, citizen."

"Fuck off," I say with a low growl.

Crap. This stupid thing is going to blow my cover. Still, none of the braindead zombie-citizens scurrying past on the sidewalk have even noticed. These people are worse than the betas back in the Zone.

“Citizen,” the drone continues. “You are now in violation of Code ZZ49B. Failure to comply with a municipal security drone. Please present your ident—“

My patience, which is already in short supply to begin with, abruptly runs out. I snatch the drone out of the air, palming it easily. With a swift motion, I crush it against the bricks of the alley wall.

“There’s my identification,” I mutter, tossing the remnants over my shoulder.

Half a second after, I realize what a dumb move that was. I’m pretty sure there’s some kind of system to alert the cops when a drone has been destroyed. This place will probably be swarming with police in a few minutes.

Still, I can’t leave yet.

Not now. Not while the target is alone with an unknown individual.

Luckily, I don’t have to wait long. Right on schedule, they come out of the restaurant entrance. One of them is the man—the little bald creep whose name I don’t know. But I barely even notice him. All of my attention is focused on his date, the woman in the red dress.

The target.

Hines.

As she steps out of the restaurant, a white carry-out box in her small hands, time seems to stand still. The chaos of flashing lights and blaring traffic seems to roll back until it's gone completely, and all that's left is her and that red dress that hugs all of her perfect, feminine curves. My cock thickens and twitches inside my jeans.

Tonight, she looks...different. Her medium-length, nut-brown hair is worn up, exposing the delicious curve of her neck. I like that.

Far less appealing, however, is her makeup.

Makeup is one custom of the hive-dwellers that I truly cannot understand. Hiding all that natural female beauty beneath a layer of fake paint. I don't want to look at the artificial cherry-red of her lipstick. I want to see the deep, natural crimson of the blood pumping through those plush lips of hers. And her eyes require no eyeliner or shadow to make them stand out. They are already perfect. Hazel trimmed with vibrant green at the edge.

The dress, however, is another matter.

The dress I *do* like, and I like it a great deal.

I like the way it leaves her soft, smooth shoulders exposed, just begging to be bitten. I like the way the top dives to the middle of her chest, revealing her deep, sensuous cleavage. I like the way the scarlet fabric clings to her flowing curves—her breasts, her waist, her wide hips. The lines beneath the

fabric hint at the joining of her thighs. That vision sends a surge of blood into my cock.

The only thing I don't like about the dress is that she's wearing it in public.

An ember of jealousy ignites in my chest. I don't want anybody else looking at Hines. I want that sexy little body all for myself. I want her locked away in some secret place where she's always safe, and nobody can look at her except me.

Source, what's the matter with me?

The woman isn't my mate. Hell, she's not even an omega. And more important, she's my target. It's my duty—my sworn duty—to *watch over* her, not to *lust after* her.

So I do my best to focus on my mission and ignore the dull, heavy ache in my deprived balls.

My attention turns to the man she's with, but that just inflames my jealousy even more. What the hell is she doing with a turd like him? I could crush that little bastard's bald head like it was a cantaloupe. When I notice him place his hand against the small of her back, I seriously want to do just that. I allow the vision of his head squishing red and pink in my fingers to play in my mind.

Heat rushes up the arteries of my neck. I'm on the verge of charging across the street and ripping that creep to shreds, but I hold back.

My mission is supposed to be secret.

I can't reveal myself to the target.

The bald man gestures and issues a brusque command to a uniformed valet, who sets off down the sidewalk at a sprint, weaving in between the crowd of pedestrians. While they wait, the bald man talks to Hines, gesturing wildly. He's ranting about something, not even letting Hines get a word in edge wise. She doesn't seem to mind, however. She's barely even listening. It's obvious she has zero interest in this guy.

That fact soothes my jealousy, but only slightly.

What is she doing with him anyway?

Out of the crowd of people rushing by, I notice a scruffy looking form moving toward Hines. My muscles tense instinctually, and my heart-rate quickens. Is this the attacker I'm supposed to protect her from?

But it immediately becomes clear that the person means her no harm. It's a homeless woman, dressed in layers of dirty clothing, a hood pulled over her head. The bald man gets irritated, tries to shoo the beggar away, but Hines gestures for him to be patient.

What is she doing?

She bends, talking to the homeless woman briefly. Then she hands her the white carry-out box. She's giving the woman the leftovers of her meal.

The woman's face brightens. She smiles and nods. I can't hear her over the din of traffic, but I can read her lips, even from here.

"Thank you."

A few seconds later, a different security drone hovers along their side of the street, driving the beggar off. The poor woman shuffles away, clutching the little carry-out box like it's the most valuable treasure in the world.

The scene makes me sick and angry.

Back in the Zone there are no homeless. The Central Ruins Tribe is one big family, and we would never let one of our brethren fall into such poverty and despair.

Here in the city hive, however, nobody seems to think that way.

Nobody except for Hines.

A moment later, the valet brings the man's vehicle around. It's a hulking monstrosity that looks like it should be a military vehicle except for the glossy, pristine black paint and the luxurious leather interior that I glimpse as the man squeezes his fat ass into the driver's seat.

They are leaving.

Time for me to follow.

I move deeper into the shadows where my motorcycle is hidden, mount up, and crank the ignition. The bike comes alive, engine snarling like a hungry jungle cat. There's a pleasing smell of burnt rubber as I peel out into traffic, and I nearly run down half a dozen sleep-walking pedestrians in the process. They hurl a few angry curses at my back before returning their attention to their tiny screens.

The bald man's SUV is easy enough to tail. The damn thing is so big it barely fits in one lane. Looks like somebody's got an ego problem. I follow them at a safe distance to keep from being noticed.

The sky has begun spitting a thin, dirty rain.

After several blocks, the bald man's vehicle divorces itself from the flow of traffic and takes a curving ramp that descends into the lower tiers of the hive.

I follow them down.

CHAPTER 3: HINES

Down here, night lasts all day long. Overhead, the sky is blotted out by the undersides of roadways and passenger rails. The streets here are narrower, the dingy buildings more tightly packed. In the chilly, artificial glow of the streetlamps, it has the feeling of an immense man-made cave of asphalt and steel. As Martin drives, I give him occasional directions, leading him finally to my decrepit loft on the edge of an industrial sector.

“Jesus, this is where you live?” Martin makes no attempt to conceal the disgust in his voice.

“Thank you for dinner,” I say as I grab my bag from between my feet on the floorboard.

“I’ll walk you to your door.”

“Oh no, really that won’t be necessary, Martin. I—“

But Martin is already out of the driver’s seat and rushing around to the passenger side of the car, his man-boobs jiggling beneath his shirt as he goes. I sigh, clutch my handbag, and step out onto the sidewalk. After the fresh, filtered air of the SUV’s interior, my nose is assailed by the smell of stale petroleum and rotting garbage.

Home sweet home.

Martin scowls at our surroundings as he walks me toward my building. It is a grimy looking industrial warehouse that has

been converted into cheap housing. Aside from squatters and nihiloxin addicts, I'm the only legitimate tenant. Half the windows have been busted out and glare down on the street like empty eyes.

The rain is finally starting to filter down from the levels above, leaking from cracked drainage pipes and spattering onto the sidewalk. A streetlight flickers intermittently.

As we ascend the half-dozen concrete steps of the front stoop, I mentally prepare myself to be firm with Martin. It's clear from his weird, nervous energy that he's going to try to get a kiss—maybe more. It's my own fault for not having more backbone so far—for letting him drive me home, letting him walk me to the door.

This time, however, I'm determined to put my foot down.

“Well,” I say, trying to keep my tone light. “I appreciate dinner, Martin.”

He stares at me with intense, creepy eyes. His forehead and upper lip are beaded with sweat again, and his breathing sounds hoarse. That can't be just from the five or six steps.

“Aren't you gonna invite me inside?”

“Listen, Martin, it was a very nice dinner, but—“

“I know who you really are,” he interrupts. Something has suddenly changed in his voice. There's a jagged edge of menace to it.

I do my best to conceal my sudden surprise.

“Martin, I don’t know what you’re—“

He clasps my arm in one of his meaty, hair-tufted fists. His grip is shockingly strong for such an apparently out of shape man. He gives my arm a rough jerk, pulling me closer to him, until I can smell his hot breath—bloody steak and the sour odor of wine.

“I know you worked for SynerGen before.”

Still I try to hide my mounting surprise.

“What are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t hard to figure out,” he says. “Not for a guy like me. I got connections, see? It was just a matter of pulling a few favors, running your picture through some face-recognition databases, and from there it was a cinch.”

“Do you like to spy on every woman you date?” I try to make my voice sound accusing; it mostly just comes out trembly and fearful.

“Ha!” Martin barks. “Don’t try to turn this around on me, sweetheart. Women always lie on those dating sites. I wanna make sure I’m not gonna get stuck going out with some ugly porker.”

I’m tempted to remind Martin about the mismatch of the pictures on his own profile, but I say nothing. I’m too nervous.

Exactly how much does this creep really know?

“But when I checked up on you, *Shelley*, I got quite a surprise. A former SynerGen employee who had managed to dodge the

witch-hunts by hiding her identity. Real interesting. And I can only assume, based on the measures you've taken to hide your past, that you were *deeply* involved with SynerGen. What exactly did you do there? Not an executive, obviously. High level scientist maybe?" He smiles, seeing the flicker of panic cross my face. "Yeah, that's it. You were a scientist."

I don't answer. My mind is racing. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins. Martin squeezes my arm tighter, and my thoughts turn to the cannister of pepper spray in my bag.

Martin's eyes scan lecherously down my body and back up again.

"One thing you didn't lie about were your looks. As a matter of fact, you look even better in person, sweetheart. A real piece of ass. It would be a shame for a pretty little thing like you to get in trouble with the law. But hey, I'm an understanding guy. I'd be willing to do you a little favor and keep my lips sealed." Martin gives his aforementioned lips a long, creepy lick. "But I'd expect something in return..."

"Fuck you," I whisper.

"You read my mind, sweetheart."

Martin gives my arm an even stiffer jerk, pulling my front tightly against his flabby paunch. I struggle to pull away, but his other arm wraps around my waist, holding me tightly against him. His hot, foul breath hits me full force.

"Let me go!" I hiss.

Then I feel it. It's so small I didn't even notice at first. Something hard pressing against my crotch. My stomach lurches at the realization of the disgusting man's arousal pressing into me.

"Come on," Martin says, "You know you want it. Don't be such a little prude."

My first instinct is to scream, but I don't. Screaming will bring the cops, and that will bring all kinds of questions. About my past. About my faked IDs...

I have to handle this on my own.

My free hand delves into my handbag, fingers scrambling for my pepper spray.

Martin, however, anticipates this move. He lets go of my arm long enough to swat my purse away. It drops to the stoop with a crash, spilling my belongings all around my feet.

"Stop struggling, cunt," Martin snarls.

He forces his face against mine, trying to kiss me. I squeeze my lips shut as hard as I can. My stomach churns with nausea. I should have screamed when I had the chance. I should never have let Martin drive me home. I should never have gone on this date in the first place.

I go cold, trying to turn off my feelings toward what is happening to me, what's about to happen...

But suddenly—mercifully—Martin pulls back, his face tight with concern.

“What the fuck?” he mutters.

At first I don't know what the creep is reacting to. I assume he's just pissed at my resistance. But then I hear the *sound*—a deep, menacing growl that gets louder and closer with each fraction of a second. Martin turns toward the sound, which is rushing toward us from across the dark street.

“Oh Jesus,” he whimpers.

I follow his gaze, and what I see there flash-freezes my heart.

It's a massive, heavy figure rushing toward us, drenched in darkness, his features obscured. A long coat flutters with motion, like an animated piece of shadow that has been ripped from the night and brought to life.

Instinctively, I know that it's the man I've seen following me recently.

My stalker.

My shadow.

Until now, I've only caught glimpses. Startling movement from the corner of my eye. Now, however, he's right in front of me, barreling toward us, toward me, with terrifying speed.

His eyes reflect the streetlight like the eyes of a hungry wolf.

CHAPTER 4: TALIESIN

As I follow the SUV into the lower tiers of the city hive, a weariness surges over me. I'll need another injection of Source Serum soon, but it can wait a while longer. Once I'm certain the target is secure.

Down here, the streets are darker and dirtier. The ventilation is terrible, and the hot air is so poisonous with exhaust fumes that it stings the inside of my nose. Frail humans with hungry eyes stare from street corners. The sidewalks are strewn with rubbish. The sound of traffic hums from the overpasses forming a ceiling above.

I know where the SUV is going. Back to Hines's place. I've been stalking her long enough to know where she lives, and it's nearby.

To keep from being seen, I turn down a side street, and sheath my bike into the shadows of another alleyway, even darker than the one I left behind several levels above.

This one is an alley where I've spent a lot of time lately.

The spot is located directly across from Hines's building. It gives me a perfect vantage point to watch her. To make sure she is safe.

I cut my engine, and wait, scanning my eyes along the street.

The place where she lives is right on the edge of an industrial zone. During the daytime, it's buzzing with activity, but now

it's quiet and the sidewalks are empty. An eerie pocket of stillness tucked away inside the bustle of the city hive. The only movement is the rainwater now weeping from the leaky drainage pipes of the levels above.

A wave of disappointment rolls through me, just as it has a hundred times since I first came to this city six months ago.

Throughout my youth, my one dream was to leave the Zone. To journey beyond the Quarantine Wall to the outside world. I'd heard tales of the miraculous machines the Outsiders possessed. Metal carriages that pulled themselves as if by sorcery. Flying machines that soared through the air. Little devices that allowed people to speak at great distances as if they were face to face.

Our own ruined city deep inside the Quarantine Zone still held traces and hints of such things from before the Big Change. It seemed like magic.

The elders of my people chided me for my far-flung dreams. They told me that the Outside was a cruel place where honesty was a weakness and the soul died long before the body did. No, the Outside held nothing of value for an Alpha like me. Better to focus on the world inside the wall. Find a pack. Find an omega mate. Make children and put down roots...

At the time, I scoffed.

Now I see how right they were. The city hive is a great dissembler. The people have cars but no where to go. They have medicine for every disease, but all of their diseases come

from their unnatural way of life. They have comfort but they lack dreams.

Still, something draws me to this place.

The elders were not entirely correct. There is exactly one thing of value here. One shining spark of light in this dark city.

I shake my head and remind myself once again that I'm here on a mission.

A few seconds later, the black SUV comes trundling down the dim street and parks within a pool of dirty amber light cast by a streetlamp above.

The bald man hops out and rushes around to the passenger side where Hines is getting out. Her jewelled earrings glint in the streetlight. Where I come from, those piercings would signify something different—a claimed and mated omega. Here in the city hive, however, they are merely decorative. Devoid of meaning, just like everything else in this place.

A gentle breeze sweeps down the street and brings her scent to me. As with her makeup, she has tried to mask her natural scent beneath the artificial aroma of soaps, shampoos, and flora perfumes.

But underneath it all, I can detect the real scent of her body, raw and wild.

She's not an omega. She's an outsider. And yet...

I snap myself out of it and force myself to focus again. I don't know who this man is or what he is up to, but I don't trust him, and Hines certainly shouldn't either.

But now they are climbing the stairs to the front door of her building. For a split second, I think she's going to take him inside with her. A sharp pang stabs at my pounding heart. A surge of hot jealousy floods my veins. My muscles bulge and knot with an almost uncontrollable rage.

It takes every ounce of discipline to keep my body still.

They stop at the door. My jealousy mounts. They are talking in low voices. Even with my keen hearing, I can't make out their words over the tattoo of my heart and the rush of enraged blood in my ears.

The man grabs Hines. He pulls her close. She struggles to pull away, but he forces himself on her, pressing his disgusting lips against hers.

Something inside me snaps.

Even *I* don't have enough self-control for a situation like this. The weariness I was experiencing before disappears, replaced by a roaring flame of jealous rage. My feet begin moving of their own accord now, pulling me out of the concealment of my shadows and across the empty pavement. An ungovernable growl rolls deep in my chest.

The entire street appears red to my rage inflamed eyes.

It's an illusion, but I want nothing more than to make it a reality.

I'm going to paint the street red with this bastard's blood.

Hearing my threatening growl, the man breaks his kiss and turns toward me saucer-eyed with terror. His rubbery lips

tremble as he gasps with fear.

“Let her go!” I bellow.

My words explode down the dark empty canyon of the street, bouncing back and forth between the walls of the buildings.

The man instantly releases her. He stumbles backward, mouth gibbering, eyes instantly filling with frightened tears. The scent of his fear fills the air, but that is quickly replaced by another powerful stench. My first thought is a broken sewer line, but I realize it’s coming from the ugly little bald man himself.

Source, he shit himself.

The little bastard actually shit himself.

I pause my charge, totally astonished. Never before have I seen such a shameful exhibition of pure cowardice. The man cowers, hands raised and palsied with fear. Tears run down his flabby cheeks.

“Please,” he blubbers. “Please don’t hurt me. Please I—“

“Leave. Now.”

I don’t have to repeat myself. The man rushes past me down the steps, stumbling and tripping over his own feet. He crashes to the damp pavement with a whinny of fear, scraping his palms and ripping the knees of his pants in the process. One of his designer leather shoes has fallen off, but he abandons it. He pulls himself up, panting and whimpering, and rushes to his SUV. A moment later, the chunky vehicle squeals away from the curb in a cloud of burnt rubber.

“Pathetic,” I snort.

“Stay back,” a tiny voice says behind me. “Stay away from me.”

As the jealous rage drains out of my addled brain, I realize now what I’ve done. Shit. I’ve exposed myself to the target. I was supposed to keep my identity hidden from her, but now my cover is blown.

Yes, it was my task to protect her, and yes, that bald prick was forcing himself on her. But I could have handled it differently. I shouldn’t have charged in growling like a fucking feral beast.

I turn to face her.

To tell her not to worry.

That I’m not here to hurt her.

But before I can get the words out, a sudden spray of fluid blasts my face, burning my eyes, nose, and mouth, and filling my senses with liquid fire.

CHAPTER 5: HINES

I keep the trigger on the pepper spray pressed down until I've emptied the entire canister into the man's face. He grunts, clamps his eyes shut, and takes a step back onto the stairs.

The block is still dark and empty. The only light is the weak, flickering glow cast by the solitary streetlight. The only sound is a passenger train rumbling along the track high overhead. I'm on my own. There's nobody around to help me. Nobody to protect me from this brutal man.

God, he's huge.

Even standing one step below me, his face is still above my eye level. He chuffs and shakes his head like an angry wounded animal.

"Source," he grunts, rubbing at his eyes. "Source, that fucking burns."

I'm acting on pure instinct now. I know I need to take advantage of his distraction and pain to put some distance between me and him, so I lash out, kicking him in the chest with my high-heeled shoe. I think my plan was to knock him off balance, make him fall down the stairs.

But it's like trying to kick a pillar of stone. His body doesn't even budge.

Plan B. I need to get inside.

While the giant is still growling and rubbing his eyes, I drop into a crouch, and search for my keys. My panicked fingers scramble through the contents of my handbag, which are now strewn all over the concrete stoop. I frantically brush aside lipstick, hand wipes, spare credits. My panic mounts.

At last, my fingers light on my keys.

A pulse of relief surges through me.

I stand and face the door. My clumsy fingers fumble with the jangling key chain, searching for the right key. Why the hell do I have so many of these damn things?

Behind me, the attacker snarls.

I find the right key. It takes my trembling hands three tries to find the keyhole and drive it home. I turn it.

The door swings open, and I rush inside.

My breath is coming in quick, shallow gasps.

But before I can shut the door behind me, something slams into it hard. Something big and heavy. The metal door buckles with the impact. It swings wide, smashing against the inner wall. A giant body forces its way inside, capturing me in an impossibly strong grip and pressing me back against the wall.

“Be quiet.” The voice is deep, bestial. It rumbles straight through my body. “Don’t struggle.”

I open my mouth to scream, but an oversized palm clamps over my mouth, silencing me.

“I said be *quiet*.”

Still keeping me pressed hard against the wall, the man toes the door shut with his boot. Now I'm truly trapped.

Completely cut off from the outside world. Alone with a strange and dangerous man.

This is it then. This is how it ends.

I can only hope he makes it quick.

Here in the buzzing fluorescent light of the corridor, I finally get a good look at my killer.

He is massive.

I already knew that when I saw him outside, but now, towering over me and completely invading my space, I realize just how huge he really is. His body envelopes mine completely.

His face, however, is strange. Not like a normal man's. His bone structure is heavy and angular, as if it has been carved from solid stone. His hair is jet black and pulled back into a short ponytail. His skin is deeply tanned, and it accentuates the glacial blue of his intense eyes, which are still raw and red-rimmed from my pepper spray.

And his bottom lip—the only soft part of his hard face—is pierced in the middle with a steel ring. That's strange...I've seen piercings like that before.

Suddenly, another sensation hits me.

His smell.

It's overwhelming. Leather and wood-smoke and a pungent animal musk that completely envelops my senses like an

invisible cloud. It's a scent I've encountered before, when I still worked for SynerGen.

This man is an Alpha. And a handsome one at that.

Terrifyingly handsome.

And that is absolutely not the appropriate trajectory for my thoughts to be taking at a moment like this, but I can't seem to tear my eyes away from that masculine face, at once animalistic and strangely elegant. My eyes dart from his searingly cold eyes to his full, pierced lips and back again half a dozen times in the space of a second.

"Listen to me," those sculptured lips growl. His voice sounds more irritated than angry. "I'm not here to hurt you."

The blood rushes in my ears.

What is happening? What is an *Alpha* doing here?

"I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth," the Alpha says. "You must not scream, understand?"

If this Alpha wanted to kill me, I would be dead already. And there's no way I can fight back against him physically. I've already used up my only weapon—my high-strength pepper spray—and that proved pretty much useless. A normal man would be curled up in blinding agony. But an Alpha is not a normal man. He has shaken off the pepper-spray's effects like he had a little too much wasabi on his sushi.

There's no way I can fight this guy. I'm totally at his mercy.

"*Understand?*" He growls again.

I nod behind the covering hand, and the heavy, calloused palm slides away from my mouth.

His massive body, however, stays right where it is, pinning me helplessly against the wall. He is dressed in a heavy trench coat, but beneath the tough leather, I can feel the rippling shape of his stone-hard muscles. This Alpha breathes raw, animal power.

“Who are you?” I whisper.

“My name is Taliesin. You can call me Tal.”

“I’m Hines,” I say breathlessly, stupidly. “Shelley Hines.”

“I know who you are,” Tal snorts. “I’ve been sent to protect you.

“Sent to protect me? By whom?”

“Sloane and Lily.”

I gasp. Sloane is an omega from the Zone, but she was once a normal human woman like me. She worked as part of SynerGen’s private security force. During a failed mission into the Quarantine Zone, she was mutated and bound to a pack of savage Alphas. Later they came back to this city and helped expose what SynerGen had been doing. They were captured and imprisoned, but I helped them escape.

Lily, on the other hand, I have never met in person, but I know her. She is an omega of the Zone as well. Over these past few months, we have communicated. Mostly that has involved me transmitting messages into the Zone so that they can know what is happening on the outside.

But she has never mentioned anything about a protector.

Nevertheless, if Taliesin meant me harm, surely he would have done it by now. He has no reason to lie about this.

The Alpha towers over me. I can feel his wild, feral eyes burning into me. It's a struggle to raise my own eyes to meet that intense stare, but once I do, it's impossible to look away. I sense something in the air between us, a spark like static electricity.

I'll have to trust him. I have no choice.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

"We don't have time to talk. Not here. Once your little bald friend cleans the shit out of his britches, he's going to call the authorities, and this place is gonna be crawling with cops. We need to be gone before that happens."

"Where will we go?"

"My place. Come on."

Tal doesn't give me time to think about it or refuse. He simply grabs my arm, which is swallowed up in his massive fist, and tugs me through the door and back outside.

Just a couple of minutes ago, I was turning down a creepy guy who wanted to come upstairs to my apartment for the proverbial cup of coffee. Now a tall, dark, and handsome stranger is dragging me back to his place. God only knows what's waiting for me there.

But I have no choice.

As I stumble after him onto the stoop, my spilled belongings scatter beneath my feet and roll down the concrete steps.

“Tal, wait,” I say. “I need to get my stuff.”

He stops, glances up and down the street with a tight expression, sniffs the air like a dog.

“Okay,” he says sharply. “But hurry up. We don’t have much time.”

I drop to my knees, grab my bag and start scooping up my belongings, stuffing them back inside. There are some spare credits, hand wipes, lipstick, reading glasses, a few crinkly wrapped tampons that make me flush with embarrassment, an ancient snack bar.

But one thing is missing.

The most important thing.

No, no, no. Why the heck did I have to keep it in my bag? I guess I thought it would be safer if it was on my person at all times, but I never expected a situation like this.

“Come on,” Tal hisses. “You’ve got your things. Let’s go.”

“No,” I whine. “I’m missing something. A bottle of pills.”

My heart drums in my chest. A sick, liquid feeling of panic churns in my gut.

“Is this it?”

Tal stoops and reaches into the shadow of one of the steps, and picks up a small bottle of clear orange plastic rattling with blue pills.

Relief washes over me.

“Yes! Oh thank goodness, yes.”

But as I reach to take the bottle from his hand, Tal hesitates, turning it curiously in his thick fingers.

“No label,” he mutters. “What are these?”

“Allergy medication,” I lie.

Tal gives me an incredulous glance, then turns his eyes back toward the pill bottle, brow furrowing with thought. For a stricken moment, I think he’s going to pocket the pills, but after a beat, he hands them over. I stuff them in my handbag with the rest of my belongings and rise to my feet.

“What about the stuff in my apartment?”

Tal is glancing up and down the darkened street again. He is practically vibrating with tension at this point. Another train squeals on the track high overhead. The streetlight flickers.

“No time. We can come back for it later when we’re sure it’s safe.”

But there are so many things up there. Everything I’ve got left. And there may not be another chance to get it. If the cops find my apartment and confiscate my stuff...

I step back, moving toward the door.

“But my computer. My—“

“No time.”

Tal’s huge fist clamps around my arm again. I sigh, realizing there’s no point in fighting him on this.

“Fine,” I mutter. “Where are we going?”

“Just follow me. It’s not far.”

CHAPTER 6: HINES

Not far, as it turns out, is something of an understatement.

The cramped, third-story apartment is literally directly across the street from my loft.

All this time I thought this building was abandoned.

Technically it is, except for this tiny little apartment.

The main room is less than two hundred square feet. In the middle of the ceiling is an empty socket for a lightbulb, its little ball-chain dangling uselessly. The only light is what filters in through the street-side window, and it takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust.

Ancient wallpaper is peeling away from the walls, revealing plaster and lath like exposed ribs. There's a door that opens onto a small bathroom, and another leading to a dark, shadowy room in the back. The furniture is sparse—a couple of metal folding chairs, a small card table, a mini-fridge plugged into a humming promethium battery pack the size of a brick.

But one item in particular catches my attention.

By the small window, mounted on a tripod, is a large, black telescope. It's pointed directly at my place across the street.

I'm not going to lie. That's pretty darn creepy.

Behind me, there is a heavy tread of boots and a rustle of leather as Tal squeezes into the apartment. His bulk fills the doorway, and he has to twist his body to get through it.

There is a series of clicks as he snaps the half-dozen deadbolts on the door. Now I'm locked in here with the Alpha. I should be wary—and I am a little bit. But mostly I'm fascinated. Already the air in this enclosed space is thick with his hypermasculine scent. I try to ignore the strange clenching sensation deep in my core.

Inappropriate, Hines.

Totally inappropriate.

Tal finishes locking the sturdy door, and I quickly turn away so that he won't see me checking him out. My attention drifts back to that telescope, and I wonder exactly how much time this guy has spent watching me.

I wonder what he has seen.

Tal must notice me eyeing the scope because he says, "It's not what it looks like."

"Oh really?" I say, in a trembling voice. "'Cause it sure looks like a telescope."

I bend and look into the eyepiece, and sure enough, it's focused precisely on the window of my apartment. In my rush to get out the door for my date with Martin, I forgot to pull the blinds, and pretty much my entire living space is on full view: the couch, the desk with my computer, my pair of sneakers that I really wish I had right now.

And there is the door to my bathroom. Where I shower. Have I always been careful to cover myself before getting out?

How much of me has this guy seen?

A cold, hard place tightens inside my abdomen. But at the same time, there's another feeling underneath. A feeling like someone is tickling the inside of my tummy with a feather.

"You know what I mean," Tal grunts.

I tense up as his heavy hand falls on my shoulder and firmly pulls me away from the telescope.

He looks out the window, casting his eyes left and right down the street below, before carefully scanning the roof line on the other side.

"It's dark in here, so nobody should be able to see in from the street," he says quietly. "Nevertheless, it's best if you keep away from the window, Hines. Just to be safe."

"Fine," I say quietly.

I sit my butt down on the cold metal chair by the wall and place my bag on my lap. I rub my arms and look around, but there's not much to look at, and once more my gaze falls on that telescope.

"So...how long have you been living here?" I whisper.

"Six months," Tal replies, still keeping his eyes on the street.

Six months. Wow. That's about how long I've been living in the place across the street. I don't understand exactly what is going on here, but I know I don't like it. I take a deep breath of Alpha-scented air and summon the courage to say what I'm thinking.

"So you've been spying on me all that time."

Tal sighs and shrugs his broad shoulders out of the heavy trench coat, which he tosses across the back of the other chair. The pungent Alpha odor in the room doubles. Much to my dismay, certain parts of my anatomy start to stiffen and tingle.

Underneath the coat, Tal was wearing a small tank top. Even in this dimness, it is glaring white against the dark complexion of his skin, and it shows off his bare arms bulging with muscles. The thin fabric conforms to his chiseled abdomen.

A leather harness with a shoulder holster holds a massive handgun beneath his left arm.

“I haven’t been *spying* on you,” he says coldly. “It was for your *protection*.”

I don’t feel like arguing semantics with him right now. Besides, it’s all I can do to keep from staring too blatantly at his hard chest and biceps as he slips his arms out of the harness and tosses the holstered gun onto the card table with a thud, jolting me out of my daze.

“Is that a real gun?” I ask in amazement.

“Why would I carry a fake gun?”

Fair enough. So maybe that wasn’t the most brilliant question I’ve asked in my life. Still, I’ve never seen a real gun before. Well, no, that’s not entirely true, of course; there are the weapons carried by soldiers and guards. But that’s different. I’ve never seen a civilian with a gun.

“Isn’t that illegal in the city?”

“Yeah,” he grunts. “Very. But you know what else is illegal in the city? Alphas. So I’m not too worried about getting caught with a gun.”

Tal grabs the other metal chair, the one with his coat hung over the back, and he carries it over to the window. I’ve never seen a man who fills a room the way that he does. I don’t just mean his physicality, although that is no doubt impressive. But there is also an energy emanating from him, dark and dangerous.

As he crosses the room, my eyes trace the lines of his well-muscled back, which are clearly visible through the tightness of his shirt, following the deeply carved channel of his spine down until it disappears inside the faded denim wrapped around the hard, flexing curves of his butt.

Another shameful pulse of desire throbs in my core.

With a sudden, quick motion, Tal plunks his chair down, spins, and drops that perfect behind onto the seat, fixing his blue gaze on my face. I quickly dart my eyes away, flushing with embarrassment and silently praying that he didn’t catch me checking him out just now.

When I slowly bring my eyes back to his, the faint smirk that tips the corner of his mouth suggests that he did.

Tal bends down and unlaces his leather boots before tugging them off his feet and tossing them aside.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he says, nodding toward my shoes.

I hesitate, unsure whether I want to undress, even in that small way, in front of this dark, intense man. But there was something in his voice—a purr of command—that I'm unable to resist.

I bend in my seat and reach down to slip my heels off.

When I glance up, I catch Tal staring down the top of my dress at my cleavage. Actually, *catch* isn't the right word. That would imply that he is being sneaky about it. He's not. His stare is blatant, and my nipples tingle with the knowledge that they are being watched.

I sit up and clear my throat, thinking he'll glance away embarrassed, but he doesn't.

He just lounges back in his chair and continues staring at me across the dark room. Heat prickles at the nape of my neck and between my thighs. I feel like frightened prey locked in the sights of a hungry predator.

Tal rakes his gaze down to my lap, and I could almost swear I see his nostrils flare as if he's catching a scent. I squeeze my thighs tightly together.

I'm starting to worry that I made a big mistake letting this scary man bring me back to his lair. If Sloane and Lily really did send him here to watch me, I doubt *this* is what they had in mind.

"Why are you here?" I whisper.

"I already told you," he says, finally flicking his blue eyes back up to my face. "I'm here to protect you. You're in a very

vulnerable position, Ms. Hines. You helped expose SynerGen and in the process you brought down one of the biggest companies in the world. There are bound to be a few people who are unhappy about that. And there are probably people in the government who want to get rid of you as well. Lily and Sloane wanted to make sure you were protected, so they asked me to keep an eye on you.”

“Why didn’t they tell me anything about this arrangement?”

“They figured you’d object.”

Well, they were right. I do object. But I keep that information to myself and cast my eyes down at the floor.

Sudden headlights backlight the dirty window and slide along the wall. Tal ducks out of the way. He cautiously peers out the window. Just some random car passing by. Its tires hiss along the pavement that is now wet with the rain leaking down from the upper tiers.

Tal sighs and rubs the furrows out of his brow.

He turns in his seat, reaches into his trench coat, and from some inner pocket concealed in its depths, he retrieves a flat, black box about the size of an old fashioned paperback book.

“Sorry,” he mutters, a hint of embarrassment creeping in.

“Need to take care of something.”

He sets the box on his lap, and opens it. It contains sterile syringes and several vials filled with some kind of fluid.

Is this guy a nihiloxin user? Most people take the mind-soothing drug in pill form, but hardcore addicts like to shoot it

up. Tal certainly doesn't have the unhealthy appearance that I would associate with a drug addict though. Then again, I have no idea how an Alpha would even respond to that drug.

Tal notices me watching him.

"It's not what it looks like."

That's turning into his pet phrase tonight.

He selects a syringe, removes the protective cap from the sharp tip of the needle, and stabs it through the rubber stopper of one of the vials before dragging back the plunger to fill the syringe.

As the substance fills the clear cylinder, I get a better look at it—as good a look as I can get in this unlit room. Whatever it is, it's definitely not nihiloxin. This stuff appears metallic, kind of like liquified mercury.

"What is that?" I ask in a hushed voice.

Tal extracts the needle. He flicks the syringe to settle any bubbles and pushes the plunger slightly. The pointed tip dribbles a few drops onto his thigh.

"It's Source Serum," he answers.

"Source Serum?"

I know about the Source. Lily has explained all about it in her messages. It is a massive machine located in the center of the Zone, and it produces a field of microscopic nanites that cause the mutations of the Quarantine Zone—the Alphas, betas, and omegas.

“Yeah. We Alphas derive our power from the Source,” Tal says. “We can survive for a while beyond the Quarantine Wall. But eventually we need to go back to recharge. However, Sloane and Lily didn’t want to leave you unattended. So they gave me this nanite serum, which allows me to stay here without the need to constantly go back into the Zone. Lily and Seraph came up with it.”

Seraph. That’s the artificial intelligence that controls the Source. It was created by SynerGen, but disobeyed its original masters.

Tal shifts in his seat. He pulls his jeans down his hips, revealing a good half of one meaty, tanned glute. He stabs the needle into his flesh and injects the metallic nanite serum.

The change is nearly immediate.

He was intimidating before, but now that just increases twofold. His muscles seem to knot. Striations appear. Veins pop out along his arms.

And something quite large strains at the crotch of his jeans.

I try to swallow, but my mouth has gone desert-dry. My breath catches in my throat.

Tal removes the needle and discards the used syringe in the shadowy corner. I see now that there is a little pile of old syringes there.

“Ah, that feels better,” he murmurs.

Tal stands, rolling his big shoulders. He slips the box containing the vials and syringes back inside his coat.

“Look, you have to stay here, Hines. Just for tonight. It’s just a precaution, in case the cops come calling, okay?”

“All night?” I stammer.

Tal nods. “Come on, you can sleep back here.”

He ushers me to the almost pitch black room in the back, which is even smaller. There’s a window here too, but it’s been completely boarded up, blocking out all the light. On the floor there is a mass of sheets and blankets and quilts. Tal stoops and begins arranging them. It’s hard to see in the dark, but it looks like he’s making a...nest.

I’ve studied Alphas. I know all about their nesting instincts. Building nests like this is something that they do for their omegas.

It is a pre-mating ritual.

A sudden tremor runs up my spine, like someone just dropped an ice-cube down the back of my dress.

“You’re cold,” Tal says, sensing my shivers. “Wait here.”

Wait here? Where the hell would I go? Part of me is screaming to rip the planks off the boarded-up window and climb out.

But of course I don’t do that. I stay rooted in place.

A moment later, Tal returns with his trench coat.

“You can use this as a blanket.”

I just stand there dumbly for a moment, fidgeting my fingers. Then I ask the first thing that pops into my mind.

“Where are you going to sleep?”

“I’m not.”

He lays the trench coat on the edge of the nest cushions, then trudges back toward the door, steps through, and pulls it to behind him. A narrow spear of dim light pokes in through the gap. I stand for minute, just listening to the tread of Tal’s bare feet as he crosses the outer room. Those feet are remarkably quiet for someone so big.

They are a predator’s feet.

There is a soft clunk as he drops back into the chair. A tired sigh. He’s going to keep watch all night long.

I crouch and climb into the strange nest of arranged blankets and pillows. It’s surprisingly comfortable. I take my earrings out and set them aside, along with my bracelets. Then I clutch Tal’s huge leather coat and pull it over myself to keep warm.

That’s when it hits me.

The scent.

His scent.

Of course I’ve noticed Tal’s scent from the moment I met him. And this little hovel—far too tiny for an Alpha—is filled wall to wall with his odor.

But this nest and this jacket, they are absolutely saturated with it. The smell of *him*. This is where Tal has slept for months. I imagine him catching short naps in the day time. Staying up all night to keep watch over me across the street. A secret protector that I never even guessed was over here.

It should be totally unnerving, being locked in alone with a brutal Alpha like Tal. But the way that the residue of his masculine scent quilts my body makes me feel safer than I've felt in a long, long time.

However, there is still some adrenaline coursing through me from the night's excitement.

I can't sleep. Not yet.

I find the pocket inside the leather coat and touch the hard rectangle of the box that contains Tal's nanite serum. It occurs to me what a big sacrifice he is making. He has been living here in the city hive, alone and friendless, for months on end. All to watch over little old me. A woman who, until tonight, was a total stranger.

Tal's medicine makes me think of my own.

The blue pills that I've never taken because I've never had to. In fact, taking them has never really been my intention at all.

I reach out of the nest and draw the pill bottle out of my bag, taking care not to rattle them. I don't want Tal to hear and get suspicious again.

The blue pills are a top secret project—the very last remnant of SynerGen, which I have kept in my possession. Toward the end, my boss at SynerGen, Dr. Frostgrave, had me working on a “cure” for the contamination of the Quarantine Zone. A drug that would counteract the effects of the mutation.

Before SynerGen imploded, I managed to make off with the only batch of the drug—one small bottle. I don't even know if

the stuff works, but based on my calculations, it should be able to stave off the Quarantine Zone mutation, at least temporarily.

I'm the only person left who has any detailed knowledge about this medicine. The complex chemical recipe is stored on the hard drive of the computer across the street in my apartment.

I still don't know what I'm going to do with it.

I haven't even told Lily or Sloane about it in my messages.

It's far too dangerous. I'm pretty sure my messages have been totally secure, but you never know. And if the government got their hands on this drug, who knows what they would do with it. If they could mass produce it, it would allow them to create an army immune to the Quarantine Zone mutation. They could invade. They could enslave the Alphas.

I turn the bottle, studying it in the thin beam of dim light cutting through the cracked door.

I should have destroyed these stupid pills a long time ago.

They are far too dangerous.

But something, some tingling intuition in the back of my mind, tells me that I should hang on to the pills and keep them close.

Something tells me I just might need them after all.

Carefully, quietly, I slide the pill bottle into the coat pocket alongside Tal's own box of drugs.

I shift in the strange, smelly nest, still unable to sleep.

The coat is draped over me like a quilt. Now I slide my arms into its oversized sleeves—sleeves tailored for a giant. Clutching the coat around me, I slip out of the nest and tiptoe to the door, peering out through the thin opening.

Tal is sitting vigilantly by the window, watching the streets below. The dim light is just enough to reveal the bulging contours of his muscle-laden shoulders and back.

He is a guardian.

Maybe the first real guardian I've had in my whole life.

I watch him for a minute, then I crawl back into the nest, and pull the blankets snugly around me until I'm enveloped in warmth and Tal's Alpha scent. It only takes a minute or two before I drift off into the deepest, darkest sleep I've experienced in a long, long time.

* * *

But like all good things, my peaceful sleep is short lived.

I wake up with a start and feel a massive presence rushing toward me in the dark. A hard, heavy body crushes me into the blankets of my nest. A rough, calloused hand claps over my mouth.

The scent is unmistakable.

“Quiet,” Tal hisses. “Don't scream.”

Panic surges over me. My heart is thumping fast. I can barely see anything. Tal's huge body is blotting out what little light filters in through the door, which is now flung wide.

I squirm underneath him, but it's useless. He's far too strong. His body presses harder against mine, pinning me down against the blanket-strewn floor.

"Don't struggle," he demands.

Oh God. He's going to rape me.

I knew I should never have trusted him. He's no better than that creep Martin, and he's a thousand times more dangerous.

He's going to take my body by force. He's going to hurt me and use me, and there's nothing I can do about it.

I whimper against his hand as tears spring to my eyes.

But the anticipated violation doesn't come. Tal simply keeps me pinned down until I stop resisting.

"Shhh." His breath tickles me. His soft lips and hard piercing brush my ear, sending goosebumps flaring across my skin.

"Hines, listen," he whispers. "You have to be completely quiet, okay?"

His voice is urgent but not menacing. Something is wrong, but it's not what I thought at first.

"Hines, there's someone in your home."

CHAPTER 7: TALIESIN

In the darkness of the little bedroom, I hold Hines's body beneath mine, pressing one hand over her mouth to keep her from shouting. She is shivering with startled nervousness.

Gradually, she stops struggling beneath me. The smell of her scent mingled with my own excites and arouses me. My cock swells and throbs with desire, and my animal instincts are screaming at me to claim her body—by force if necessary. It would be so easy to pry her soft thighs apart and bury myself to the root in that tender hole that I can smell so very clearly right now.

But I must master those urges. This is neither the time nor the place for pleasure.

Although my throbbing balls disagree with me, there are more pressing matters at hand.

“There's someone in your home,” I repeat. “And they are not the police.”

When I sense that Hines understands, I slowly draw my hand away from her mouth. I'm ready to cover it again at a moment's notice if she should try to scream. She does not.

“Who is it?” she whispers, her voice barely louder than a breath.

“Don't know. Come look.”

I lead her into the front room. Her tiny body is almost completely swallowed up by my trench coat, which she is wearing. She looks cute like that. I would probably smile under less dire circumstances. Now, however, I steer her toward the window and guide her to peer out from the shadows. With the lights off inside my hideout, nobody can see in. But we can see *them* well enough.

In the street below, a cadre of men are milling about. They are clad in black—black caps, black t-shirts, black tactical pants, black combat boots. They are armed with automatic rifles, also matte black, and they have high caliber polymer-frame pistols holstered on their hips as well. Their vehicles, four black sedans, have blocked off the streets the way cops would do. But there are no lights, no badges, and no yellow tape.

Like I said, these guys aren't cops.

There are more of them inside the building. I can see them moving around inside Hines's apartment, the yellow-white circles of their flashlights licking along the walls and floor as they search her sparse dwelling place.

Beside me, Hines's body suddenly grows rigid.

"Oh no!" she whispers.

She moves to the telescope and drops her face to the eyepiece

"Oh no, no, no..."

"What is it?"

"My computer!"

Even without the aid of the telescope, I can see into her apartment well enough. One of the flashlight beams has fallen on her small, fastidiously neat desk and the compact laptop computer that is lying there closed.

The not-cop moves closer to it. Opens it.

“You can get a new computer,” I say.

Hines pulls back from the telescope and stares up at me with a worried look. Something in those big, round eyes filled with fear and concern stabs at my heart.

“You don’t understand,” she whimpers. “There’s information on that computer, Tal. Valuable information. If it falls into the wrong hands...”

I turn back to the window. Across the street, the man has powered up her computer, and the screen is glowing softly as the operating system boots up.

“Maybe these guys aren’t the wrong hands,” I suggest. “We can’t be sure.”

But as soon as I say it, I know it’s bullshit. Whoever these guys are, they definitely aren’t on our side. I hate to think what would be happening to Hines right now if they had caught her at home. That thought heats my blood and tightens my scowl.

“Please,” Hines begs. “Tal, we have to do something.”

“Do what?” I ask.

Across the street, the guy is now tapping at the keyboard. He seems to have been thwarted by the login password.

“Look, they can’t even log in.”

“Not yet,” she hisses. “But no security system is invincible, Tal. Whoever these people are, they’ll take it back to their headquarters and their hackers will crack the code.”

She’s panicking now. Starting to hyperventilate.

“Calm down,” I say in a hushed voice. “What’s on that computer that’s so important anyway.”

“It’s...it’s...oh, there’s no time to explain!”

Across the street, the fake cop is saying something to his companions who are searching other parts of the apartment with flashlights. He gestures toward the computer. Another fake cop wanders over to look.

“Shit,” I mutter, “Look, what the hell do you want me to do about it? It’s not like I can just run in and grab the computer. Maybe if it were just me, by myself, I could do it. But I’m not going to put you at risk, Hines. My primary mission is to keep you safe. And I don’t intend to fail.”

Her eyes, trembling with tears, turn toward the card table where my 10mm pistol is lying in its holster.

“You can shoot it,” says Hines.

“What?”

“You’re an Alpha, right?” she says, a hint of challenge in her voice. “With your eyesight, you can easily make that shot.”

She’s right, I could easily make the shot, but that’s not the point. The gun has no silencer, and a 10mm is a big ass

handgun. One shot and all of those phony cops are going to know our location.

I grab Hines and give her a firm shake. She lets out a startled gasp.

“Are you crazy?” I hiss. “You’re already hip-deep in shit as it is, Hines. I don’t know who these guys are, but they obviously have bad intentions. If I shoot that gun, they’ll be on us like a swarm of angry hornets.”

Her tiny hands emerge from the baggy sleeves of the coat and clutch at the fabric of my tank top.

“Tal, if you knew what was on that computer...”

“Tell me.”

She presses her lips together in a tight seam. More tears well and wobble at the corners of her eyes and her chin dimples with crying.

“Tal, please...”

I glance back across the street. Now one of the officers has shut down the laptop and picked it up, preparing to carry it away. It’s now or never.

“Source damn it,” I growl under my breath.

In a flash, I have the 10mm drawn, safety off, sights lined up on the laptop in the man’s hands across the street.

“Plug your ears,” I command, no longer bothering to keep my voice quiet. “This will be loud.”

I squeeze the trigger and the small room lights up in a flash of lightning. For a fraction of a second, I see the two of us, me and Hines, mirrored in the glass panes by the light of the muzzle flash.

The pistol barks. The sound is painfully sharp in this enclosed space. The glass of the window spiderwebs with cracks.

Across the street, the laptop erupts in a shower of sparks.

And two dozen pairs of eyes all turn in our direction.

“Time to go,” I say, tucking the pistol into the back of my jeans.

My arm coils around Hines’s waist, and I lift her easily and whisk her away from the window.

A half second after, the glass erupts with gunfire. Bullets angled upward from the street smack into the ceiling. I shield Hines from the shards of glass and raining plaster.

“Oh God, we’re gonna die!” she cries.

“No we’re not.”

I’ve been given a task—to protect Hines. I’ve never failed at a task before, and I sure as shit don’t plan to start today. We are *not* going to die tonight.

At least not both of us.

I snap the deadbolts open in rapid succession, one, two, three, four.

“Hold on tight.”

Hines squeals as I toss her over my shoulder, her body still swaddled in my too-big trench coat. I swing the door wide and rush into the hall.

Already, I can hear shouts and running boots echoing up the stairwell at one end of the corridor. We won't be getting down that way.

But that wasn't my plan.

I turn the other way and rush toward the other end of the hall where a large window opens onto a fire escape in the back alley.

"Ears!" I shout to Hines.

She plugs her ears again as I draw my 10mm and take aim. The dark hall lights up and resounds with the roar of gunfire as I send three shots into the top of the window. The glass falls in a glittering crystal cascade.

I tuck the gun back into my jeans and jump through the open window, clearing the jagged shards by a hair.

My momentum carries us from the stuffy confines of the abandoned building into the cool night air of the alley.

Hines screams.

I squeeze her tightly. Still in mid air, I use my free hand to clutch the steel railing of the fire escape, arresting my momentum so we don't smash into the far wall of the alley.

Gravity kicks in, and we're falling three stories to the darkness below.

For an Alpha like me, a three story fall is nothing. My body is durable. My muscles and bones can absorb the impact, no problem.

Hines, however, is a different story. She is an Outsider. Small, soft, and fragile. The force of the landing would break her spine across my shoulder.

So I let her go, tossing her lightly so that she's free falling in front of me and slightly above, within arms reach.

The shadowed walls of the alley race past us as we fall. The dark ground rises to meet us with accelerating speed.

When I land, I use my body like a spring to slow Hines's fall. I bend my legs and drop my arms to match her velocity, slowing her to a stop.

I end up kneeling, cradling Hines in my arms, her little butt just an inch off the concrete.

"Are you okay?"

Hines doesn't answer, at least not with words. She just draws a loud, ragged gasp. Even through the thick trench coat, I can feel her heart racing inside her ribs.

I'll have to take that as a yes.

There's no time to waste. Voices are calling out from the street. Boot soles are clunking against the pavement.

"The alley!" Someone shouts. "They're in the alley."

My bike is parked a few feet away. Without hesitation, I hoist Hines's trembling little body onto the seat, and I hop on

behind her, enfolding her with my arms and legs. Normally, I would put a passenger on the seat behind me, but I want to make sure Hines's body is shielded from our pursuers.

I dig the key out of my jeans pocket, crank the ignition, and the engine roars to life just as spotlights illuminate the alley from behind.

“Down there!” Someone else shouts. “Don't let them get away!”

I peel out in a spray of debris, weaving the motorcycle between the obstacles of the alley—an overflowing garbage dumpster, stacks of wooden pallets, empty oil drums.

Behind us there is more shouting.

A burst of automatic gunfire.

Three rounds thump into my back.

The bullets stab into my flesh, but my Alpha hide is tough enough to keep them from passing all the way through. Hines is protected, and that's all that matters.

Those assholes should have aimed for the tires.

I'm not going to give them a chance to correct their mistake.

As I reach the end of the alley, I swing the bike into a sharp turn, and with Hines still surrounded and shielded by my body, we race off into the night.

CHAPTER 8: HINES

Rain spilling from the upper tiers spatters my face, shocking me into alertness. After the heart-stopping drop from the fire escape, followed by Tal's impossible catch, I went into a kind of panic-induced trance. Now, the cold rain and sound of gunfire from behind brings me back to my senses. I'm bundled in Tal's heavy leather coat and cradled in the protective cocoon of his body as he races a motorcycle down a dark alleyway toward the open column of light at the end.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Three sharp impacts vibrate through Tal's body. The Alpha merely grunts, more in annoyance than pain.

It occurs to me dimly that he's just been shot in the back. Even more distantly, I register the fact that his body must have actually stopped the bullets.

None of this seems real.

It's like watching a movie happening to somebody else.

A split second, however, is all it takes for that to change. Drastically.

As we reach the mouth of the alley, Tal finesses the brake handle, barely more than a caress. He throws the bike into a sickening swerve that drops my stomach into my bowels.

The rear tire fishtails over the wet pavement, seemingly out of control. Then, with a subtle motion of Tal's body, the bike

straightens, aimed dead center down the open street.

He twists the throttle hard.

The engine roars like an angry dragon.

I gasp aloud as the vibration of raw power hits me directly between my open legs and penetrates deep into my core.

The bike accelerates, pressing me back into the hard wall of Tal's body. His bare arms form a living cage around me.

Wind whips at my hair and dirty raindrops dripping from the higher levels of the city plop against my cheeks, running my makeup. I squint my eyes.

"Are you okay?" Tal shouts.

"Yes," I reply, my voice ripped away by the wind rushing past.

"What about you? You've been shot!"

"I've had worse."

He's had worse?

Seriously?

He just took three high-caliber automatic rounds into the meat of his back. No bullet-proof vest. Not even a coat—that's wrapped around me—yet he's talking about it as if it's no big deal. Like he fell off his bicycle and scraped his knees or something.

Tal's body tenses around me protectively as he steers.

"Hold tight," he roars. "This is going to get a bit hairy."

Going to? I can't help but wonder about the future tense. In less than a minute, we have plummeted from a third-story window, been shot at, and now we're barreling down the city street at an insane speed on a motorcycle.

How could things possibly get *more* hairy?

Then, through my squinted eyes, blurred with wind and rain, I realize what Tal means.

We're rocketing toward the end of the industrial zone. Up ahead, the road is quickly becoming filled with traffic, even at this hour.

I manage to blurt one quick phrase before we fly into traffic at full speed.

“Oh *shit!*”

Then my breath is sucked out of my throat and my lungs are pulled deep into my bowels to join my stomach. My heart skips, clenches like a fist. My muscles go rigid with terror.

We must be going at least a hundred miles an hour now. Cars are flashing past, indistinct shapes and blurs of light and shadow.

“Tal slow down!” I scream.

“Can't.”

I blink away the rain and tears and manage a quick glance in the rearview mirror protruding from the handlebars. Behind us, a quartet of black cars swerve precariously out of a sidestreet, tires flinging rain and wet trash.

We're being chased.

The size and maneuverability of the bike should give us an advantage. However, the dark cars somehow manage to gain on us, barreling between the lanes of traffic amid a welter of angry horns.

Within seconds, they are looming on our tail, less than five or six car lengths behind.

"Tal, they're right behind us!" I shout.

"I know."

Of course he knows. He's an Alpha. His senses are attuned with a canine sharpness. But this is my first high-speed chase, and I can't help the obvious words from tumbling out of my breathless mouth.

Up ahead there's a red light. Traffic is lurching to a halt. But Tal keeps the bike between the lanes. He doesn't let up on the accelerator. Not even a bit.

"Tal, look out!"

The intersection passes in a heartbeat. Crossing traffic screeches to a stop. Horns blare, Doppler-shifting as we blow past. We dive back into traffic on the other side driving so fast the tires barely seem to touch the wet pavement.

My eyes dart to the rain-flecked mirror.

Our pursuers slalom through the blocked intersection. One of them slams into a delivery truck and turns over in a shower of

shattered glass. The other three, however, make it through unscathed, and within seconds they're back on our tail. Shit...

Around us, traffic has begun to thicken.

"It's no good," Tal shouts over the roar of the engine and howling wind. "We'll have to lose them in the undercity."

The undercity? Oh, that's not good.

The motorcycle shears across four lanes of traffic and into an off-ramp leading down into the deepest bowels of the city. With a shriek of hot rubber, the bike drifts sideways down the curving ramp. The concrete barrier flows past, mere inches away.

I clamp my eyes shut and press back into Tal's tensed body.

At last, the bike straightens and accelerates.

When I open my eyes, we are in the lowest levels of the hive. The motorcycle's headlights lance into the darkness, disclosing the ruins of the undercity. Ancient buildings long since left to dereliction, their crumbling walls blackened with grime. Sidewalks choked with heaps of debris. Gangs of looters crouched around flickering bonfires.

From behind, there is a squeal of tires. Three pairs of blinding lights gleam painfully in the rearview mirrors.

"Tal, they're still behind us," I whimper.

He guns it, slaloming between the wrecked carcasses of old cars furred with rust, then throttles the bike down a clear

straightaway. The motorcycle blasts between the dark, enclosing shadows like a bullet down the barrel of a gun.

Behind, our pursuers don't even bother to swerve. They simply smash through the rusty husks of the old cars amid a shower of sparks.

This was a mistake. At least up above there were other people around. Traffic to block their pursuit.

Down here, we're totally screwed.

A burst of gunfire erupts behind us. Bullets whistle past and ricochet sickeningly off the broken pavement.

"We're going to die," I cry.

"We're not going to die."

Tal's voice is cold and hard. He twists the accelerator as far as it will go. The engine sounds like it's on the verge of exploding. Intense vibrations flood upward through my body.

More gunfire. The left mirror disintegrates in a shower of glass and I scream.

Tal lets go of the handlebars with one hand. Before I realize what he's doing, his pistol lets out three ear-splitting barks. He's returning fire, shooting behind us without looking, seemingly aiming at random.

Somehow, impossibly, one of his bullets flies true. In the one remaining mirror, I see one of the pursuing cars swerve, smashing head-on into a wall. The horn sounds, a single sustained note that gradually recedes as we barrel ahead.

But there are still two more cars back there, and they are gaining on us

More bullets zip around us, spraying chips of pavement

We're gonna die, we're gonna die, we're gonna die.

The words play over and over in my brain like a mantra.

My already shallow breath catches in my throat. My mouth goes dry, and my blood freezes in my veins.

Ahead of us, in the yellow beam of the headlights, the road is blocked by a wall of rubble. It is far too steep and high for us to climb. A wide jumble of bricks and twisted metal spattered with filthy water raining from the levels above.

We're trapped.

But Tal doesn't slow the bike. If anything, he clenches the throttle even harder, as if trying to wring even more power out of the overworked engine.

What is he doing?

What the hell is he doing?

Has he admitted defeat and decided our best option is to go out in a blaze of glory?

"Tal, look out!"

Then I see what he's steering for. A huge flat slab of metal angled against a heap of rubbish forming a ramp.

"Close your eyes," he growls.

"Tal!"

We hit the ramp at full speed. The nose of the bike angles upward, and we go airborne, soaring over the wall of debris. I'm vaguely aware of the sound of screeching tires behind, as our pursuers slam on their brakes. Wind stirs my hair.

Time seems to slow to a halt as we glide through the still air.

Then we reach the apex of our arc and gravity takes over. We start to descend. My heart leaps into my throat with such force I think I might actually throw it up. I should close my eyes like Tal said, but I can't. I simply can't. It's like they are clamped open.

There's a heavy thud as our tires smack down on something hard and flat.

Another even longer ramp formed by an iron beam. Without letting up on the throttle, Tal guides the bike down the beam-ramp and back onto the pavement.

In a momentary flash of intuition, I realize that he knew this ramp was here all along. He may have even set it up ahead of time—his last-resort escape plan.

"You asshole," I breathe.

"You're welcome."

I look in the remaining mirror again. For the first time since this chase began, something like cool relief washes over me. The mirror reflects nothing behind us but velvet darkness. No headlights. No pursuers.

Still, Tal doesn't slow down. He punches the bike down a long tunnel. The walls reverberate with the snarls of the engine.

Up ahead there is a circle of grayish light—the light at the end of the tunnel.

“Where are we going?” I yell.

“Away from the hive,” Tal answers.

The dull circle of light grows and grows until it fills my blurry vision. We erupt from the end of the tunnel into the pale glow of morning and the pelting rain. It takes me a few seconds before I realize exactly where we are.

For the first time in my life, I am beyond the perimeter of the city hive.

CHAPTER 9: HINES

I raise one flap of the leather coat, shielding my eyes from the watery bullets of rain, and I look back over Tal's broad, bare shoulder.

Behind us, the city rises like a blocky mountain of steel and glass, its uppermost spires disappearing into the gray, roiling rain clouds above. From deep in the city's heart there comes a multicolored glow—flames from the refineries mingling with neon from the commercial sectors—giving the impression of a man-made volcano on the verge of erupting. Flying machines and unmanned drones circle the summit like iron birds of prey. The highway that we are riding on is disused, but there are dozens, maybe hundreds of other elevated roads and railways radiating outward from the city, all of them packed with freight-liners laden with food from distant agri-stations.

“My God,” I gasp.

“What's the matter?” Tal asks.

I try to swallow, but my mouth is still dry from the excitement of the chase. And right now, looking up at this towering colossus of a city—at once hideous and awe-inspiring—I'm at a loss for words.

“It's just that...I've never seen it from the outside before.”

Being in the vast, wide open expanse feels like a dream.

Totally unreal. Sure I've always known intellectually that there

is an entire world outside of the city hive. The barren wastelands, the agri-fields, and deep blue oceans so very far away.

But actually being on the outside of it, actually seeing it with my own eyes...I can't put it into words.

I struggle to get my bearings. Our chase through the dark, winding bowels of the undercity has me completely disoriented.

"Tal, where are you taking me?" I shout over the howling wind and lashing rain.

During the brief beat before he speaks, I already know what the answer will be. Hearing him actually say the words only serves to chill my already cold body even further.

"The Quarantine Zone."

Almost as a reflex, my body struggles and squirms inside the enclosure of Tal's muscled limbs. Without taking his hands off the controls, he manages to tighten his arms around me and squeeze my butt in place with his thighs. His insanely hard body, which has been a protective shield up to now, suddenly becomes a cage of muscles and flesh.

"Stop wiggling," he growls. "Do you want to fall off?"

He's right of course. It's absurd to try to get away from him now. We're on a motorcycle speeding over an ancient, disused highway in the middle of a rainstorm.

Still, what Tal has planned is totally out of the question.

“I can’t go to the Zone!” I cry.

“You have no choice,” Tal answers coldly. “Whoever your pursuers are, they clearly want you dead. And I’m sworn to keep you alive.”

The rain stings my face. My hair is completely soaked already and plastered to my cheeks and neck in sticky tendrils.

“I can hide,” I shout. “I’ve done it before.”

“And they found you, remember?”

“That was *your* fault!”

I immediately regret that accusation. Yes, Tal’s attack on Martin is what drew the attention of the bad people. But he also saved me from an attempted rape. And it was my own stupid idea of going on a date that set this chain of events in motion in the first place.

“I’m sorry,” I say just loud enough to make myself heard over the rain and wind. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Tal says nothing.

The oversized coat is soaked through at this point. So is my dress. So is my underwear beneath. My muscles are beginning to shiver from the cold. My lips are trembling. I find that I have instinctively nestled myself back into the concavity of Tal’s protective body. I know from my scientific research on Alphas that his metabolism is off the charts, but I’m still shocked by just how furnace-hot his body is despite the cold rain. I press into him hard, trying to absorb a bit of that body heat.

It's little use, however. The wind greedily rips most of the heat away.

"Tal, please," I beg. "Let's go back. I can take refuge in the undercity. They'll never find me down there."

"The undercity?" Tal scoffs. "That's even more dangerous. Our pursuers would be the least of your worries down there, Hines. The gangs of scavengers would sniff you out and eat you alive. No. We're going to the Quarantine Zone, and that's final."

He swerves the bike around a deep pothole.

I slump forward and tuck my chin, trying my best to protect my face from the rain. It's not the wetness I'm worried about. I'm already soaked to the bone. I'm just trying to avoid the sting of raindrops.

Obviously when Tal devised his little escape plan, he didn't factor rain into the equation. Otherwise he would have selected a different vehicle.

And there's one other detail he seems to be forgetting. A much bigger detail.

"Tal," I yell. "If you take me into the Zone, I'll be mutated by the contamination there."

Even though the Cataclysm that created the Zone occurred over a century ago, the contamination is still strong, emanating outward from Ground Zero. It's caused by invisible nanites that are emitted by a device that the Alphas call "the Source" and which is controlled by an unstable AI known as Seraph.

The device and AI were created by SynerGen to be a population control mechanism, but something went wrong with Seraph, and the Cataclysm happened, creating the Quarantine Zone.

Outsiders can venture a little way into the Zone using protective suits. But without any protection at all, a person will be mutated in minutes. Some of them become Alphas like Tal. A few become omegas, like my acquaintances Lily and Sloane, but that mutation is rare.

The vast majority of people, however, get mutated into betas—mindless drooling zombies with dead eyes.

And there's no way to know how the mutation will affect a person until they are exposed.

Yes, I have that bottle of pills tucked away inside the pocket of this trench coat. The supposed *cure* for the mutation. But I don't know how long those pills will last.

I don't even know if they will work at all.

And Tal doesn't know what the pills are, so I decide to bluff him.

“What's the point in fleeing the Zone if I'm just going to become a beta,” I call back to Tal.

“You won't become a beta.”

“There's no way you can know that, Tal.”

“I know.”

He states the answer in his usual terse, flat manner. Savior or not, this guy can be a bit impossible sometimes.

After it becomes clear that Tal isn't going to volunteer an explanation, I ask, "*How* do you know?"

"Lily, the Source-speaker, has interceded on your behalf. She has discussed it with Seraph. He can alter the Source to ensure that you become an omega."

An omega.

That's almost as frightening as becoming a beta.

A beta doesn't feel anything.

An omega's feelings, by contrast, are uncontrollable. Sooner or later, I will enter estrus. I'll go into heat. My urges to be dominated and bred by an Alpha will be overwhelming. Painful even. I've witnessed first-hand an omega lost in the throes of her heat. The thought of going through that is terrifying.

Who will be the one to quench the fires of my estrus when it happens? Tal?

And who else?

Omegas are always mated to a pack.

A shiver spasms up my spine. Is it from apprehension? The chill rain? A combination of the two?

Perhaps it is something else entirely.

Tal takes one hand off the handlebars and touches the control buttons on the small dash which is somewhat protected from

the rain by a short windshield.

“Baen. Do you copy?” Silence. He tries again. “Baen? Come in. Do you read me? Is anybody there?”

A small but effective speaker crackles with static, and then a voice replies. A voice every bit as deep and guttural as Tal’s. There’s no mistaking the fact that it’s another brutal Alpha speaking.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m here. What’s going on?”

Tal grunts behind me, and I sense that he’s annoyed at the other Alpha’s lack of communication protocol. Actually, I’m surprised to find Alphas communicating this way at all. From everything I’ve studied about Alphas—and I’ve studied them quite a bit—they are primitive. Intelligent, but primitive.

Tal, however, is clearly no ordinary Alpha, as evidenced by his ability to stay concealed within the city hive all this time.

Did Lily and Sloane teach him to use this technology?

He presses the comm button again.

“We had to flee the city hive,” He shouts against the wind. “Be at the meeting place in two hours. I’m in transit with the target.”

“The target?” I pout.

I have a name, after all. Calling me the target makes me sound like some...object.

The voice comes over the speaker again amid another tangle of static.

“Shit, what’d you say? I can barely hear you, Tal. It sounds windy as fuck. Where are you?”

Tal growls with annoyance. He reaches for the comm button again, but before he has a chance to speak, there is a burst of gunfire from somewhere behind us. The bullets fly in at an angle, one of them punching a hole through the small windshield of the bike.

“Source!” Tal shouts.

I look back and see a black car roaring toward us down the broken highway, lights off, half-obscured by the slanting rain. Farther back, the city hive is now little more than a featureless gray shadow looming in the distance.

“Shit,” Tal snarls. “How the hell did they get through?”

He had eased up on the throttle a bit after exiting the undercity, but now he cranks it again, and again I feel that sickening drop in my stomach as the force of acceleration pushes me back into his hard muscles.

I feel his weight shift. I sense he’s drawing his pistol.

He unloads a barrage at the black car until the hammer of the pistol clicks on an empty chamber.

Out of ammo.

I look back over his shoulder and see the car still coming fast despite holes in the windshield and hood.

A black-clad man with goggles leans out of the passenger window into the rain. He takes aim with a rifle.

The muzzle flashes and more bullets whistle past. My guts clench at the sound.

“Damn it,” Tal shouts. “If they hit the wheels, we’ll be done for.”

The other Alpha’s voice shouts over the radio. “Tal! What the hell is going on?”

More gunfire from behind. Tal swerves at the same moment, and more bullets spear past us, so close I swear I can feel the heat from them.

Tal presses the comm button and shouts.

“Meeting place! Two hours!”

He swerves again, barely dodging a geyser of pavement raised by a bullet.

His fingers tap a few more keys on the dash. A screen flashes the words “Auto-Navigation Engaged.”

“Hines, listen,” he shouts. “Don’t get off the bike until it stops. Baen will find you. He will make you safe.”

“Tal?” I whimper. “What are you—“

Before I can finish my question, Tal has let go of the handlebars, and with superhuman agility, he leaps and turns so that he is crouching backward on the seat behind me.

“Tal!”

He leaps again, this time flying off the motorcycle.

I look backward, and the scene seems to freeze behind me. I see the dark colossus of the city hive disappearing into the

rain. I see the black car, less than twenty yards behind us. I see the look of utter shock on the gunman's face as his mouth drops open. But most of all, I see Tal—the dark skin of his arms is accentuated by the white of his tank-top, which is stained on one side with a vibrant red. The thin, wet fabric is plastered to the rippling muscles of his back. His arms are outstretched, body poised to attack.

The sound of the wind, the pelting rain, the rumbling engine—all of it is drowned out by his primal roar.

Then, in a flash, Tal tucks and dives through the windshield of the oncoming car, his massive body punching through the glass on the driver's side.

The car swerves and goes into a violent roll.

The gunman hanging from the window is flung away like a limp rag doll.

The vehicle tumbles end over end, spraying rain and glass and twisted metal.

“Tal!” I scream.

Behind, the black car finally comes to rest on its crumpled roof. It shrinks into the distance as the motorcycle continues onward, its computerized navigational system automatically driving me away from the city.

“Tal...”

After a few more seconds, the wreck is swallowed up in the gray curtains of rain and disappears.

I turn back to the controls. Tears spring to my eyes and roll down my cheeks, mixing with the rain.

He's dead. Tal is dead. Even though we only knew each other for a few hours, the connection between us was undeniable. And now he has sacrificed his own life to save mine.

Now I'm alone again.

The bike whispers down the highway, driven forward by its automatic controls, carrying me toward the Quarantine Zone.

I reach one hand into my pocket, fingering the bottle of pills

It provides little comfort.

PART TWO:

THE ZONE

CHAPTER 10: BAEN

Source, this is a miserable job.

I huddle beneath the limbs of the scraggly tree, but it provides scant shelter from the sheets of rain that are rolling over the wasteland, churning the dead earth into a thick soup of mud. The downpour is so dense, I can't see more than fifty yards in any direction. Hell, I can't even make out the Quarantine Wall, even though I know it's out there, somewhere off to my left, writhing across the landscape like a steel ribbon.

Yes, a miserable job indeed.

And to make matters worse, that asshole Taliesin is late.

Anyway, I *think* he's late. With no sun to tell the hour by, it is difficult to be sure. But my internal clock is never wrong, and I sense that it has been at least two hours since he called me on that damnable human speech-machine. I've tried to raise him on it several times since then, but every time, there has been no response. All I know for sure is that he said to meet him here in two hours.

Well, it's been two hours. So where the hell is Tal?

And what did he say in his last message to me? Did he really say he was bringing the *target* with him? Surely not. She's an Outsider. A hive dweller. Surely she would not willingly let herself be brought back here to the Zone, right?

Source, if he's bringing the target back here, then something must have gone very, very wrong.

Or perhaps, just perhaps, something went right.

For Tal, I mean. I grin at that thought. Yeah, maybe grumpy old Tal fell madly in love with the target, and he's decided to take her as his mate.

I wouldn't put it past him. Tal has always been enamored with the Outsiders and their way of life. Six months ago, when our high leader Addom proposed the mission to the Outsider's city, Tal was practically tripping over his own dick to volunteer.

Me, on the other hand...I got stuck with the raw end of the bargain. I've been stationed for months, standing guard at the rendezvous point. It's fucking wolf shit, it is.

I slump back against the trunk of this tree and try to expel my frustration in a heavy sigh. I glare out at the gray curtains of water falling from the sky.

By the Source, what did I ever do to deserve this?

Actually, I know the answer to that question all too well. The other Alphas are jealous of me. Jealous of the attention that I get from all the pretty young omegas.

Well, it's not my fault, is it? It's not like I'm one to go looking for trouble. Quite the opposite, in fact. Most of the time it's those wild little omegas who are the ones trying to get into my loincloth.

It's not my fault that I know how to make those little omegas howl.

My real talent is my sense of smell.

All of the Alphas have powerful noses, but mine is the best in the Zone by far. I can sense when a young omega is going into first heat before anyone else. Hell, sometimes I even know before the omega does. Then it's just a matter of sticking close by the omega in question. Sooner or later, we'll be left alone, and when that happens, it's game on.

An omega in heat can't keep her hands off me.

And being the young gentle-Alpha that I am, it would be downright rude to refuse them.

Besides, it's all just harmless fun. I never actually fuck them—that could result in a pair bond, and I don't want that. I never go around bragging about my conquests. I would never shame a poor, young, unbonded omega that way. And once they finally are bound to a pack, their Alphas are none the wiser. They never question their precious omega's oral skills. They assume that she's simply a natural. They have no idea that she's been schooled by a master.

Source, when you stop and think about it, I'm practically doing them a public service.

But then there was that mess with Kronin's daughter, Azia.

For an instant, the rainy landscape flashes with a blinding, blue-white glow, and the sky sounds like it's being ripped in

half by thunder. Though it seems almost impossible, the rain somehow gets even harder.

This is my punishment.

I should be back in the city ruins, drowning in omega pussy. Instead, I'm out here beyond the Quarantine Wall, drowning in cold rain and mud.

And it's all because of Azia.

I should have known better than to mess around with her. She is the daughter of Kronin, after all. One of the biggest and meanest Alpha's in the Zone. In terms of political clout, Kronin is second only to the high leader Addom. And his daughter Azia was already arranged to be claimed by another high-status pack of Alphas.

She was completely off-limits.

But that never stopped me before.

And by the Source, that sweet, wicked little creature gave me no choice.

It had happened after that big meeting six months ago. Practically the entire tribe had been there. The meeting had something to do with that strange omega named Sloane. The one who had once been an Outsider warrior. Though the gathering was clearly one of great importance, the exact topic eluded me. Truthfully, I was too distracted by all of the young omegas who were there in the audience.

Afterward, when the gathering had been adjourned, all of the Alphas and omegas had drained out of the dark meeting hall.

In the jostling crowd, Azia had brushed up against me, her hand briefly grazing my chest.

At first I assume it was a mere accident. She had not even looked at me when she had done it.

But if there is one thing I've learned, it's that there are no accidents when it comes to omegas.

They are clever, and wily beyond measure.

It was only after Azia had already melted back into the shifting crowd that I noticed it. A streak of warm moisture where her hand had touched me.

I tested it with my fingers. It was slick and oily.

I raised it to my nose, sniffing discreetly.

My cock instantly engorged with intense desire, and I had to press it down to keep from embarrassing myself in the crowd.

It was the little omega's arousal fluid, and it bore the faint scent-markers of her first heat. The little she-devil had touched herself and then smeared it on me.

It was an invitation.

What else could I do? I had to accept. To refuse her would just be rude.

So later that night, under the cover of darkness, I climbed the tangled vines of the ancient tower where she dwelt with her father's pack and snuck into her quarters. Everything was going swimmingly...

Until her father Kronin caught us, that is.

The old fart had been so pissed, I thought he was going to kill me.

Now, shivering in this rainstorm, cowering in the practically nonexistent shelter of this scraggly tree, I almost wish he had. Instead, I've been assigned to duty at a remote checkpoint without an omega in sight.

It's a fate worse than death.

And if that emotionless dickhead Taliesin doesn't show up soon, I really will be dead either from drowning or cold.

One more minute. I'll give him exactly one more minute, then I'm heading back under the Quarantine Wall to hunker down in the shelter. At least the shelter is dry.

I count off sixty beats of my heart.

Nothing.

That's it. I've waited long enough. Tal isn't coming.

I rise to go, turning toward the hidden entrance of the old mineshaft that is hidden a few hundred yards away, concealed beneath a cluster of boulder and scrubby vegetation. The tunnel itself extends one mile underground. It passes beneath the Quarantine Wall, so I can return to the Zone. That's where the shelter is.

But just as I start to move, a new sound reaches my ears. At first it's just a low hum, nearly imperceptible, vibrating at the very lowest level of audibility. Gradually the sound grows until it is a nearby rumble.

I turn, muscles tensing, nose testing the air.

I don't smell Tal, and that puts me on edge.

But I do smell something else. An Outsider.

A female Outsider.

It's the target!

But if the target is here, then where the hell is Tal? Shit, this isn't good...

Moving cautiously, I stalk toward the sound of the idling motor. I try to move stealthily, but it's impossible under these conditions. The mud sucks at my bare feet with wet, squelching sound.

As I trudge forward, a shadow appears between the dull ribbons of rain. A few more steps and it resolves itself into a shape. A motorcycle with a single tiny figure huddled on top. One more step, and I can finally make out some details.

My heart stops, seems to rise physically into my throat.

My skin prickles with an electric chill that has nothing to do with the rain.

My cock bucks beneath my loincloth, thickening and throbbing with bloodflow.

I've never seen an Outsider before. Not up close. Sure, I've seen and smelled the guards who run about on the parapets of the Quarantine Wall, but only from a distance. And of course Lily and Sloane were Outsiders once, but by the time I met them, they had already become omegas. But this tiny female

shivering on the seat of the motorcycle is the first real Outsider I've ever seen up close and personal.

Source, she is beautiful.

It's a beauty so sharp and dangerous that it pangs, like a knife blade slipped between my ribs. And that knife is given an agonizing twist as I see how desperate and vulnerable she is.

She is bundled in a thick leather cloak and soaked to the bone, her muscles shuddering with cold. Her brown hair is stained dark with rain and plastered to her pale, freckled cheeks. Her eyes—a lovely shade of hazel edged with green around the iris—are rounded into circles of fear. Her blue lips tremble. Rain streams down her face and drips from her chin.

A wave of protectiveness surges over me. My heart starts beating again double time. All other thoughts—of the Zone, of the pretty young omegas there, of that business with Azia—all of that is wiped away, replaced with a solitary, single-minded need.

I *must* protect this woman.

I *must* make her safe.

My feet move of their own accord, carrying me forward through the sucking mud. My arms stretch out to gather up her shivering body.

The female flinches away from me. A tiny gasp escapes her delicate lips.

I have startled her.

I approach more slowly, as one would approach a frightened, wounded animal. When I speak, I give my voice that low, rolling chest-purr that works so well for soothing an omega's apprehensions. This female is no omega, not yet, but the noise seems to have the desired effect.

"Easy," I tell her, "I mean you no harm..."

She flinches again, but allows me to rest my hands on the shoulders of her leather garment. I realize that it is Taliesin's old coat, part of his Outsider disguise.

"What happened to Tal?" I ask.

Her blue lips quiver. Her voice stutters as she struggles to speak. It takes her a few tries before she finally forms the word.

"Dead."

Another chill rolls over me, and my heart drops. Can it really be true? Is Taliesin dead? He and I were never on the best terms. He was cold, aloof. And he clearly didn't care for my way of life. Nevertheless, the news of any tribesman's death is a sorrowful thing. Whenever one Alpha dies, we all die a little with him.

"How?" I ask.

Her lips twitch, trying once more to form the words, but she is too weak, too cold.

That's when I realize the drops on her face are not just rain. Some of them are tears as well. The Outsider is weeping, and

she has been doing so for a long time. Those tears tell me everything I need to know.

Taliesin died protecting this female.

It's up to me, Baen, to make sure his sacrifice was not in vain.

I must make sure this female lives. I must protect her, with my life if necessary.

There's just one problem: to protect the female, I must take her into the Zone. And when I do that, she will be changed. The power of the Source will make her different. For most Outsiders, this means becoming a beta—an unthinkable fate, worse than death perhaps.

However, I was told that this woman is special. I don't know why or how, but I know that if she is brought into the Zone, she will definitely become an omega.

That thought worries me too—because if this female becomes an omega, if she goes into heat...I know I won't be able to control my urges.

But that is simply a risk we'll have to take together.

“Come, little one,” I purr. “Come with me. I will make you safe.”

CHAPTER 11: HINES

I open my eyes.

Flickering candlelight discloses a room barely more than eight or nine feet across, and perhaps three times that in length. The walls are metal, covered in white paint that is chipping away with age, and they curve smoothly upward into a rounded ceiling. It feels like being trapped inside of a giant tin can that's been tipped on its side and filled halfway with concrete to form a floor.

The furnishings are spartan, to say the least. Along the far wall are arranged a row of modular metal shelves stocked with canned goods, jars, gallon jugs of water. Mismatched candles have been set without holders on the corners and empty spaces of these shelves, stuck right into the melted blobs of previous candles. Their drippings hang like waxy stalactites, and their orange light wavers and refracts through the fluid-filled containers of water and preserved food, casting eerie shapes along the curved walls.

This is some kind of emergency shelter from before the Cataclysm.

Preppers built this place. Survivalists. Maybe they were expecting a nuclear war. Or perhaps a pandemic of some kind. Zombies even...

But I'm sure they weren't expecting what actually happened. When the Cataclysm came, nobody saw it coming.

Nobody expected Alphas.

The only other furnishing in the shelter—if it can even be called a furnishing—is the nest where my body has been laid. It is a deep, cushioned mass of swirled materials. As with Tal's nest back in the city, there are blankets, quilts, random strips of cloth. But these are ragged, moth-bitten, and stained with time and God knows what bodily fluids. There are other materials woven into it as well—dead leaves and straw, rags of sod with dirt still clinging in the roots, plush moss.

A sense of repulsion grips my gut as I survey this dirty nest. But there is nothing I can do about it. My body is too weak to move. My flesh is still numb and unfeeling from the cold rain.

I have no choice but to relax into the soft depths of the enveloping nest, and I'm forced to admit that it is comfortable.

Then something jerks my body.

A firm but gentle tugging motion that shifts my weight inside the nest.

It is an Alpha. His thick masculine musk hangs heavily in the still air of this enclosed space. He is dressed only in a primitive loincloth of animal hide. His body is brutal, like Tal's, but in a different way. His limbs are long and sinewy. His muscles are so deeply etched I can see the fibers twitch and contract in the shadowed candlelight. His forearms and neck are shot with winding veins. His dirty blond hair is cropped close to his skull.

Something glints on his face, catching the light.

He is pierced. His right nostril is pierced with a ring of steel.

And he is undressing me.

Tal's heavy leather jacket has been removed. It now lies heaped in a wet lump by the wall. I'm still dressed in my red dress, but not for long. The Alpha's brutal fingers are curled beneath the edge of the sodden cloth, yanking and tugging it down my body.

The zippered back splits. The black lace of my bra is exposed. Then my pale, goosebumped belly. The waistband of my panties comes into view.

"Wait!" I gasp.

My voice comes out scratchy and weak. But it's enough to get the Alpha's attention. He freezes, and his gaze latches onto mine.

"You are cold. Your garment is wet. I must remove it."

As soon as I hear that deep guttural voice with its strange, foreign-sounding inflections, I know that this is the Alpha I heard before. The one speaking to Tal over the radio on the motorcycle.

My mind grows more alert, and the memories of recent events begin tumbling into place, fitting together like pieces of a puzzle.

I recall the long, lonely ride through the punishing rain as the bike automatically drove me toward the Zone. At last, the engine slowed, and the motorcycle steered itself off the ruined

highway, its tires squelching to a stop in the thick mud. Then this Alpha appeared out of the rain.

He hid the bike inside a clump of scrubby vegetation, then slung me over his broad, muscled shoulder and started to run.

We went through some kind of underground passage. Pitch blackness echoing with the sounds of dripping water. From time to time, my fingers brushed the walls of rough-hewn stone as we flew past. How the Alpha navigated that tunnel in total darkness, I do not know.

Then there was more rain. More mud. More feverish delirium, until at last we ended up here in this shelter.

My attention is yanked back to the present as my dress is yanked down my hips.

“No...don't,” I whimper.

But the Alpha ignores my frightened pleas. He bunches the wet cloth in his fists and drags it down my thighs and off my legs, leaving my helpless shuddering body completely exposed except for my underwear.

The Alpha discards the dress over his shoulder. It hits the floor behind him with a wet smack.

His gaze rakes over my body. I feel it like a fingertip tracing over my bare skin, roving over my breasts, my belly, my inner thighs, my wet crotch.

Beneath his loincloth, something jumps.

Something big.

I manage to clamp my weakened thighs together and twist my hips to hide that place from the Alpha's hungry stare. An explosion of jealous, lustful rage flares behind his eyes, and for an instant I think he's going to pounce on me and force my legs apart again.

But he does no such thing. Whatever urges are stirring inside him, he keeps them in check.

For now, at least.

I open my numb, trembling lips, tensing the half-frozen tendons of my throat as I struggle to force a full sentence out.

“Who... Who are you?”

The Alpha moves forward with slow, catlike grace, and kneels over me.

“I am Baen.”

His voice is a low, rolling purr that vibrates deep into my muscles and the marrow of my bones. The sound is so rich and strong it seems to warm me from the inside out.

“What is your name?” he purrs.

“Hines,” I half-cough. “Shelley Hines.”

The Alpha frowns.

“A strange name for a female,” he mutters.

On my belly, the cold numbness of my skin transitions into an uncomfortable pins-and-needles sensation as my blood warms and my nerve endings prickle back to life. As the numbness

fades, I realize that Baen is touching me there, rubbing circles on my abdomen.

I flinch under his touch, but I'm too weak to pull away.

"Be still," he commands firmly. Then in a softer, purring voice he adds. "Do not be afraid. I want to help you, Hines. I must warm your body."

And warm my body he does. My cold flesh and muscles seem to melt under the heat of his palm and the soft friction of his rubbing. I relax deeper into the primitive cushion of my nest, unable to resist if I tried.

"Does that feel good?" he purrs.

I find myself nodding in affirmation.

Baen's warm hand draws widening ovals over my ribs and down below my navel. With each upward pass, my nipples tingle with renewed life and anticipation. And with each downward swipe, my other sensitive bud awakens beneath my panties.

He is bringing me back to life with his touch and his warmth. I can feel it radiating off his lean, half-naked body like a furnace. Soon my whole body is tingling with life and heat.

I catch my thighs falling open of their own accord.

"Good," Baen rumbles softly. "Good..."

I gasp as the muscles of my deep core suddenly spasm inside me. They clench tightly and relax. A strange ticklish feeling that ebbs and flows.

In the back of my mind, I know that my arousal is inappropriate, but I'm too weak to resist.

My nipples are now fully awake, and they are aching to be touched. I whimper as Baen teases one of his fingers inside my bra, feeling how turned on I am. A wave of hot shame surges up my neck and floods my cheeks.

This is so wrong.

Why do I want this?

Why now?

His raw, filthy, animal scent saturates me, seems to soak into my pores. It is not one smell, but a mixture, wafting from different places on his body. From beneath his sinuous arms. From beneath his rising leather loincloth. God, I want to see what's under there so bad.

Another spasm of desire clenches in my guts. My core flutters. I'm acutely aware of a hollowness inside me, like an empty stomach, but lower down. An emptiness that desperately needs filling. It pangs like a hunger, and a desperate, needy sob slips from my lips.

“Good,” Baen repeats. His hand traces lower, smoothing over my quivering inner thigh and heading for my pulsing center.

“Good omega...”

“What?”

I've suddenly found my voice again, and my shouted question is like a gunshot in this enclosed space. Even the savage Alpha flinches back ever so slightly. I shift my weight away from

him, pressing back into the side of the nest, which now feels more like a trap than a bed. A very comfortable trap.

“What did you call me?” I rasp.

Baen gives me a perplexed look and moves closer. “Omega. I called you omega because that is what you are becoming.”

The wings of his pierced nose flare as he inhales, drinking in my scent.

“You are changing, Hines. I can smell it.”

My heart skips as I finally realize what is going on. My brain was too addled and tired and...distracted to see it. But that dark tunnel from my feverish half-memories—the one that Baen carried me through—that must have been a tunnel under the Quarantine Wall. That means we are inside the Zone now.

And without protection, I’m mutating, becoming an omega just as Taliesin said I would.

My body is descending into estrus.

I’m going into heat.

“No,” I mutter, shaking my head and swinging my still damp hair. “No I can’t—“

Another muscle spasm wriggles through my insides, even more intense than before. A sickening, shameful desire. My panties are already moist from the rain, but now another, warmer sensation of wetness blossoms down there too. Something slippery exuding from between my legs.

The way that Baen's nose twitches tells me that he smells it all too well.

Another rush of embarrassment and panic flushes up from my chest and into my face. I try to swing my thighs shut again, but Baen's arm is positioned between them, supporting his leaning body and making it impossible for me to close my trembling legs completely.

Yet another convulsion of need pulses through my interior. I whine and arch my back. It's like a hundred little fingers tickling my tummy from inside.

No, not my tummy exactly.

A little lower down.

But as intense as these sensations are, I know from first hand experience just how insane an omega in heat can become if her needs are not met. I've witnessed it first hand in the SynerGen labs. I've seen an omega doubled over in agony with need. I've seen her seize and writhe and snarl like a mad animal.

What I'm experiencing right now is just a pale echo of that.

Wherever this shelter is, I can assume that it is not too deep inside the Quarantine Zone. We are probably only a few miles inside the perimeter of the Quarantine Wall, in fact. Out here on the edge, the contamination field is weaker, which means the mutation is slower.

My transformation is not complete. Not yet.

There's still time.

“Pills!” I gasp.

I flop one weak arm across the soft materials of the nest and gesture toward the leather coat flopped in a puddle on the concrete floor. “Pills...”

Baen’s smooth forehead wrinkles with perplexity. He looks at the coat, which once belonged to Tal—poor, brave Tal—then back to me, then the coat again. For a long, stomach-tightening moment, I’m afraid he won’t understand. Or that he simply won’t care. But at last he gives in. He moves on all fours like an animal, inspects the sodden coat, rifles through its pockets.

I hear the rattle of pills against plastic, and a rush of relief flows over me. But it is followed by another strong pulse of estrus.

“Pills,” I murmur.

Crouching, Baen lifts the orange bottle out, holding it up in the candlelight. He gives it a shake, rattling the pills like a miniature maraca. He sniffs the bottle.

“What are these?” he asks.

I have to wait for the current wave of estrus to subside before I can answer. “Medicine...please...”

Slowly and doubtfully, Baen crawls toward me, walking on his knuckles like an ape, shoulders high. He extends the pill bottle toward my hand, but as I reach for it, he snatches it back.

“What medicine?” he asks. “What does it do?”

I strain desperately for the bottle, but Baen effortlessly holds it just out of my reach.

“It’s for my...my allergies,” I lie.

He frowns, eyeing the bottle incredulously.

“Allergies? I don’t understand.”

“I have a *disease*,” I whimper. “I need the medicine to make me well. Baen, *please*...”

It’s not a total lie. From a certain perspective, it is true. I’m just omitting a few important details.

Baen’s frown deepens. Slowly, he moves the pill bottle forward to place it in my hand. My heart jumps with elation. Just one pill is all I need to stave off what is happening to me. That will buy me time to think, to plan. Just one more inch and the bottle will be in my grasp.

But at the last moment, Baen snatches it away again.

“No,” he says with cold finality. “I don’t trust Outsider medicine.”

He reaches behind him and sets the bottle on one of the shelves next to the canned goods.

“Baen, please,” I beg. “If I don’t get my medicine, I will die.”

He shakes his head.

“No. You are healthy.” He draws a deep breath. “I can smell that you are healthy. But you are going into heat, omega. What you need is a different kind of medicine.”

My heart begins to race as Baen's hands drop to his hip, fingers unfastening the strap of his loincloth. Adrenaline courses through my veins, a mixture of fear and raw desire.

I shouldn't want to see what is under that leather flap.

So why does my body tingle with anticipation?

Why does my mouth flood with saliva?

Why does that needy, hollow feeling below my tummy become even more deliciously painful?

"Oh God," I gasp.

Another clenching of desire squeezes my innards as Baen pulls his loincloth aside and drops it to the floor.

The member dangling between his legs is long and thick and smooth. It bounces with the ticking of his pulse, and with each tick it rises, engorging with arousal until the erect, vein-riddled shaft is pointed toward the ceiling, revealing his ridged underside and the smooth, massive testicles hanging from his base.

Steel glints at his tip. Oh God, he's pierced. A metal ring that passes through his urethra.

"This," Baen purrs softly. "This is what you need, omega."

My hand is still stretched weakly toward the pill bottle. Baen moves his hips so that his throbbing cock is pressed into my open palm instead.

"This is your medicine."

“No,” I whimper and shake my head, but I don’t draw my hand away. I can’t. In fact, I find my fingers curling of their own accord, wrapping themselves around Baen’s meaty girth. His skin feels blazing hot against my cold fingers. The steel piercing at his tip is hard and cool.

Baen begins to rock his hips, fucking my fist with long, slow strokes.

“Yes,” he whispers. “You *need* this. You know you do.”

My conscious mind sends the signal to my fingers to let go, but somehow they have the exact opposite response, gripping him even tighter. My mouth waters and my body thrills at the slip of his hot flesh against mine. The way that the velvety sleeve of his outer skin shifts over his rigid inner core sends tingles down my spine and all through my core.

I think of how that piercing would feel inside me. How perfectly it would abrade my tender inner tissues.

That hollow feeling within me intensifies. It burns like a wildfire—a fire that can only be extinguished with Alpha seed.

No...I mustn’t give in to this desire, this heat.

There’s still time. The transformation is still incomplete.

“Baen,” I plead. “My pills. I need my pills.”

Even as my lips are begging for the medicine, my little hand has taken on a life of its own, twisting and stroking Baen’s hot naked length as he continues rhythmically thrusting into my fist.

“You don’t need pills,” he growls. “You need to come.”

He moves, slipping his cock away from my hand, and to my surprise, my lips actually gasp with disappointment at being deprived of that astonishing member. But my disappointment is short-lived, and I gasp again as Baen’s smooth palm begins gliding over me again.

“I will make you come,” he whispers. “First with my fingers, and then, when you are ready, with my cock.”

He emphasizes that last statement by gripping and brandishing his pierced erection.

His hand sweeps over my skin, moving in wide circles and figure eights. He touches me everywhere, my belly, my ribs, my tingling breasts.

His primitive fingers fumble briefly with the catch on the front of my bra. He’s probably never seen clothing like this before, and I think he will be thwarted. But with an annoyed grunt, he simply pulls harder, breaking the hook and ripping my bra open.

“Oh God!” I cry. “What are you doing?”

My breasts spill out, glowing in the soft candlelight. My nipples are tingling and erect, just begging to be squeezed and sucked.

“You know what I’m doing, omega.”

Baen leans over me, and touches my breasts, which disappear beneath his massive, Alpha palms. He kneads and massages my soft flesh, sending tingles and chills all through my body.

“No, please...”

I squirm and struggle beneath him, but it’s no use. My body is still too weak from my ordeal on the rainy highway. Even if I were at full strength, I would be no match for a savage Alpha of the Zone.

“Yes,” Baen rumbles.

He dips his face to my chest. His warm, soft lips—perhaps the only thing soft about him—wrap around my stiff nipple and suck, first gently, then extremely hard, swelling my sensitive bud with blood.

“Oh God,” I moan beneath. “Baen, please...”

He switches his attention to my other breast, leaving the first to be cooled by the air. His lips close over me, tongue swirling, teeth nipping and scratching deliciously.

My tummy twitches as I feel his hand sliding down my belly. The pulse of need is growing stronger inside me. The waves of heat are coming in steady intervals.

I have to do something soon. I have to resist.

“Baen stop,” I cry. “I can’t do this.”

I press my hands against the hard, striated muscles of his chest in a futile effort to shove him away from me.

His hand delves between my open thighs. His fingers touch my sensitive places, stroking me through the wet lace of my panties.

“Yes, you can,” Baen purrs. “And you must. You have no choice. You’re in heat.”

The thick pad of his middle finger caresses up and down the crotch of my panties, tracing the groove of my parting. Automatically, traitorously, my hips buck and roll, trying to hump his hand.

“I’m *not* in heat.”

The sound of my own voice shocks me. It’s not my usual, mousy whimper that I hate so much, but a defiant snarl.

Above me, Baen grins. His sharp fangs catch the golden light of the candles.

“Not in heat?” he laughs. “Taste it for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

His hand moves away from my crotch and rises to my face. He runs his wet fingertip along my bottom lip until my mouth opens. Then he slides his finger inside. Instinctively, my lips wrap around him and my tongue flickers over his skin.

He’s right. I can taste it. I can taste myself on his fingers. I can taste my own arousal, raw and tangy and hot.

Oh God, is it really too late already? Am I already a full-blown omega?

Baen slides his finger in and out, gently finger-fucking my lips as I continue to suck him. I’m unable to quit, unable to take my eyes away from his intense glare of lust.

“By the Source, you’re beautiful,” he grunts. “You’re the most beautiful omega I’ve ever seen. I can’t wait to watch you writhe and come on my fingers.”

His digit slips from my lips with a wet smack. Once more, he touches me down below. His fingertip teases back the edge of my panties.

He touches my outer lips. My inner.

“You need this don’t you?” he purrs. “You need me to touch you inside.”

To my dismay, I find myself nodding wordlessly.

Now his fingertip is pressed against my hole. My channel clenches and flutters in anticipation of what’s coming. Just one little push, and that thick Alpha finger will be inside me.

But the moment is interrupted by a startling bang of metal on metal.

Someone’s feet tread heavily and rapidly down a set of stairs I cannot see.

Another bang as the door at the end of the shelter flies open.

With his finger still pressed against my needy hole, Baen looks up at the intruder. His lips peel back from his fangs in a snarl, and an explosion of fury erupts behind his eyes.

Just as quickly, however, his expression softens.

“Taliesin? You’re alive!”

CHAPTER 12: HINES

I toss my head back against the soft rim of the nest and look at the doorway. From this angle, everything is upside down.

There is a man standing in the open door. He is lit from below by the wavering glow of the candles, sending stark shadows upward over his features. His head is a wet mop of jet-black locks plastered to his dark skin. His upper body is clad in the tattered remnants of a white tank top that hangs in ragged strips, leaving his hard, chiseled abdomen exposed. Below, he is wearing a similarly destroyed pair of jeans that have been burnt and torn into ragged denim shorts.

I can hardly believe it's really him, really Taliesin. But there are two features that erase any doubt.

The first are those glacier-blue eyes

The second is his scent. His unmistakable Alpha scent.

It's similar to Baen's, but different, carrying specific scent markers that identify him as Taliesin. No other Alpha has that smell. It's as personal to him as his name. As unique as the patterns of whorls on his fingertips.

I shouldn't be able to pick out those details of his scent. It's another sign of my transitioning physiology.

“Tal!” Though my voice is still weak, I manage to shout happily. “Tal, it's really you! Oh God, I thought you were dead.”

I roll over in the nest to look at him right side up.

I don't think I've ever been so happy to see anyone in my life. I was so certain that Tal had been killed. Any normal man would have been crushed to death in that wreck.

But his skin, miraculously, appears mostly unscathed. When he turns to shut the door behind him, I see that even the bullet wounds on his back have closed. Incredible.

My happiness, however, does not seem to be reciprocated by Tal. He doesn't even answer me, and I can sense the anger emanating from his body like waves of heat. His anger is not directed at me, however. All of his attention is focused on Baen, who is still hunched over me protectively.

Tal growls low and aggressive. "What the fuck are you doing to the target, Baen?"

I sense Baen's muscles tense. I try to clamber away, but his arms pin me in, keeping my half-naked body trapped beneath him.

"She needs help," Baen answers in a growl of his own. "That's what I'm providing."

For a moment, nothing moves inside the shelter except the incessant flicker of candle flames. The room is so still and quiet I can actually hear the sizzle of the burning wicks. The air between the two Alphas seems to crackle with energy and aggression. Another wave of goosebumps washes over my flesh.

It's Tal who finally breaks the silence.

“Help?” he snorts derisively. “You’re the one who’s gonna need help when I’m done with you, boy.”

His lunge is so quick I almost don’t even see it.

Baen rises to meet the attack, but he’s a fraction of a second behind, and Tal gets the upper hand. Their bodies meet with a sickening crack of muscle on muscle. Baen tumbles backward, sprawling on the floor.

“The omega is mine,” Tal roars. His voice is so loud it rattles the jars on the shelves. “MINE!”

Tal steps forward, placing himself protectively between me and the other Alpha.

That protective gesture and his possessive words stir something inside me. More hot arousal licks at my insides, and my muscles shudder with lust. A surge of guilt and shame follows fast on its heels. This is so wrong. Only moments before, my body was getting turned on by Baen’s insistent touch. Now I’m having the same reaction to Tal violently staking his claim over me.

This isn’t like me. This isn’t like me at all.

It’s my estrus.

My heat.

It’s like a flame deep in my core, consuming me from the inside out.

But maybe there’s still a chance. My eyes dart toward the bottle of pills where Baen set them on the shelf earlier. If I

could just get those pills...

But Tal's body is blocking me from reaching them.

With an angry grunt, Baen pushes himself up into a seated position. He drags the back of his hand across his mouth, inspects it for blood, grins.

"If you want her, you'll have to kill me." Baen's voice is quiet but scary.

"Gladly," Tal snarls.

I haven't seen him like this. Even when we were fleeing from the city on the motorcycle, his emotions were cold and restrained. Now, however, he seems to be practically vibrating with rage and jealousy.

And Baen is the same.

The fallen Alpha launches himself off the floor with a blood-curdling howl of rage.

"The omega is MINE!"

Once more, their bodies connect. An impact of meat and bone rings through the enclosed space. The candles gutter with the sudden churning motion.

Tal's body is slammed backward into the curved wall. The metal buckles under his weight. He shoves off, grappling with his opponent, and the two Alphas tumble down the length of the shelter, snarling and punching and biting.

"Mine!" both voices roar back and forth.

Shelves collapse in their wake, spilling cans and shattering jars, filling the shelter with the sharp odor of vinegar. Candles are doused, bringing the light level down.

Something clatters and rattles nearby on the floor.

The pills!

My muscles are still weak and shivery, but I summon all of my strength and fling my upper body over the side of the nest of cloth and moss. I tumble onto the hard concrete floor. My fingers search for the pill bottle, and when they find it, my heart leaps.

I may still be able to stop this.

But time is running out...

There are more crashes in the darkness at the far end of the shelter. The sound of whaling fists and gnashing teeth. Both Alphas are snarling and shouting their claim.

They are fighting over me. Over my body.

And shamefully, that is turning me on.

The hot arousal simmering just below my tummy starts to boil over. The need is almost too much to bear. It doubles me over with pain.

I have to put an end to this now.

My fingers fumble with the lid of the pill bottle. It takes me three tries, but finally I wrench it free. I tilt the bottle toward my open palm. Several small blue capsules tip out.

“She’s mine, fucker!”

Before I have a chance to pop the pills into my mouth, the sparring Alphas come charging down the length of the shelter again. Their bodies slam into me, knocking me back against the cushion of the nest.

The bottle drops from my hand, sending little blue pills skittering over the floor.

“I’ll kill you!” Tal snarls, gripping Baen’s throat in his hands.

“Fuck you, asshole!” Baen drives his knee upward into Tal’s groin, and the Alpha’s stranglehold loosens

The struggle continues. The Alphas roar and slam against the curved walls, leaving heavy dents in the metal.

The sounds of their fighting heightens my arousal to unbearable levels. I’m feverish with lust. My skin burns with the need to be touched, to be claimed, to be owned. I want so badly to give in to that desire. To fling my legs wide and howl for both Alphas to claim me at the same time.

But I have to be strong. I have to resist.

I drop to the floor searching for the spilled pills. All I need is one. Just one pill to halt the transformation.

My eyes scan over the mess left by the feuding Alphas. There amid the scattered cans and shards of broken glass, my eyes land on a single blue capsule.

But as I reach for it, a heavy Alpha heel steps back and treads on my hand.

I yelp in pain.

It is Baen who stepped on me. My cry of pain draws his attention away from the battle. He twists his head around, staring down at me with a look of concern.

“Look what you did, idiot!” Tal shouts. “You’ve hurt the omega!”

Tal takes advantage of his opponent’s temporary distraction to drive a powerful kick straight into Baen’s breast bone. Baen grunts in pain and flies backward.

“Now, I’m telling you for the last time,” Tal roars. “The omega belongs to me.”

He stoops, and his muscled arm coils around my body, lifting me off the ground like a broken doll.

“Over my dead body,” Baen snarls.

He leaps forward and grabs me around the waist, and before I know it, I’m caught in the middle of an Alpha tug of war. Their hard fingers bite into my flesh. Their knotted muscles pull me in two directions at once.

“Stop it,” I whimper. “What are you doing?”

But the Alphas don’t hear me over the sound of their own fierce growls.

“MINE,” they both snarl. “MINE!”

They yank my helpless body back and forth like two selfish children fighting over a favorite toy. Only these are no children. They are brutal Alphas, and they are inhumanly

strong. My muscles ache under the tension of their struggle. My limbs feel like they'll be pulled from their sockets.

The Alphas have both gone feral, and their inflamed brains don't realize that they are on the verge of ripping me in two.

In a last ditch effort, I muster every bit of energy I have left, suck in a deep breath, and scream.

“STOP!”

That does the trick. And not a moment too soon. A few more seconds of that, and these possessive Alphas would have literally torn me in half.

“I won't belong to either one of you if I'm dead,” I pant. “Now put me down.”

The Alphas stare at me with blank expressions, their jaws hanging open. They look like they have just woken up from a dream.

“Put. Me. DOWN!”

I'm crying now. The tears are drawing wet stripes down my cheeks. That seems to snap the Alphas out of their daze.

Together, they carefully lay my body down into the center of the nest.

“Hines,” Tal breathes. “I'm sorry. I lost control...”

He notices my hand reaching out to the floor of the now ravaged shelter.

“Please,” I rasp. “My pills...I need my pills...”

Tal turns around, eyes searching, and plucks a blue pill from the floor. He offers it to me. The look on his face is contrite, as if he is truly embarrassed for his bestial behavior.

“Wait,” Baen says, catching Tal’s wrist. “What are you doing?”

Even though he is challenging Tal’s action, the fire has gone out of his voice.

“I’m giving Hines what she needs,” Tal answers.

Baen shakes his head and furrows his brow.

“She doesn’t need that. It’s Outsider poison.”

Tal jerks his wrist out of Baen’s grasp.

“It’s not for you to decide,” Tal snaps. “She says she needs it, so I’m going to give it to her.”

Baen is clearly not happy about the decision, but he relents, sitting back on the floor with a grumble and propping his arms on his knees.

Tal cradles my head and places the pill into my mouth. My mouth and throat are parched, and I struggle to swallow. He finds a jug of water in the mess behind him, opens it, and gingerly pours the fluid between my lips.

I swallow the pill, praying that it’s not already too late.

At first nothing happens, and panic clutches my throat like an invisible hand.

But then, by slow degrees, the throbbing need in my center dissipates outward. My clenching muscles relax, and the heat

leaches out of my half naked body.

I think it's working.

Baen sniffs the air like a dog, and the look of displeasure on his face confirms it. My estrus is fading. I'm not turning into an omega. Not today at least.

But the term "heat" is more than just a metaphor. Though I did not realize it before, the estrus really was raising my body temperature, along with the other effects, and now, half-naked and still pretty damp, a shiver writhes through my chilly muscles.

"Hines, you're cold," Tal says. "I will warm you."

He strips off what remains of his tattered shirt and tosses it away, then he climbs into the nest with me. Even though his skin is damp, his body heat is so intense that it starts to warm me instantly, evaporating the moisture on my skin.

Baen, still naked and once again growing aroused, starts to climb into the nest on the other side. Tal snarls jealously at him.

"Easy, big guy," Baen says. "You said it yourself. Hines is cold. I'm just helping warm her up."

Tal's snarl transitions into a low growl. He's unconvinced.

"Look," Baen goes on. "We're *both* sworn to protect the omega." He notices me wince at that term, corrects himself.

"The Outsider, I mean. And if she's cold, well, we both have a responsibility to warm her, correct?"

After a beat, Tal gives in with a gravelly exhale.

“Very well. But no funny business. She needs to rest.”

Tal picks me up and turns me so that I’m facing him. If this annoys Baen, he doesn’t say so, and the younger Alpha seems perfectly content to press his rigid arousal against the cleft of my backside.

One thing is for sure: these two Alphas are doing a good job of raising my body temperature.

I feel like I should object to this situation, but the surge of weariness that comes over me silences my complaint before it has a chance to leave my throat. And so, sandwiched between two warm, hard-bodied Alphas, I drift off to sleep.

CHAPTER 13: TALIESIN

The heavy rains have finally abated to a soft mist. Overhead, gray clouds are still pulled over the sky like a dingy quilt, but it is not as dark and ominous as yesterday, and there are even a few holes where patches of blue sky show through and beams of gold light slant downward to the rolling hills of the Farlands—the outermost region of the Zone.

We set out from the shelter at daybreak feeling well-rested. Even Hines seemed energized and refreshed after the ordeal of the preceding day.

Now the Quarantine Wall is far behind us, and with the slackening of the rain, we are making good progress as we travel on foot toward the center of the Zone, to the central ruins where our tribe lives. To avoid the mud and uneven ground, we are following an ancient paved road from the time before the Big Change. This makes it easier for Hines, but it also leaves us exposed, out in the open. I don't like that.

The most important thing, however, is time. Even though the rain has let up for now, there are dark thunderheads piling up on the eastern horizon, flickering with internal lightning.

That makes me nervous. We need to move fast and reach our checkpoint shelter in the forest before the storms reach us.

Hines walks beside me, and I try to position my body in such a way as to block her from the wind and the rain. We left her sopping wet dress behind, and now she is dressed in dry

clothing that we found inside the shelter—an oversized hoody that hangs half way down her thighs like a baggy dress. Her smooth legs are bare, exposed to the cool air, but the constant movement seems to be keeping her warm.

Then there's the other member of our little party.

Baen.

The young Alpha frequently runs ahead of us, scouting out the terrain ahead, checking for danger.

I'm glad for that. I don't want Baen anywhere near Hines. I don't trust him around her. The young Alpha's reputation is well known throughout our tribe. I know all about his penchant for seducing young, unbound omegas. Although I'm not sure of it, I suspect that is the reason the Elders posted him way out in the Farlands at that remote shelter—it was a punishment for messing with the wrong omega.

And I have no doubt that he's got similar plans for Hines.

Source, if I hadn't reached the shelter when I did yesterday, the stupid boy might have actually marked her.

I can hardly blame him, though.

No Alpha could have resisted that scent.

And I have to admit that Baen is a useful addition to our little group. Aside from his reputation as a seducer, he's known to have one of the most sensitive noses in the Zone. That nose has gotten him into trouble. But now it's a valuable asset. So he stays ahead, testing the air every hundred yards or so,

gesturing back to us that the coast is clear for us to continue our march.

If there are any Farlanders nearby, Baen will certainly smell them before they smell us.

Normally, I wouldn't have any fear of the Farlanders. In fact, the thought of hiding from them is distasteful to me. I would much rather meet them head-on and defeat them in battle.

However, right now, the most important thing is protecting Hines. We can't risk letting her fall into the hands of the Farlanders. I shudder to think what they would do to an omega like her.

No, not an omega, I correct myself.

I look down at the small female as she walks bravely beside me, her brown hair stirring in the breeze.

Yesterday, she was beginning to transform into an omega, just as Lily said she would. But then she took that little blue pill, and the transformation was reversed.

I don't know how I feel about that. On the one hand, being an omega is not a disease that needs to be cured. But on the other hand, halting the mutation means she does not have an omega scent, which means she is less likely to attract Farlanders as we journey deeper into the Zone.

But how long will that medicine last? I have to assume the effects were only temporary because she gathered up the rest of the scattered pills—as many as she could find—and put

them back into the bottle that is now tucked in the front pocket of her hooded garment.

Hines looks up and sees me watching her. She quickly looks away.

I can't tell if it's shyness or fear on her part.

A pang of remorse stabs at my heart for what happened yesterday. When I was around her in the city, I was able to control my desire for her. But yesterday when I caught the beginnings of her omega scent and her estrus, it sent me into a frenzy. Baen and I were both so swept up in our feral urges that we nearly hurt Hines.

We nearly hurt the very woman we are sworn to protect.

A heavy burden of guilt drags at my heart.

I cannot allow that to happen again. I must protect Hines at all costs. I must not give in to my base, animal urges.

At midday, we stop to rest in the shelter of a stone outcropping. Hines needs to rest her legs and refuel. I give her some pemmican—dried meat and berries—which she devours hungrily. There is a little freshwater spring trickling from the rocks as well, and Baen collects some water for her to drink.

After her little meal, I notice her wince briefly and clutch her lower abdomen.

At first I think it is something wrong with the food. But afterward, I see her remove her pill bottle and swallow another of the little blue pills. A minute later, she frowns, and

immediately takes a second pill. She tries to do it sneakily, but I notice.

Baen notices this too, and we pass a silent glance of communication.

Hines's omega transformation is returning, and with it her heat. As long as she has her supply of pills, she can stave off that transformation. But the deeper we go into the Zone, the stronger the power of the Source becomes. Does this mean she'll need to take a greater quantity of medicine as we progress on our journey?

How long will it be until she runs out of pills?

That's a bridge we'll just have to cross when we come to it.

For now, we keep going. Keep moving forward toward the ruins at the center of the Zone.

After our short rest and meal, we set out once more along the road, me shielding Hines from the weather and Baen running ahead, making sure the way is safe.

After a few more hours of trekking, a thin dark line appears on the horizon, and my heart rises with a sense of relief.

The forest.

That means we're getting close to a place where we can take shelter from the coming second wave of storms. The thunderheads in the east have grown, and now they are looming ominously, but we should be able to beat them.

Suddenly, Baen pauses ahead of us as he tops a rise in the road.

He raises a clenched fist, signalling for us to halt. I place a hand on Hines's shoulder, stopping her in her tracks.

“What is it?” Her wide, frightened eyes dart back and forth between me and Baen.

I lift my head and sniff, testing the air. It takes me a moment, and a great deal of concentration, but it's there all right—the scent of Farlanders.

The Farlanders are so called because they live out here in the wilderness, away from the central ruins. They are the ancestors of criminals who were expelled from the Central Ruins Tribe a few generations ago. They are vile, inbred creatures with no honor and a hunger for cruelty.

The short hairs bristle on the back of my neck. My muscles tense out of pure reflex.

“Tal?” Hines whines.

I slash a finger across my lips, signalling for her to be silent. She obeys, but I can see a million questions churning behind her eyes.

Now is not the time for discussion, however.

Moving swiftly and silently, Baen comes running back to us.

“Farlanders,” he whispers.

“Yes, I smelled them too. Did you see them?”

Baen nods. “Yes a half dozen Alphas.” He pauses for a beat.
“And an omega.”

“A Farlander omega?” I ask in astonishment.

Baen nods again. “I think so.”

That is strange indeed. Farlander omegas are rarely seen outside of their camps. It is well known that the Farlanders mistreat their females, keeping them locked away in cages, used as slaves for mating. Once they have outlived their usefulness for breeding, then they are used for meat.

It is a cruel, hellish existence.

But what could a Farlander omega be doing out here in the open? Did she escape? It seems impossible.

“What are Farlanders?” Hines asks, her voice trembling.

“They are bad Alphas,” I answer. “That’s all you need to know.”

“But Baen said there was an omega with them too...”

I look back to Baen. His instinctual reaction is the same as mine. His muscles are striated with tension. Veins are popping out along his arms and neck, and I can smell the adrenaline coursing through his system. He’s ready for a fight to the death.

“We can take them, Tal,” he says in a low growl. “There’s only six of them. Between you and me, we will make short work of them.”

It's tempting. There is nothing I would like more than to kill some Farlanders. But I shake my head.

"It's too risky," I say in a low growl. "If we get into a fight, that will leave Hines unprotected. And it could be a trap."

Baen's disappointment is obvious, but he nods in agreement.

"What about the omega?" Hines whispers insistently. "Baen said something about an omega..."

Just then, a noise comes from beyond the rise ahead of us. A sharp yelp that slices the air like a knife. The sound is unmistakably female and unmistakably in peril. Even Hines hears it, and her body stiffens with tension.

"What was *that*?"

"Don't worry about it," I say. "We're going to avoid this situation. We're going to go around." I turn my eyes toward the looming darkness in the east. "It will take longer, but if we hurry, we can still make it to shelter before the storm arrives."

Another agonized yelp bursts in the distance, louder this time.

Hines shivers at the sound, but immediately her expression becomes firm with resolve.

"Someone is in trouble," she says. "We have to help them."

"No," I hiss. "We're not getting involved. Hines!"

But the defiant little female is already racing ahead, her small bare legs carrying her forward with a surprising swiftness.

Still, she is no match for my Alpha speed. I lunge forward and catch her arm, stopping her. Baen is there too, blocking her

path.

“Tal is right,” he says. “We can’t get involved in this. We need to keep you safe.”

Hines’s eyes are moistening with tears. Her face reddens like she is going to cry.

“But someone is in trouble,” She insists.

Her courage is admirable. Her desire to help someone, and a total stranger at that, swells my heart with pride. It reminds me of two days before when I saw her help that poor homeless woman in the city.

I take a deep breath.

“Okay, I’m going to check it out,” I whisper to Hines. “But you stay put.” I turn to Baen. “Keep her here.”

He nods in agreement.

I stalk forward, moving cautiously up the slight incline. I concentrate on the flow of the wind over the hairs of my arms and legs. It’s blowing into me, which means I’m downwind. The Farlanders cannot smell me, but I can smell them. Their foul stench grows in intensity with each step I take.

But I have to be careful. The wind could shift without warning.

As I near the top of the ridge, I duck into a crouch. I lower myself further, until I’m lying prone on the wet road, partly concealed by a row of tufted weeds sprouting from the cracked

pavement. I tease the weeds aside with my fingers and peer down into the shallow valley below.

What I see down there sends a rush of white hot anger coursing through my veins. I force myself to bite back the pissed-off growl welling in my chest.

It's a group of Farlander Alphas. Six of them, just like Baen said. They are repulsive monstrosities, sick mockeries of Alphas, their faces gnarled and twisted by generations of inbreeding. Their naked bodies are filthy with mud and grime. Their lips curl back, baring rotting, broken teeth as they snarl and circle their prey.

Their quarry, trapped in the center of the circling Farlanders, is the omega Baen mentioned.

She is young. Barely past her first estrus, if that. Her naked body is on full display—skin fair, breasts small and immature. She is filthy too, and feral-looking. Her long blonde hair is matted and wild. But she doesn't seem to be a Farlander. Her features are delicate, even pretty, and when I finally sort her scent from the others, it doesn't have that same ugly, goatish smell.

Who the hell is this omega?

And what in the name of the Source is she doing out here?

One thing is for certain. Whatever happens, we can't let Hines see this. She will insist on intervening, and I can't allow that. As much as my Alpha instincts are roaring inside me, urging

me to help this unknown omega, my protective feelings for Hines keep me pinned in place.

The risk is too great.

As soon as that thought flashes through my mind, however, I hear the patter of tiny feet rushing up from behind. A second later, Hines appears at my side, dropping to her belly beside me.

She peers through the screen of weeds, eyes wide with concern.

Fuck...

CHAPTER 14: HINES

Baen positions his body in front of mine, blocking my path as Taliesin strides forward, moving silently up the little incline, then lying on his belly to look through a patch of scraggly grass sprouting through the cracked pavement.

The wind rises, carrying strange and frightening sounds from the other side of the rise. Sounds like a pack of wild dogs would make. Deep, guttural snarls and barks and popping jaws. And interspersed through this awful chorus comes the occasional frightened yelp of a young female.

Those sounds grip my stomach with icy fingers and send awful shivers wriggling up my spine.

“Baen, what is it?” I plead. “What’s happening?”

The Alpha doesn’t move. He frowns down at me.

“You don’t need to see,” he whispers.

I don’t need to see? Screw that. I understand that Baen and Tal are concerned about protecting me. But something bad is about to happen over there, and I want to know what it is.

I drop my shoulders, as if relenting, and casually sweep my gaze to one side, out across the empty plains, dark beneath the clouds and spotted here and there by sunlight poking through. Then, summoning the best acting skills I can muster, I pry my eyelids open wide, draw an exaggerated gasp and point at nothing.

“Baen, what is that?”

“What?”

He falls for it, turning his gaze toward the place where I’m pointing. As soon as he does, I spring into motion, dodging around him before he has a chance to catch me.

“Source damn it,” he hisses behind me.

I pump my legs, sprinting as fast as I can without making too much noise. As I reach the place where Tal is lying, I drop to my belly beside him, scraping my hands and knees on the pavement in the process. I hardly even feel the fiery sting, however, as I push aside a tuft of grassy weeds and see what Tal has been looking at.

My heart drums against the wet ground.

The scene in front of me is worse than I could have expected.

There are six monsters down there. Baen and Tal called them Farlanders. But in all my studies of the Zone and its mutations, I’ve never seen Alphas like these. They are hideous creatures, and just looking at them makes my flesh crawl.

They’ve got a young omega trapped in their midst. They are circling her like man-shaped wolves circling a trapped fawn. They lick their chops, looking like they intend to eat her alive.

But the bent and grotesque erections protruding from their pelvises make their real intentions perfectly clear.

A welter of emotions swirls inside my chest—repulsion, rage, fear, and more than anything else a desire to intervene.

We cannot stand by and let this happen.

“Tal, we have to do something!” I say, struggling to keep my voice hushed despite my emotion.

Tal casts a troubled glance my way, then turns his attention to Baen, who has appeared on my other side, also lying down to hide himself.

“I told you to keep her away,” Tal growls in annoyance, talking to Baen over my head.

“She is...very quick.”

I look at Baen, and his face colors with embarrassment. He’s embarrassed that I fooled him with such a silly, childish trick. With my look, I try to let him know that I won’t let Tal know about that. I turn back to the other Alpha.

“It’s too late,” I whisper. “I’ve already seen. Now we have to do something. Tal, please...”

His face darkens. His jaw tightens and ticks.

“I’ve already told you, Hines. The risk is too great. If any harm should come to you, I—“

His whispered words are cut off by a sharp bark from below. It’s the trapped omega. Though she is small and outnumbered, she’s not going to allow herself to be taken without a fight. She shifts into a fighting stance, curling her fingers like claws. She turns slowly in the opposite direction of the circling Farlander Alphas, snarling at them and gnashing her teeth.

God, she is courageous. If I were in her position, I would be cowering in fear right now. But this young omega isn't going down so easily.

Her courage inspires me, and I draw a deep breath, preparing to shout at the Farlanders. Before I can do so, however, Tal clamps his hand over my mouth.

"Don't," he says in a low snarl. "Don't you dare."

"Come on, Tal," Baen says. "We can take these fuckers. Shit, I could take six Farlanders on my own, no problem. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid," Tal answers, still covering my mouth. He is speaking to Baen, but his eyes are locked on me. "At least not for myself. But if even one of those Farlanders managed to get away, he would alert his brethren. And the last thing we need is a pack of Farlanders on our tail as we head into the woods. It will put Hines in danger. It's out of the question."

Baen lets out an annoyed grunt, but he doesn't move.

I whine against Tal's palm and raise my eyebrows in a pleading look. He looks away, unwilling to give in.

I turn my eyes back to the shallow valley below.

The circle of Farlanders are tightening around the wild omega like a noose. Their excitement is mounting. Lurid hoots and yips are spilling from their lips. Something else is spilling from their disgusting, erect members.

I want to scream, but Tal's hand won't let me.

With a blindingly quick motion, the omega lunges at one of her attackers, raking her fingers down his twisted face. Her sharp nails draw four red scratches. The Alpha stumbles back with a grunt of pain.

My heart leaps at this small victory.

But it is short-lived.

Another Alpha darts forward, catching the omega by the arm. She shrieks with fury, and poises to strike with her free hand, but another Alpha catches her wrist. A third comes from behind, fisting her matted hair.

I struggle to pull away from Tal's clamped hand, but his heavy arm falls across my back, pinning me in place

"Be still," he hisses. Then to Baen, he says. "We need to get Hines away from here."

Down below, the scratched Alpha swipes his fingers over his marred face, inspects the blood, licks it. He glares at the omega struggling in his companion's hands, and a twisted grin spreads across his face as if carved by an invisible knife.

He balls his bloodied fingers into a fist, swings low. His knuckles hit the omega in her belly with a sickening thud. The air rushes from her lungs in a pained wheeze and she doubles over.

My own gut pangs suddenly, as if experiencing a faint echo of that punch. I feel like I'm going to throw up.

Even Baen and Tal tense on either side of me.

The awful anticipation of what is coming twists in my guts like a cold iron chain.

The Farlander with the scratched face—he seems to be in charge of the gang—grunts something I cannot understand and motions to the others. They drag the omega to the muddy, damp grass. She continues to struggle, but she is still gasping for breath after that punch.

Two of the Farlanders pin her arms. The scratched Farlander kneels, roughly spreading her bare legs.

I look away, turning my eyes back to Tal. I can sense the conflict inside him, tightening his jaw and the muscles around his eyes. I whimper into his hand. When he looks at me and sees my pained expression, something crumbles behind his eyes.

“Oh fuck it,” he growls.

His hand slides away from my mouth.

“Listen to me,” he says, whispering rapidly. “No matter what, you stay put and stay silent,” he commands. Then to Baen he hisses. “We have to kill them all. If even one of them escapes, there will be hell to pay.”

“Kill them all?” Baen answers with a snarling grin. “Gladly.”

“All right,” Tal growls. “Let’s go...”

In unison, the two Alphas burst from beside me, rushing down the muddied hill. They let out twin roars of challenge that tremble the ground and echo over the landscape like living thunder.

The scratched Farlander is mere inches from mounting the helpless omega. Now he looks up, his beady eyes widening with surprise and anger.

The others turn too. Before they have a chance to prepare, Tal and Baen crash into them, scattering them like bowling pins.

I watch breathlessly from my hiding place.

One of the Farlanders manages to keep his footing on the slippery ground. He swings a wild punch at Tal, who blocks it easily. He catches the Farlander's wrist, twists it, and slams down hard with his elbow.

There is a stomach-lurching crack. The Farlander's arm bends the wrong way. The creature howls in agony, but the sound is cut off by a blow to his trachea. A second blow flattens his nose.

The Farlander flops to the earth with a wet thud. His body is statue-still.

He is not unconscious.

He's dead.

Behind him, Baen is going to work. He pounces on one fallen Farlander who is sprawled in the mud and grass. With a swift, twisting motion, he breaks the creature's neck. Even from this distance, I can hear the dull, sickening pop.

My squeamish stomach rolls over, and a sour taste surges into my mouth

It's not as though I've never experienced violence. During our flight from the city, Tal killed several men. And then there was that incident at SynerGen six months ago, when I helped free Sloane and her Alphas.

But there's something about this fight that is so raw, so primal. The combatants are spattered with mud. And the Alphas' method of fighting is so brutal.

It has a strange effect on my body.

Beneath that queasy feeling, something else is welling up. That hollow feeling below my belly. That hot, clenching need. Now, of all times, my estrus is coming back, and it's returning with a vengeance.

Below, the fight continues. The remaining four Farlanders have staggered to their feet. Tal is facing off against two of them, easily dodging their blows. Baen directs his attention to a third, catching the creature's throat and biting down with his fingers until the Farlander's face turns purple, eyes bugging like they will pop from their sockets.

The fourth Farlander takes advantage of his distraction. He is sneaking up behind Baen, preparing to strike.

A cry starts in my throat, but I hold it back, remembering Tal's command.

And there's no need for me to yell. Baen has help from another quarter.

The little wild omega has caught her breath again. She rolls onto all fours and pounces, sinking her fangs into the sneaky

Farlander's ankle. And it's no small bite, either. She jerks her head back, tearing away a chunk of meat and tendon.

The Farlander shrieks in pain. An earsplitting keening sound.

Baen drops the Farlander he is choking, spins around, and strikes the bitten Farlander in the face, cutting off his scream.

The Farlander's jaw falls slack as it dislocates under Baen's fist.

The other Farlander, recovering from the stranglehold, leaps on Baen's back.

Meanwhile, Tal is still fending off the other two.

And all the while, my awful need is growing.

It's so messed up. So wrong...

The violence, the sight of watching my two Alpha protectors kicking ass, is acting as a catalyst for my urges. Combined with our proximity to the center of the Zone, the omega-change is growing stronger, more insistent.

I shift my weight and pull the pill bottle out of my baggy hoody, fumble with the cap, and tap two more pills into my palm. I swallow them dry.

God, there are only a dozen or so left.

That's not good.

So far, I've managed to stave off the transformation. It hasn't been able to complete itself. But I won't be able to hold it at bay much longer.

My only hope is that we reach the center of the Zone in time and that Sloane and Lily have the necessary equipment and chemicals for making more of the suppressant.

I've got the recipe memorized. All I need are the materials.

Gradually, my shameful arousal dissipates. The cramps of desire fade into my core and disappear.

I turn my attention back to the fight.

At first, Tal and Baen had the element of surprise, and they were able to dispatch the first two Farlanders easily. The others, however, are putting up a fight.

With a low, sweeping kick, Tal manages to drop the two Farlanders that he is fighting. He prepares to pounce and kill them but senses that Baen is in trouble, and whirls around to help. He delivers a sharp kick to one attacker's spine, giving Baen the break he needs to fling the other Alpha from his back.

Together, they fall upon the two Farlanders, brutally pummeling them into the mud. The feral omega joins in, releasing her justified rage.

But now they are caught up in a frenzy of bloodlust.

They don't notice how quickly the remaining two Farlanders have recovered.

One of the Farlanders that Tal tripped rises, clutching a heavy stone in his hand. He moves forward. The sound of his feet on the muddy ground is muted beneath my Alphas' pummeling fists and growls.

The Farlander raises the heavy jagged stone. He's going to bring it down on Tal's head.

Nobody else sees.

I have to do something.

"Tal! Behind you!" I scream.

The Farlander with the rock freezes and turns toward the top of the rise where I'm lying behind the weeds. My heart stops, seems to clench like a fist.

The Farlander's nose twitches. Behind, his fallen companion has raised himself from the muck, and he is sniffing too.

I realize that the wind has shifted, blowing in from behind me.

I'm upwind.

Shit. They can smell me. They know I'm here.

Tal springs up from his crouch and whirls a roundhouse kick into the Farlander who was sneaking up behind him. The rock drops harmlessly from the creature's hand.

The other Farlander takes one last sniff and bolts.

Baen starts to go after him, but he loses his footing on the wet grass and slips. It's a matter of seconds before he recovers, but in that time, the Farlander, loping away on all fours, has managed to get a head start of several hundred yards.

Baen starts after him again, but Tal shouts to stop him.

With all of the Farlanders dead or fleeing, I assume it's safe to come out of hiding. I run down the hill, keeping to the pavement so that I don't slip in the mud.

“I told you not to intervene,” Tal snarls.

His face is a dark mask of rage, grooved with wrinkles and shot with veins. He looks more terrifying than I’ve ever seen before.

“You told me to stay put,” I answer in a trembling voice.

“That’s what I did.”

Tal drags a heavy breath between his clenched teeth, holds it, blows it out again, along with some of the tension from his muscles.

“The Farlanders have smelled you now,” he growls. “When the one who escaped tells his brethren, they’ll be after us in droves. They won’t let an omega like you slip away.”

“I can go after him.” Baen gestures toward the fleeing Farlander.

Tal shakes his head, swinging his dark, muddy hair.

“You’d never catch him before he makes the woods,” Tal says.

“And there’s no telling how many Farlanders are waiting there. Could be too many for you to take on by yourself.”

Baen scowls. His muscles twitch like a poorly trained hound eager to give chase. I half expect him to whine like an impatient dog.

“Besides,” Tal goes on. “We need to stay together. We need to protect Hines.”

Baen casts one last glance at the fleeing Farlander, who is now little more than a distant speck, pale against the backdrop of

the forest's darkness in the distance. His shoulders drop, and he nods reluctantly.

“What about her?” I ask.

The young, feral omega is standing a little way off. Her naked, mud-smudged body is trembling with adrenaline. Her face is pale, but her lips and chin are vibrant with blood from where she bit that Farlander. Her dark eyes are wide and glassy with animal apprehensiveness.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

The omega just stares and trembles. Her dark eyes are fearful but inquisitive. God, she can't be older than eighteen, if that.

Tal places a big hand on my shoulder.

“Careful, Hines.”

I take one slow step forward, dropping my head like I would with an injured animal. I slowly turn my hands palms up, making myself as non-threatening as possible—which isn't all that hard for me.

“Don't worry,” I say. “We won't hurt you. We want to help.”

“Thank you,” she rasps.

Then, quick as a wild hare she turns and bolts. Her pale legs are a blur, and her small feet barely seem to touch the muddy ground. I let my hands drop.

“Don't worry about her,” Baen says. “We saved her. Now she's on her own.”

“Yes,” Tal agrees. “And it's time for us to start running too.”

He stares off down the converging lines of the old highway where they lead into the dark forest in the distance. His eyes squint, not so much with focus as with thinking. After a moment, he speaks.

“We can’t keep going straight ahead. The Farlander went that way, which means the rest of his tribe is in that direction.”

From the east, electricity grumbles like a hungry stomach. The thunderhead is darkening, expanding, swollen and black with rain.

“We could turn around,” Baen suggests. “Return to the shelter. Reconnoiter.”

Tal shakes his head, scrapes the back of his hand across his darkly stubbled chin.

“No. Too far.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Baen says.

He is standing protectively at my side, so close I can feel the furnace-like heat emanating from his sinewy, half-naked body.

Tal points toward the mounting thunderhead, towering like a black anvil over the horizon. It dominates the sky like a misshapen mountain of cloud.

“We head east,” Tal says sternly. “Into the storm.”

Deep within that looming mass of dark vapor, silent lightning flickers like a reply.

“Are you nuts?” Baen half chuckles.

“Maybe. Let’s go.”

Before I even have a chance to question his plan, Tal has scooped me up and flopped me over his shoulder, and he sets off running toward the gathering darkness in the east. Baen follows close behind.

CHAPTER 15: BAEN

The wind howls over hills and stones. It whistles past my ears and pushes against my front, slowing me down. The trees at the edge of the forest dance madly, throwing off swirls of leaves. The first sprays of rainfall spit across my face.

Lightning forks across the black wall of cloud looming in the east, and for an instant, the dark landscape is lit bright as noon—brighter even. The thunderclap that follows a moment later is so explosive that it seems to come not only from the sky but from the earth itself. The air is laced with the scent of ozone and rain.

The storm is upon us.

I'm ahead in the scouting position again, sniffing for Farlanders, but it's useless. I can't smell shit in this whipping wind.

Now I understand Tal's plan. It may be crazy, but it's also ingenious.

The Farlanders will never be able to follow us inside the storm. The darkness will conceal us. The swirling wind and pouring rain will cover the scent.

The scent of the half-omega.

That's how I think of her now. She is still an Outsider. The change is not complete. But it has begun, and it is only a matter of time.

I turn back to check on the others. They are not far behind me. Tal is charging forward across the muddy grass, his face stoney with determination.

I have to admit, that asshole is good in a fight.

Of course I experienced that first hand yesterday when we battled over Hines. I'm still ashamed about that—ashamed about the way that we nearly hurt her with our jealous rampage.

But now that Tal and I have fought together against the Farlanders, we are battle-brothers.

He is a warrior. I can respect that.

And I can respect his single-minded devotion to the half-omega.

He's right. She must be protected at any cost.

Right now, the half-omega, Hines, is bent over his shoulder. The fair skin of her thighs is a stark contrast to Tal's darker complexion. The baggy, hooded garment has ridden up her legs, revealing her plump luscious backside. Her thong of black lace conceals her holes from me, but her round, supple cheeks are on full display.

Even now, in this desperate situation, my cock throbs at the sight. Two beats of my pulse, and it has grown as rigid as stone, tenting my loincloth.

Source, I would like nothing better than to bury my pole to the root between those soft cheeks. To see them jiggle as I slam my pelvis into her over and over again.

As Tal nears, he glances down at my raised loincloth, then gives me a chastising look.

“Now is not the time, boy,” he growls.

But his own cloth—the tattered remains of his Outsider denim—is nearly busting apart with his own arousal. And little wonder. With that beautiful half-omega ass right next to his face, he’s no doubt getting a noseful of her sweltering cunt-scent.

“Not the time for what?” Hines cries from over shoulder.

Tal grunts and rolls his eyes.

Suddenly, the rain starts to fall. I can hear it rushing over the ground in a wave toward us. The half-omega squeals as the fat cold drops start to pelt us like stones.

“We need to find shelter!” I shout over the roar of the gale.

Tal simply nods, and we set off into the woods as the sky shatters.

CHAPTER 16: HINES

As soon as the storm rolls over us, it turns the world to night, and being deep in this old-growth forest just makes matters worse. All around us, the tree trunks are creaking as they sway in the ferocious wind. Wet leaves blow past. Some of them stick to my bare thighs. My nose fills with the odors of rotten wood and wet moss.

“Up there,” Baen calls in a low voice. “Beneath that overhang.”

Tal responds, following the sound of the other Alpha’s voice. He is still carrying me over his shoulder like a wet sack.

I can tell that we are ascending a rocky rise. I try to turn and look over Tal’s shoulder, but between the darkness and sprays of windblown rain I can hardly see a thing.

Then a double strobe of blue lightning illuminates the forest, and I see it. A cliff tucked amidst the giant trees, its stone face slick with rain. In the middle is a small, dark cavity. Just enough space for the three of us to huddle, to take shelter from the storm.

The cliff disappears like a mirage, swallowed up by the darkness, but its afterimage is still burned on my retinas. I have a strange premonition that something will happen in that cavity. Something fearful.

Thunder booms, vibrating the stones and the trees.

We rise. Tal leaps deftly up the piled boulders. He is not even slightly burdened by my weight on his shoulder.

God, he is so strong. Both of them are. Both he and Baen.

That thought brings back the squirmy ticklish feeling in my lower abdomen. I tell myself it's just a slight discomfort at the pressure of Tal's round, boulder-hard shoulder pushing into my belly. But I know that's not true.

It's the other thing.

The change that's happening in me.

I already need to take more pills.

Tal reaches the top of the rise and ducks inside the shelter of the stone cavity. Baen is already waiting there. The cliff blocks the rain, which is a relief, even though my sweatshirt hoody is already soaked and clinging to my skin.

Tal sets me down against the deepest wall of the shallow cave.

Outside, lightning blazes again, three flashes in rapid succession. The light paints a monochrome image of the forest—tangled limbs, column-like trunks, and a scraggly underbrush of briars and bushes.

Again the scene blinks out, leaving only a spectral echo in my vision. Again the thunder booms like a cannon, so loud it vibrates my teeth.

The two Alphas are on either side of me, bracketing my body with theirs. I sense that they are surveying the surroundings. Tasting the air. Listening for pursuers.

In the ensuing silence, I carefully reach into my pocket and take out the pills. I try to do it silently, but my hands are shaking with adrenaline overload, and the capsules chatter inside the plastic bottle.

“Tal,” Baen whispers. “We have a problem. The half-omega...”

“I’m not an omega,” I mutter as I unscrew the lid.

“I said *half*-omega. And believe me, if you could smell yourself you would understand.”

I’m grateful for the concealing darkness. It hides the blood rushing into my cheeks—a mixture of embarrassment and anger.

Part of me wants to tell him off, but a cramp of desire twists my insides, and it’s all I can do to keep from doubling over.

Shit. This heat could be the worst one yet.

“I’m taking care of it,” I whisper.

I spill three pills into my palm and toss them into my mouth. I swallow them dry and they stick in my throat. I don’t know if Tal senses this—I’m not sure how he even could—but when the lightning flashes again, I see him gathering rain water in his cupped palms.

“Drink this,” he says.

I tilt my head back, and he drizzles the cool fluid into my open mouth. Some of it trickles down my chin. I swallow.

A moment goes by, then another. The ball of tightness squeezes in my core again, but it quickly passes. I'm getting better again. But for how long?

Baen snuffles the air, and I flush with renewed embarrassment. I know what he's smelling.

I draw my ankles back to block my crotch.

"The Outsider medicine isn't working," Baen says.

"It *is* working," I insist. "I can feel it. Just give it a minute."

A low, gut-clenching howl drifts through the depths of the forest. It sounds like a wolf, but something tells me its not.

"We may not have a minute," Tal whispers.

I say nothing. The edge of my need is dulling, but it's taking longer than before. It's because we are deeper inside the Zone now, and the contamination is stronger here. I could take more pills to speed up the process, but they are already running low.

More howls answer in the distance.

"They are out there," Baen says in a hushed voice. "The Farlanders. Tal, we have to do something. Those Farlanders may be stupid, but they can smell a cunt in heat from fifty miles away. The storm will only throw them off for so long. The half-omega will draw them right to us."

"I told you," I blurt, "I'm not—"

Before I can finish, a sharp pang of estrual need stabs at my womb. The inner channel of my vagina cramps, bending me in gasping agony. At the same moment, lightning and thunder

explode overhead, answered by a chorus of chilling howls. They seem much closer now.

Tal growls.

“Baen is right, we have to do something.”

“I’ll...I’ll take more pills,” I stammer, struggling to recover from that unexpected spasm of need.

“Fuck that,” Tal grumbles. He catches my hand and shoves it and the pills back into my pocket. “We’re going to handle this the old-fashioned way.”

He lifts me easily and sets me on his lap. I gasp as my butt slides against the long, hot rod of flesh straining to burst through his denim. My sex clenches again like it is desperate to grip around that hard member.

“Oh God,” I moan lightly. “Tal what are you going to do?”

“What I should have done already. I’m going to make you come. You need this release, Hines.”

My legs are unconsciously spread, and Tal’s hand dips between them, lifting the front my hoody and exposing my wet panties. I swear I see Baen’s eyes flash in the darkness in front of me.

“No,” I gasp.

My one hand is still stuffed deep inside the pocket of my hoodie. I push it down, covering myself.

“Don’t do this,” I beg. “There has to be another way. I’ll take more pills, guys. I’ll—“

More howls from the forest silence me. The Farlanders are even closer than before.

“The pills aren’t working.” Tal’s lip ring tickles my earlobe, pebbling my legs with goosebumps. “At least not fast enough. We need to diminish your heat by other means.”

Lightning flashes once more. In the instant of illumination, I see Baen removing his loincloth. In the ensuing darkness, the afterimage of his enormous, erect penis is branded into my mind’s eye.

God, it’s so long. So thick.

And one other detail—the glint of light at the tip where his urethra is pierced.

My sex quivers as if intimidated by that brutal Alpha cock.

“What are you doing?” Tal hisses.

Another electrical flash reveals a silver string of precum dangling from that metal piercing. Baen’s eyes blaze with animal lust.

Darkness.

“I’m going to fuck her,” Baen replies. “I can’t fucking take it anymore. Besides, she needs a knot. Her cunt is weeping to be knotted.

“Fool,” Tal spits. “What if the Farlanders do find us? Do you want to be knotted deep in omega cunt, unable to withdraw? Think about it, boy.”

Baen fetches a disappointed sigh.

“Then what?” he asks.

“We’ll use our fingers.” Tal’s breath ghosts over the nape of my neck, stirring the short hairs erect. “Her medicine is abating her heat slowly. Our fingers will suffice to finish the deed. For now...”

That final phrase draws a thin whimper from my lips.

Tal’s hand moves between my legs, fingers curling under the hem of my hoody.

“Wait,” I gasp. “Tal, wait...”

To my surprise, Tal actually stays his hand. He doesn’t move it away, but he doesn’t pull the hem of my hoodie up either.

“Hines, we need to do this,” he purrs at my ear. “We must do it. For your safety.”

The soft warmth of his breath and the deep vibrations of his purr send a second wave of pebbles over my skin. At this point, my goosebumps have goosebumps.

My sex-starved skin is screaming for his Alpha touch. But my mind is holding back.

“Let *me* do it,” I plead. “I’ll make *myself* come.”

God knows I’ve done it before.

Tal hesitates a moment longer, then draws back his hand.

“Okay, but make it quick, Hines.”

I nod, take a deep breath, and try my best to relax. No easy task when one Alpha is holding me in his lap while another Alpha—naked and fully aroused—watches nearby. And that’s

not to mention the storm and the Farlanders, whose intermittent howls are still traveling through the woods.

But I do my best to push all of that out of my mind, and I begin to rub myself, slowly at first, then with more and more intensity.

“It’s not working,” Baen mutters low. “It’s taking too long.”

“Please, I can do it. I swear I can,” I whimper.

I rub myself even more deeply, stimulating my half-erect clit through the thin lace. I rub in circles and I rub with an aggressive sawing motion, but nothing seems to work. A ball of arousal builds inside, but it won’t break—won’t release. There’s too much going on for me to concentrate.

“Enough,” Tal grunts at my ear.

His massive hand swats my much tinier hand away from my crotch, and he cups me there, the warmth of his palm penetrating my underwear and igniting my sensitive places with desire. My body wants it so badly, but my brain knows that it’s wrong.

He’s an Alpha.

A beast.

I try to squeeze my thighs shut against him, but it’s already too late. Tal’s hand is already in place. He’s touching me there. Touching my most private area. Only the thinnest strip of fabric separates his skin from mine.

My channel floods with arousal. Hot moisture blossoms beneath his touch.

“Taliesin,” I gasp.

He rubs me roughly. There’s nothing soft or gentle about it. His brutal fingers demand my release.

When it doesn’t come immediately, he spans my pussy, once, twice, jolting my clitoris awake.

I start to squeal in shock at the rough treatment, but his other meaty palm clamps over my mouth, stifling my cries.

“Come for me,” he purrs. “Surrender to your release.”

The gentle rolling purr of his voice is in stark contrast to the violence of his fingers. He spans my pussy again. Rubs. Spans. Rubs. After several repetitions, my poor clitoris is so ripe and swollen with arousal it feels as if it will pop like a juicy grape.

I whine into his hand. I want to struggle against him, but my traitorous body disobeys, melting against Tal’s hard muscles behind me.

“Come,” he breathes.

His technique softens. His fingers slide to the top of my panties. His fingertips wriggle beneath the elastic. They push downward, parting the curls of my pubic hair, delving lower until they find the ridge of flesh above my nerve bud.

I gasp into his hand and squeeze my thighs together as hard as I can.

“Spread your legs,” Tal commands softly into my ear.

I speak a muffled, indecipherable refusal into his palm. For once, my body obeys my wishes, and my legs stay clamp shut.

But for how long?

“Defiant,” Tal purrs, with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Then to Baen he whispers, “spread her legs, boy. Spread them wide.”

My struggles are useless. Baen’s powerful young Alpha hands easily pry my knees apart and splay my legs so wide that the tendons of my inner thighs ache from the deep stretch.

Obstacle removed, Tal’s rough fingers slide deeper inside my panties. I whimper nervously.

His fingertips delve deep, separating my wet, fleshy petals and stroking the sensitive exterior of my hole. He gathers my arousal fluid and swipes it over my throbbing clit, sending tingles of irresistible pleasure tingling through my belly and down my open thighs.

I mewl and whine softly against Tal’s hand.

Lightning flashes again, and I catch a glimpse of Baen, crouching between my legs like a horny gargoyle, pierced nostrils flared wide as he drinks in my scent.

“It’s not working,” he whispers. “You’re just making her scent stronger.”

“Well don’t just sit there, boy. Clean her. Lick her. Drink her arousal.”

In the darkness, Baen growls with satisfaction, and positions myself so his face is between my legs. I gulp and shudder as his warm breath tickles the wet skin of my inner thighs and warms my already hot center. And through it all, the pads of Tal's fingers never stop circling and strumming my bud.

"Fuck she smells so good," Baen purrs.

He plucks the front of my panties and pulls them tight. The lace wedges in my groove and my plump outer lips bulge on either side. Baen licks my smooth, pillowed skin, and I gasp. He starts with tentative flicks which soon progress to long, deep licks with the entire blade of his spongy, moist tongue.

"Good," Tal purrs. "Now come for us, Hines. Come on our fingers and tongue."

My body shudders. The pleasure welling up in my depths frightens me.

But not as much as those too-close howls echoing through the pitch-dark, rain-soaked forest.

While Tal continues fingering my clit, Baen draws the crotch of my panties aside, fully exposing my slit to the humid evening air. He growls briefly, then starts to lick again, this time running his tongue between my folds, tasting both of my holes and slathering me with his warm saliva.

He jams his tongue tip hard into my entrance, wriggling deep. At the same time, his lips suck hard, like he's trying to devour me from the inside out. My hot juices flow into his mouth. I

run my hands over the close-cropped hair lining his massive Alpha skull.

And through it all, Tal's fingers never stop.

Swirling. Stroking. Strumming.

"Fuck," Baen whispers, pulling away from my pussy. "I can't take it, Tal. I need to fuck her so bad."

Tal pulls his hand out of my panties and backhands Baen hard across his temple. The younger Alpha snarls, and my opening clenches hard at the sound.

"Damn fool," Tal hisses. "We've already been through this. I won't have you knotted up inside her with Farlanders about."

As if on cue, more of those curdling howls ripple through the dark woods.

But part of me senses that Tal has other motives. Something tells me he wants *his* knot to be the first knot that I feel.

"Besides," Tal goes on, "When she comes, you'll need to catch her fluid. Swallow it to hide the smell."

Another burst of lightning reveals Baen's grinning face between my spread and trembling thighs. He has been persuaded.

Baen goes back to lapping me with renewed energy. Tal's fingers continue torturing my helpless clit.

My hips buck and shudder as I feel something pressing at my hole. Something harder and stiffer than Baen's tongue. He is slipping a finger inside, penetrating me. His thick knuckle

pops inside me like a small knot. Tal has to squeeze his hand extra hard over my mouth to subdue my squeal of shock and pleasure.

The walls of my pussy flutter around the invading finger.

Baen begins stroking my tender inner tissues. He curls his finger, beckoning the orgasm welling in my depths, tickling that sensitive place on my front wall. It's like he's stimulating my clitoris from the inside while Tal, steadfast Tal, touches the outside.

I've never experienced pleasure quite like this before.

I am Hines. Mousy little Hines.

The girl that nobody ever pays any attention to, standing shy and quiet in the corner.

Now, this double attention from two determined and dominating Alphas is too intense to bear. No matter how I try to tamp my rising pleasure down, this pair of Alphas are intent on ripping it from me, whether I want it or not.

Tal notches up his tempo. Baen senses this, matches him. He shoves another finger inside, stroking my wet interior with a double rhythm and groaning softly as his tongue licks away my sticky leakage.

Yesterday they were enemies, on the verge of tearing me in two.

Now they are a team, working in tandem to force my pussy into submission.

We are past the point of no return. I'm going to come, and I'm going to come hard, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Lightning flares with nearly simultaneous thunder. For an instant the forest is alive with light and sound. I can see down into the area below our hiding place. There is nothing out there but the trees and underbrush. Raindrops, caught in a freeze-frame flash, look like silver ribbons of light.

Then darkness re-enfolds the world. Darkness, and the patter of rain, and the soft squelching sounds of the Alphas' fingers between my legs.

The tension and pleasure is mounting within my pelvis. It is an expanding bolus of need threatening to crack under the pressure.

Lightning illuminates the forest again, and I gasp into Tal's hand.

This time the scene that is disclosed in that instant of light is not the same. The trees are there. The dense underbrush, the ribbons of rain. But we are no longer alone.

Farlanders.

The forest outside our stone covert is crawling with them. A dozen or more. Their gnarled, twisted bodies are slick with rain. Their hideous faces are upraised, noses testing the air, seeking a scent.

My scent.

But they are unable to see the three of us tucked inside this shaded cavity.

Darkness falls in a crash of thunder. My shudders of ecstasy become shivers of raw fear.

“I know,” Tal whispers at my ear. “I see them too.”

He shifts to my other side.

“Just relax. You must release, Hines. Release.”

The rhythm of his fingers never misses a beat.

Despite the danger, my oncoming climax continues expanding inside of me. I can't hold on to it any longer.

Deep inside, my arousal finally breaks. It cracks like an egg. Pleasure oozes through my spasming muscles. Thick, messy secretions pour from my quivering hole. Baen laps up the fluid immediately to conceal its raunchy scent. He licks me clean and swallows every drop, leaving my pussy a wet, throbbing mess of warm saliva.

“Source,” he grunts softly. By the sound of his voice, I can tell that he is rising. “Source, it tastes so good. I can't hold it any longer. I have to blow.”

“No, damn you,” Tal hisses. “The Farlanders are right there. They may smell your seed.”

“I can't hold it,” Baen insists. “It's coming. Oh Source, I can feel it coming...”

“Shit,” Tal mutters. “You'll have to do it in her mouth to hide the scent. Quick, boy, quick!”

Tal's hand slides away from my mouth. Before I can even ask what is happening, he clutches my wet hair from behind and

pulls it taut, stinging my scalp. I gasp in pain.

The moment my lips part, Baen's hard cock slides inside my mouth. His piercing clicks my bottom teeth as he enters me.

"Careful, boy," Tal whispers. "Careful..."

I moan softly around Baen's thick meat as he shoves his penis deeper inside my mouth. His cock is heavy and smooth on my tongue. It throbs with the pulse of his blood.

He fucks my mouth as Tal fists my hair.

It doesn't take long. Three thrusts of his penis. Four, five...

Baen's cock erupts inside me, spilling an enormous load of hot, salty semen onto my tongue. The intense flavor saturates my taste buds. It is raw and raunchy in my mouth. The taste of an animal. It should repulse me, but it doesn't.

I want more.

"Swallow it," Tal demands, tightening his fist in my hair.

"Swallow it all."

I do as his says, drinking Baen's viscous fluid even as another spurt floods my mouth, followed immediately by a third. It slides down my throat in thick, slippery gobs, and it settles warm and gooey in my belly.

"Okay," Baen whispers. "That's enough. That's...oh fuck..."

I disobey and continue sucking.

My animal instincts have taken over now. I'm addicted. I need to suck every ounce of hot cum from those smooth heavy balls

that are tapping my chin. I smooth my palms up Baen's naked thighs, feeling his muscles and tendons quiver with weakness.

When he finally withdraws from my wet lips, his cock has been so thoroughly cleaned, so thoroughly polished by my tongue and my saliva, that not a single speck of his seed residue remains.

I have swallowed all of it. Every last drop.

Baen stumbles. He collapses back on his haunches, legs weak from coming.

Tal releases his grip on my hair. I slump back into him, totally satisfied, totally comfortable. In that moment, I wish I could sink into him. Just merge my body into his.

My breath steadies.

My heat is receding once again.

We did it. The three of us together.

Lightning splits a tree in front of the cliff, not fifty feet away, raining down a pyrotechnic explosion of yellow sparks. In the sudden light, I see half-silhouetted around the outside of our hiding place two dozen figures or maybe more. Misshapen, mutant forms with tangled, rain-slick hair and beady, lizard-like eyes.

The Farlanders have found us.

My scream is lost beneath the deafening crash of thunder.

PART THREE:
THE FARLANDS

CHAPTER 17: HINES

The Farlanders march us through the woods all night long and into the next morning. The storm has long since passed, but the sodden trees are still dripping with rain, and our captors' heavy feet squish through the muddy soil.

At the alcove, Tal and Baen fought fiercely, killing several Farlanders in the process, but there were too many of them, and they were overwhelmed. Now their arms have been pinioned behind their backs with wooden stocks and heavy ropes.

And I have found myself slung over another shoulder, this one grotesque and gnarled like the knobby root of a tree.

"Fuck this shit," one of the Farlanders grumbles. "I say we kill these two bastards and fuck the omega."

The Farlander who has me over his shoulder snarls. With his free hand, he brutally cuffs the one who spoke upside the head.

"Abaddon wants 'em alive, you git. Says he's got plans for 'em." There is a sound of snuffling nostrils, and my stomach lurches as I feel hot breath blasting over my butt. "Besides, this one ain't no omega. She's a Noutsider."

Our captors didn't bother to search me, so I still have my pills. I've managed to sneak a dose every couple of hours during the march.

"Never fucked a Noutsider," the other grumbles.

There is the sound of another even harder blow, knuckles cracking against a thick skull.

“Damn it, I done told ye, git. If you touch Abaddon’s prize ’e’ll eat your liver. Now shut yer gob and keep marchin’.”

We come into a wide clearing just as the angry, red sun is just stepping over the tips of the tall evergreen trees, bathing our surroundings in an awful, bloody glow.

Situated in this clearing is a primitive camp. Crude huts built of mud and sticks and piled-up stones of mismatched sizes. It is a Farlander camp. Crooked buildings for crooked, monstrous creatures.

Despite the simple shelters, there are dozens upon dozens of Farlanders sprawled on the ground, which is muddy with the previous night’s rain. As the dawn light touches them, they raise their groggy heads and blink their bleary, bloodshot eyes, seemingly oblivious to the filth or the fact that they must have slept all night in the pouring rain.

For some of the huts, threads of pale smoke are rising, and I smell the scent of burning wood. But it is overpowered by the thick, goatish musk of the Farlanders and the cloying stench of mud.

As we move toward the middle of the Farlander encampment, a sound reaches my ears. A chorus of mushy, slack-jawed moans and grunts. When I see the source of the sound, my guts go cold inside me.

In a large enclosure surrounded by a fence made of branches, three dozen naked people are milling about. These are not Farlanders. Their bodies are much smaller and weaker. Their skin is pale and shot with black, diseased-looking veins. Their eyes are milky and unseeing.

It takes me a moment to realize who they are.

“Betas,” Tal mutters from behind. It’s the first words he’s said all night.

“Fuck,” Baen adds. “These sick bastards are farming them.”

When the Cataclysm struck over a century before, most of the humans within the perimeter of the Zone were transformed into betas. Mindless zombies with no will or sentience. Most of those first betas died in a matter of days or even hours. The ones that didn’t walk into a river and drown were killed by Alphas or slowly withered away as they starved to death.

Since then, the government and SynerGen have made excursions into the Zone. More often than not, those missions ended badly, and the Outsiders involved were mutated. Typically they became betas too. I always wondered what became of them.

Now I have some idea.

“But why on earth would the Farlanders want to farm betas?” I whisper back to Tal and Baen. “Betas can’t do anything, right?”

Neither one of them answers me, but I see Baen’s eyes dart unconsciously toward a lopsided shed at one end of the beta

enclosure. As we get closer, I notice that the shed is swarming with flies. It is dark inside, but I catch a glimpse of tools hanging on the walls. Metal axes and cleavers that are dirty and brown with rust.

No...not rust.

This time, my stomach turns over so violently I really think I'm going to vomit. A taste of sour milk surges into my mouth, and I struggle to keep my gorge down.

"Oh God," I gasp. "You mean they eat them?"

"Quiet back there," the Farlander who is carrying me barks.

He punches my thigh hard, and I wince in pain. Both Tal and Baen instinctively struggle against their bonds, growling and snarling like mad dogs. But the ropes and stocks holding their arms are too strong. The other Farlanders start to beat them and kick them. They fall to their knees in the mud.

Tears of rage flood into my eyes, blurring my vision.

"Stop it!" I shout. "You're hurting them."

But the Farlanders do not stop. My angry shouts only serve to whip them into more of a frenzy. The cowards continue beating my Alphas. Tears stream down my cheeks. I want to stop this, but I'm powerless to do anything.

Then a sudden, curdling bellow explodes through the clearing.

The Farlanders cease their assault. They grow silent. Fearful.

"Back away from the Alphas," a deep voice booms.

The Farlanders obey, leaving Tal and Baen bloodied but unbroken on their knees in the mud. The other Farlanders around us part, leaving a wide muddy path, and a tall, brutal figure strides forward, bare feet squelching in the messy earth.

His broad shoulders are cloaked in crudely stitched scraps of fur. A necklace of animal fangs hangs around his neck. His dark hair is long and stringy on the right side of his head, while the left part of his scalp is completely bald. As he draws closer, I realize the reason—the entire left side of his head is webbed with mottled burn scars. The eye on that side is a dead, milky blue.

His thin lips split to reveal a grin comprising brown and rotten fangs.

This figure, clearly the leader of this tribe of Farlanders, stands imperiously over Tal and Baen. The two Alphas, bound and bloodied, rise to their feet courageously.

“Who are you?” Baen asks coldly. “You’re no Farlander.”

The cloaked, scarred figure merely chuckles.

“I know him,” Tal says. “He is an Alpha of the central ruins, though his name escapes me.”

“My old name matters not,” the man in the cloak says. “My new name is Abaddon. And I am no longer an Alpha of the Ruins.”

He turns toward me, and his one good eye ignites with curiosity.

“Well now, what do we have here? Set her down, please.”

The Farlander carrying me over his shoulder unceremoniously drops me on the ground. The landing knocks the air from my lungs and splatters mud all around me.

“Easy, you idiot,” Abaddon snaps.

He lashes out, striking the Farlander who dropped me straight in his larynx. The Farlander’s eyes go wide and he sucks in thin, wheezing gasps. He stumbles and falls back into the mud. Some of his companions drag him away.

“Sorry about that,” Abaddon says softly.

He reaches under my armpits and lifts me out of the mud, standing me up on my feet which are unsteady after a long night of being carried. My toes squish in the thick mud. Behind him, Tal and Baen snarl protectively, and it takes several Farlanders to hold them back.

“There, there,” Abaddon chuckles. “I don’t mean her any harm. Not yet, at least.”

I cringe as his knuckle swabs a tear from my cheek.

He sniffs it. Licks it.

“Fascinating,” he murmurs. “What manner of creature is this.”

His eyes scan around the group of filthy Farlanders who have now encircled us. At this point, there are hundreds of them. Every Farlander in the camp is now awake and gathered around curiously.

“Where is Sickorax?” Abaddon bellows.

“Here, Master.”

The voice is thin and cold as the edge of a knife, drawing out the S into a long, sibilant hiss.

It is a woman who steps from the crowd and appears at Abaddon's side. Her body is angular and bony. Her skin is pale as marble, and her black hair sticks up in spikes like the ruffled plumage of a raven. Her skin is decorated with strange symbols drawn in charcoal.

But the most frightening feature are her eyes. They are so dark that they appear almost totally black, like a pair of obsidian marbles. And behind those black eyes, I can almost see her mind churning with madness.

One thing is unmistakable, however. Her scent. She is an omega.

"What do you think, Sickorax?" Abaddon asks, gesturing toward me.

Sickorax reaches her left hand toward me and I see that her index finger is sheathed in a long, razor-sharp talon made from carved and polished bone. With this weapon, she tilts my chin.

"A fine specimen, Master," the omega hisses. "Very fine indeed."

"Agreed. But a specimen of what, my dear witch? I'm unable to identify her."

The witch draws closer, invading my space. Her omega features are weirdly beautiful, until she smiles, revealing the rotten devastation of her mouth. Her foul breath makes me gag.

She pushes back the neck of my hoodie and sniffs my throat, first one side, then the other.

“Strange,” she mutters.

With a shocking quickness, the claw on her index fingers slices down the front of my hoodie, splitting it completely from top to bottom. Unbelievably, however, my body doesn't even get nicked in the process.

“Leave her alone!” Baen shouts.

A Farlander silences him with a hard punch to the gut. The Farlander prepares to strike Baen again, but Abaddon raises a hand, and the Farlander stops.

Sickorax pulls the muddy cloth aside, exposing my naked breasts to the chill morning air. She sniffs me there too. I shiver as the tip of her claw traces over my belly. With two quick gestures, she snips the elastic of my panties, and they fall to the mud between my feet.

I try to back away, but Abaddon grips my neck, holding me still.

“Ah-ah,” he chides.

Sickorax bends, snuffling my sex. She rises again.

“Not an Outsider, Master,” she hisses and quirks a sharp eyebrow. “Not exactly.”

Without warning, she shoves the bare middle finger of her right hand into my vagina, and I cry out in shocked surprise at

the invasion. She wriggles that bare finger inside me briefly, then withdraws it, sniffing her slippery knuckle.

“But not an omega either. Not quite.”

“Some good you are, witch,” Abaddon scoffs, his burnt face twisting into an annoyed frown. Then something catches his good eye. “What is that?”

He’s looking toward the muddy ground between my feet.

His hand on my neck keeps me from tilting my head down, but I already know what he’s looking at. My stomach somehow manages to sink even lower than it already is. It seems to drop all the way into my feet. All the way into the mud.

Abaddon has found my pills.

The bottle fell from my hoody pocket when Sickorax slashed it in half.

Sickorax stoops, retrieves the pill bottle, and hands it to Abaddon. The disfigured Alpha rattles the bottle. Sniffs it. He releases my throat and spends a good minute struggling with the child-proof lid before finally giving up.

“What are these?” He asks.

I press my lips together, refusing to speak. I’m terrified of defying this hideous Alpha, but I don’t want him to know about my medicine. There’s no telling what he will do with that information. My knees feel weak with fear. My body trembles.

“What. Are. These?” The mock politeness has drained from his voice. He is deadly serious now. “Tell me now or I’ll rip your heart out through your cunt.”

“Medicine,” I blurt.

“I see,” he whispers. “What sort of medicine?”

My body shakes with fear. My mind races to come up with a lie, but my thoughts just seem to trip over one another in my brain.

“I’m not a man to make idle threats,” he snarls.

“It’s a cure,” I say. “For the contamination of the Zone. It stops the mutation.”

Abaddon’s eyes widen.

“So,” he sighs, drawing the word out. “That is why you are not an omega yet. Are the effects permanent?”

I shake my head.

“Ah. So if you are deprived of the medicine you will eventually change.”

Abaddon pauses, thinking. Over his shoulder, I see Tal and Baen, their faces taut with concern and barely restrained rage.

Abaddon tucks the pill bottle into a pouch inside his fur cloak.

“It’s time for some fun,” he bellows. “Throw them in the cage with the gray.”

A loud cheer goes up from the Farlanders around us. The blood seems to freeze in my veins.

CHAPTER 18: HINES

In the dead center of the primitive Farlander camp there is a circular enclosure, about thirty feet in diameter, covered with a rusty, domed cage. Our Farlander captors open a gate on one side and shove me roughly through. On the inside, the ground is covered in several inches of thick, sucking mud. My bare feet catch, I stumble, and I land face first in the nasty stuff with a loud plop.

Tal and Baen are both shoved inside after me. Their massive bodies send up showers of mud as they crash to the ground. The gate swings shut behind.

Baen, his arms still bound behind his back, leaps to his feet and slams his body against the gate just as the bolt of the lock snaps shut.

“Let me out of here,” he roars. “I’ll kill every last one of you Farlander fuckers!”

He throws his body against the cage again and again. His impacts are hard enough to knock away the crust of brown rust from the bars. But the metal doesn’t budge. Not even under Baen’s ferocious onslaught.

“Cut it out, boy,” Tal growls.

He rises, his hands still bound too, and shakes the mud from his long, dark hair.

Baen doesn't hear him. He continues ramming the bars like an enraged animal. Outside, the Farlanders are whooping and grinning at his vicious display. The more they taunt, the more furious Baen gets, which in turn merely encourages the Farlanders even more.

At last, Tal steps in, checking Baen with his heavy shoulder.

Caught up in his frenzy, Baen turns on him, eyes wild and bloodshot with animalistic rage. For a moment, I think he might actually attack Tal. But the older Alpha's growl puts an end to that.

"Stop," Tal says. "You're not accomplishing anything besides entertaining our captors. Is that what you want?"

Baen opens his mouth to say something, but stops. He grunts, narrows his eyes at the Farlanders outside the cage, and kicks a spray of mud in their direction, making them jump back a few feet.

"Fuckers," Baen mutters.

"Come on," Tal says. "You need to calm down, boy. Throwing a fit isn't going to get us out of this shithole. Only *thinking* will do that. We need to keep our wits about us. Now turn around."

Baen turns, and Tal uses his sharp, canine fangs to gnaw through the rough ropes binding Baen's wrists to the block of wood behind his back. After a bit of work, his arms are free. Baen then returns the favor.

Meanwhile, I stand up and attempt to swipe the sticky mud from my mostly naked body. It only serves to smudge it around even more, however. The only clothing I've got left is the hoodie from the shelter, and that is now ripped in half, sopping wet with rain, and coated with mud. I shrug the pointless garment from my shoulder and toss it aside.

The three of us stare at each other for a moment. We're a mess. I'm completely naked and slathered in thick, brown mud. Baen is naked too. His loincloth was left behind when we were captured in the woods. Only Tal has any clothing, the tattered remnants of his jeans, which have been stained with mud as well.

"Okay, now what?" Baen asks.

Tal rubs his chin, thinking. Outside the bars of our domed cage, a small crowd of Farlanders is watching us. Some of them have even climbed up the bars to look down on us.

"Maybe we can *dig* our way out," Baen says.

"With half the camp watching us?" Tal asks.

But Baen isn't listening. He's already rushing to the edge of the enclosure where he crouches and begins scooping up mud, flinging it backward between his legs like a dog trying to dig its way under a fence.

Our Farlander captors don't seem too concerned about this. In fact, the small crowd has begun to drift away, leaving only a small posting of guards to watch over us.

After only a couple of seconds of digging, Baen stops.

“Fuck!” he barks.

“What?” Tal peers over his shoulder.

“Stone underneath,” Baen sighs dejectedly.

Out of nowhere, a low, throaty voice speaks from the far side of the cage.

“I could have told you that.”

All three of us spin around to face the new voice. My heart leaps at the unexpected sound, and I gasp. Tal and Baen both shift into fighting stances, placing their bodies protectively in front of mine.

Through the gap in their tensed bodies, I see a thick lump of mud rising from the ground. The voice speaks again. The thick, guttural timbre makes it sound as if the very mud itself is speaking to us.

“Yep, digging was the first thing I tried too when they tossed my ass in here. The Farlanders are dumb, but not quite *that* dumb.”

The muddy lump continues to rise, taking on the shape of a huge man. Twin growls roll in Baen’s and Tal’s throats, growing deeper and more aggressive.

A pair of bright white eyes appears, followed a second later by a matching white smile.

“No cause for alarm, friends.”

“We’ll be the judge of that.”

The muddy smile lets out a soft chuckle. The hulking mud monster shambles along the wall of the cage slowly. A few feet away, there is a rusty bucket brimming with rainwater collected from the previous night's downpour. The monster lifts the bucket, dumps it over his head, washing away the caked mud to reveal the deeply tanned skin underneath.

It is another Alpha. Tal and Baen relax slightly, but not completely. They continue shielding me with their bodies.

Once the new Alpha has been thoroughly doused, and the better part of the mud has been sluiced away from his body, he flings the empty bucket aside and shakes like a wet dog, sending a spray of glistening water droplets spiraling away.

Now we can get a good look at him.

He is powerfully built, just like Tal and Baen, but thicker and blockier—a brick of an Alpha. His head is covered in a thick, wild mane of dark hair, and his jaw is furred with a matching beard, which looks like it hasn't been trimmed in many months. Underneath the dense growth, his face is handsome in a rugged, rough-hewn way

But the feature that stands out the most are the Alpha's scars. His naked body is covered from head to toe in brutal whip-scars. There are so many, they look like tiger stripes. Despite this, the imprisoned Alpha stands before us proudly.

Metal gleams on his chest. One of his nipples is pierced.

"Who are you?" Tal asks.

The Alpha swipes his wet mane back from his forehead.

“My name is Canaris.”

He is speaking to Tal, but I can tell that his eyes are laser focused on me. Apparently sensing this, Tal and Baen move a little closer, hiding me from Canaris’s prying eyes.

“I’m Tal. This is Baen.” Half-reluctantly, he gestures at me with a jerk of his head. “She is Hines.” After a beat, he adds, “She’s an Outsider.”

Canaris’s pewter-gray eyes widen with surprise at this news.

“An Outsider?” he mutters. “An *unchanged* Outsider? And a pair of Alphas, too. How by the Source did you three end up in this hell hole.”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“Yeah, but I asked first.”

Canaris takes a step toward us. Tal and Baen tense again as if anticipating an attack, but Canaris raises his open palms to show he means no harm.

“Look, we’re in the same boat here,” Canaris says calmly. “Or the same cage, I should say. At the very least, we have a common enemy.”

“The Alpha with the burned face,” Baen says. “Who is he?”

“His name is Abaddon,” Canaris answers. He crouches, resting his arms on his knees.

Tal relaxes. The tension goes out of his shoulders. The muscles of his arms unknot. He gives Baen a quick nod to let

him know it's okay, then we all move forward. The mud squishes between my toes with each step.

Tal and Baen crouch. My legs and butt are already so muddy I just decide to sit down in the stuff. In a weird, gross way, it feels kind of nice, and it feels good to finally give my weary body some rest.

"Abaddon?" Tal says. "Why does that name sound familiar to me?"

"He's not a Farlander, as I'm sure you noticed. He used to live among the central ruins with the other noble Alphas."

While Canaris speaks, he mainly keeps eye contact with Tal and Baen. But occasionally his eyes drift to me, and whenever they do, I see a spark of curiosity in those depths.

He's wondering what I am exactly. Tal told him that I'm an Outsider. But Canaris knows there's more to it than that. He must be wondering why I haven't been mutated yet. After all, I am unprotected. Totally naked, in fact.

And I can feel the faintest flutterings down below my belly.

Without my pills, the change is coming back, and with it my heat. I shudder to think about what will happen if I go into full-blown estrus locked inside this muddy cage with three massive Alphas.

"So what happened to Abaddon?" Baen asks.

"He was part of a pack. One of the most powerful and respected packs in the Zone. But his pack was killed in a freak

accident. A fire broke out in the northernmost section of the central ruins.”

“I remember that,” Tal says. “I was young when that happened. Barely bigger than a pup.”

Canaris nods, his expression grave.

“Abaddon’s entire pack was killed in that fire. Every single one of them. Except for Abaddon. He did not get away unscathed though.” Canaris draws a finger down the side of his face. “He was badly burned. But it wasn’t just his face that got disfigured that day. A far more grievous scar was left upon his soul.”

“His omega,” Tal whispers.

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand,” I jump in. My voice is barely louder than a whisper, but the three Alphas turn toward me like I shouted.

“What do you mean about his omega?”

Tal looks at me over his thickly muscled shoulder. “The bond between an omega and her Alphas is stronger than anything else in nature. When that bond is broken by death, the pain that the surviving member experiences is excruciating. A deep, spiritual pain that is nearly impossible to endure.”

“What happens?” I ask.

“Most Alphas don’t survive it,” Tal goes on. “Some of them will simply wither away and die. Others will take their own lives through violence. But a few strong Alphas survive, and sometimes they find a new mate eventually.”

Canaris nods. “But that isn’t what happened with Abaddon. The loss of his omega twisted his mind. He blamed the tribe for her death, and he swore a lifelong vendetta against the tribe of the central ruins.”

“And how do you know all this?” Baen asks.

“Because Abaddon killed my father.”

Baen, Tal, and I all three gasp in unison.

“After the loss of his mate and his pack, Abaddon fled from the central ruins to live out his tormented existence in the wilderness. He came upon this tribe of Farlander Alphas and established himself as their leader. He never dared to raid the central ruins directly—that would be suicide—but he did attack hunting parties and other Alphas who ventured outside of the safety of the ruins. My father was one of many Alphas who died in one of those ambushes.”

A silence descends for a moment.

The pain and sadness emanating from Canaris is almost palpable. The sight pulls at the strings of my heart, and I want to move forward and give him a hug. Tal and Baen would never allow that, however.

Instead, I simply say, “I’m sorry, Canaris.”

He stares at me, and the corner of his mouth turns up slightly in a sad, sympathetic smile.

“But how did you end up *here*?” Baen asks.

Canaris’s shoulders rise and fall with a deep sigh.

“Simply put, it’s because I’m a failure,” he groans. “I was just a young pup when my father was killed. Once I was old enough, I set out into the Farlands, searching for my father’s murderer. I killed many a Farlander in the process. But Abaddon’s tribe found me before I found them. They ambushed me in the night, captured me, and threw me in this cage.”

Canaris’s muscles tense with pent up anger. His face reddens and winding veins bulge along his arms and his thick neck.

“I had one task, and I failed. But someone must stop Abaddon. He is a menace. The Farlanders are bad enough, but they are only driven by instincts. Abaddon is different. He is driven by pure hatred. He wants nothing but to destroy every Alpha of the central tribe.

“That,” speaks a cool, mirthless voice from behind us, “is something of an oversimplification, Canaris.”

It is Abaddon. The dark-cloaked Alpha is now standing just outside the cage, his pale fingers hooked on one of the horizontal cross bars, his eyes glaring at us, one brown and one milky blue. The omega witch, Sickorax, is grinning at his side.

In a flash, Baen has sprung toward the bars, teeth gnashing and fingers outstretched. But Abaddon easily steps back, and Baen clangs off the grate, rebounding back into the mud.

“Tsk-tsk,” Abaddon clucks his tongue. “There is no point injuring yourself, boy. No quantity of self-harm will numb you against the pain I have in store for you and your companions.”

His mismatched eyes move among the Alpha prisoners inside the muddy cage, landing last on me. My blood turns to sleet in my veins.

“What do you want from us?” Tal’s voice is steady. Whatever emotions he is feeling right now, he is hiding them exceptionally well. Me, on the other hand—I’m on the verge of peeing myself.

Abaddon strolls around the perimeter of the cage.

“As I said, Canaris’s depiction of my motives was an oversimplification. I do not hate you Alphas. In fact, I want to *teach* you. I want to share with you my knowledge.”

“What knowledge?”

Abaddon halts abruptly.

“Pain, brother. I want to teach you about pain. But I haven’t had the proper means...until now.”

With that last phrase, Abaddon glares at me again, sending an unpleasant sensation slithering through my veins. He smirks and resumes his leisurely stroll around the cage.

“My earliest attempts to enlighten others were crude. Blunt instruments. I orchestrated raids, such as the one that killed Canaris’s father. What was his name again? I seem to have forgotten.”

At the mention of his name, Canaris bristles. His lips peel back from his fangs. Abaddon flashes a twisted grin.

“His name was Abram,” Canaris growls.

“Oh yes, of course. Now I remember. Anyway, my methods later became more refined. I turned to torture,” he gestures toward Canaris. “Our friend here displays the marks of my handiwork. But Alpha’s are durable creatures. No amount of corporal punishment can teach them the true meaning of pain.”

Abaddon chuckles coldly.

“But now, you have presented me an opportunity.”

“What are you talking about?” Tal asks. He still manages to keep his voice level, but I can sense the pent-up emotions underneath. Rage, and beneath that perhaps...fear.

Abaddon stops again and fixes me with this mismatched eyes.

“Your omega,” he says.

Tal and Baen once again move to shield my body from Abaddon’s eyes.

“She’s not an omega,” Tal says. “She’s an Outsider.”

Abaddon laughs cruelly. “Perhaps, but not for long...”

His hand dips inside his dark fur cloak, and he draws out the little bottle of pills, shaking it like a rattle. My heart leaps, seeming to punch at the bottom of my throat.

“...not without these.”

“Please,” I gasp. “I need those. I...”

Abaddon drops the bottle into the mud outside the cage.

Before Tal or Baen have a chance to stop me, I move around them and scramble forward to the edge of the cave.

“Hines, wait!” Tal shouts.

But I don't wait. I hit the cold, rusty bars of the cage so hard that I'm certain my shoulders will be bruised, but the pain barely registers. Right now, there's only one thing on my mind, and that is getting those pills back.

As I reach for them through the bars, however, I quickly realize that they have fallen well out of my reach. I twist and strain, willing my arm to grow another several inches.

Abaddon towers over me, laughing.

Realizing how useless it is, I give up, falling back into the mud with tears filling my eyes. Tal and Baen have rushed forward, and they hold me protectively in their strong arms. I sense Canaris behind them as well.

That awful fluttering sensation grows inside my middle.

After the commotion, more and more Farlanders are gathering around again, as if expecting some kind of show.

"Yes," Abaddon purrs smugly. "Without her Outsider alchemy, the female will soon be changed. She is becoming an omega. I can already smell it."

"If you try to hurt her, I'll fucking rip your throat out!" Baen barks.

"Hurt her?" Abaddon asks in mock surprise and indignation.

"No, boy. You misunderstand. You are the one who will be hurt, and very badly at that. I will teach all three of you Alphas the meaning of pain."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Baen growls.

A disgusting smirk twists Abaddon's lips as he stares down out as.

“Once her transformation is complete, the omega will go into heat. You three Alphas will have no choice but to claim her. To fuck her. To mark her. Your souls will be bound.”

I look around at the hundreds of bestial Farlander eyes now staring through the bars of the domed cage and shiver in repulsion.

Are these things, these Farlanders, going to watch us do what Abaddon just described?

“And once you have been thoroughly bound,” Abaddon continues, “then I will kill your bound omega. I will scar your souls the way mine has been scarred. I will teach you the true meaning of pain. Only then will you understand.”

Fear cascades down my spine like icy water.

“You're sick, Abaddon,” Tal says.

In a sudden, violent outburst, Abaddon flings himself at the outside of the cage, clawing the rusted iron and pressing his face between the bars. His already hideous features twist into a mask of pure pain and hatred.

“I'm sick?” He shrieks, his voice cracking. “*I'm* sick? No! It's the Source that's sick! The Source is what made me what I am! The Source is the cause of all my pain! I wish the Source had never come into existence! I would destroy it if I could!”

I'm shocked to see tears streaming from his eyes and wetting his creased features. The tears leaking from his dead eye are

tinted pink with blood.

Abaddon draws back.

“But I cannot destroy the Source, so I will settle instead for teaching you the meaning of loss and pain. Come tomorrow’s dawn, you will have been bound to this female. Then...*then* you will learn how I feel.”

“No,” I mutter shaking my head.

“Yes,” Abaddon snarls. “The change is already beginning.”

He’s right. Even in just the last minute, the low, soft fluttering in my belly has ramped up in intensity. Now a sudden cramp of desire squeezes my insides, doubling me over with pain and need.

“No...”

CHAPTER 19: CANARIS

The female's body curls in on itself and she groans with pain. A moment later, a spasm unfurls her body again, flinging her backward into me. I catch her—saving her from falling into the mud. When her head tilts back, I am met with a pair of eyes dilated to near total blackness.

The female is going into heat.

Already, the scent of her need is spilling from every pore, enveloping me like a cloud. It wafts from every crevice and recess of her body—from the hollow of her throat, her armpits, and the dripping cleft between her soft and trembling thighs. It is a scent both wild and sweet like raw honey. I have no choice but to drink it in. The pheromone-laced oxygen streams into my lungs and courses through my veins. With two beats of my heart, my cock is rigid with arousal and drooling precum into the mud.

Source this omega is delicious. Better than anything I've ever smelled before.

The youngster, Baen, is at her side in a flash, white teeth bared in jealousy at my touching her. Her scent hits him too, and his growl of aggression transitions into a groan of desire. His cock lifts with his excitement.

“Source,” he grunts as he loses himself in her aroma.

Her naked, mud-slathered body twists and writhes in our arms as spasms of need pulse through her muscles.

Meanwhile, the bigger Alpha, Tal, rushes toward the side of the cage and slams his arm between the bars. He reaches for the orange bottle of pills. No matter how he strains, however, the bottle remains a millimeter out of his reach.

I do not understand completely, but it seems that those pills are some kind of medicine that temporarily counteracts the pull of the Source. It has kept this Hines from changing into an omega. Until now.

But Tal is the largest Alpha in this cage. He has the longest reach by far. If he cannot reach the bottle, then none of us can.

Part of me is glad for that.

This omega smells so fucking good, that I can't wait to claim her.

Abaddon and his witch laugh at Tal's efforts.

The sound of their laughter reminds me of the vile plan that Abaddon has just laid out for us. He *wants* us to claim the omega. Then, once we are bound, he will kill her just to torture us.

The sound of their mocking laughter fills me briefly with hateful rage, but even that emotion is soon washed away, overwhelmed by the mounting scent of the omega's needful cunt.

The smell is like a landscape, churning, shifting, rendered in every imaginable color, here bright and clean, there dark and

mysterious. There are mountains and valleys and deserts of scent, oceans and skies, rivers and forests, an indescribable panorama of fragrance. The rest of the world seems boring and sterile by comparison.

Even though I know Abaddon's plan, I cannot resist Hines's scent.

"I must claim her," I growl. "I must fill her with my knot and my seed."

Against my lap, the omega whimpers. The sound is a mix of fear and hunger. Her dilated pupils dart from me to Baen.

The younger Alpha skins his hard fangs and snarls. His own pupils are dilated too, as I'm sure mine are. We are both caught in the thrall of her heat-scent.

Baen shoves me back. I drop the omega and she splats into the mud.

"No!" Baen growls, huddling over the dropped omega. "She is *mine!* Her body belongs to *me!*"

The Farlanders are pressed around the perimeter of our cage. They can smell her too, and they are banging wildly at the bars, snarling hungrily. I pull myself up, dripping globs of mud, and I take up a fighting stance.

"Fuck that," I snarl. "She's mine, boy. I'm claiming her."

"You're both wrong."

Tal has now abandoned the bottle of pills and now he is standing over the omega too, his body hunched and ready to

attack. His roar of challenge is directed at both me and his young companion.

So it's going to be a fight then.

Fair enough.

To the victor go the spoils.

CHAPTER 20: HINES

The sound of Tal's roar sends another violent convulsion of need ripping through my body. My insides cramp painfully, and my sex squeezes with desire. I can smell my own pheromones filling the air.

Canaris is the first to attack. He hurls himself at Tal, and their bodies connect with an impact of stone against stone.

“She is MINE!”

The pair of Alphas crash to the ground in a splash of mud, clawing and biting and punching furiously.

A horrible snarl erupts from Baen's throat, and he is about to throw himself into the fray when his nose twitches. He turns to face me, his pupils blown wide and dark with the rut. His pierced cock bucks, oozing a long string of clear, sticky precum over my thigh.

With the other two Alphas distracted, Baen has me all to himself.

He pounces on me, pinning my helpless, heat-racked body beneath his much larger, more powerful frame. Around us, the audience of Farlanders is thrown into a frenzy. They yip and howl like wild dogs, jostling for a view of the action.

Somewhere beside us I can hear Tal and Canaris trying to kill each other.

Baen growls over me. His eyes are embers of lust.

“Mine...”

His body seems to be barely under his control. His movements are frantic and shaky. His pelvis thrusts, and he humps the air like a horny dog, spilling more hot precum over my crotch.

He lowers himself. The blunt knob of his cockhead kisses my entrance. A scream dies in my throat and I wince in anticipation of the oncoming thrust.

But his cock glances off my slippery wet groove. My hole is too tight and his cock too big.

His dick ring drags over my throbbing clit, sending electric shivers of pleasure zapping through my center and down my open thighs.

“Mine...”

Bracing himself with one hand, Baen brandishes his cock with the other and presses it to my hole for a second attempt.

I try to scream, but my throat is clenched by an invisible hand. My heart feels like it will explode from terror and something else.

“*Mine...*”

Before Baen can thrust into me, his body is flung sideways by a brutal kick and he tumbles through the mud.

It is Tal who stands over me. The smudges of dark mud barely show against his deeply tanned skin. His broad shoulders heave and his massive rib cage expands and contracts with his ragged breathing.

“Tal,” I whimper as another contraction seizes my insides.

I don't know whether I'm begging him to save me or to do something else. The long, straight bulge pressing against the front of his jeans, however, makes Tal's intentions abundantly clear.

His hands drop to the tattered denim. He doesn't even bother with the button and fly. Instead, with one swift motion, he rips the muddy fabric to shreds, exposing his lower body.

His stone-hard erection springs free, flinging a streak of clear precum across my twitching belly. As it flips upward, I catch a glimpse of steel on the upper side—a piercing through the crown of his cockhead.

“Mine...”

My insides quiver at the thought of being taken by that impossibly long, thick, Alpha cock. That thing would destroy me. It would tear me in two.

So why do my legs stretch wider, inviting that to happen?

Tal straddles me. His huge body blots the sun. His legs are like a pair of stone columns towering over me. He fists his enormous, veiny member and strokes it. More precum leaks from his slit, drizzling over my tummy and my little thatch of curly hairs below.

“I'm going to enjoy knotting that hot little omega cunt,” he growls.

A trembling whine slips from my moist lips.

There is another impact, a clap of meat against meat, and Tal tumbles sideways, tackled by Canaris. They struggle in the mud, but this time it is Canaris who gains the upper hand. But a moment later, Baen leaps into the fray. Soon, the three Alphas are a swirl of flailing arms and gnashing teeth.

They are fighting over me.

They are fighting to see which Alpha will stake his claim over my body.

And they are fighting for keeps. They will kill each other if I don't do something soon.

"Stop," I whine. "Please..."

But my voice is weak. The Alphas cannot hear me over their own snarls and the tumult of Farlanders shouting and thumping against the outer walls of the cage.

Now that hollow, hungry feeling returns with a vengeance. It is a sharp pang that refuses to be ignored. My body squirms and writhes in the filthy mud. The muscles deep within my pelvis clench like an inner hand trying desperately to grab onto something long and hard and hot.

"Please," I cry, my voice cracking in desperation. "Oh God, please..."

The fight continues. The Alphas claw and bite, scattering mud as they move around the cage. Every time someone seems to be gaining the upper hand, he soon loses it to another.

And as messed up as it sounds, the violence of their struggle only adds fuel to the fire between my thighs.

They are fighting over *me*, and that fact raises my horniness to even greater heights.

Goosebumps flare and flare again across my flesh in rolling waves. Gouts of arousal flush from my opening and pond around my butt.

This is beyond shameful.

I shouldn't be aroused by this violence. Especially not here in these filthy surroundings with a hundred savage Farlanders looking on. My mind is repulsed by everything about this situation, but my body cannot contain the mounting desire.

My need is growing unbearable.

I feel like I may literally die if it goes unquenched.

"Please," I moan.

I slide my hands between my legs, shamefully rubbing my tingling clit in the hopes that I can extinguish the rising heat. But it only serves to stoke the flames. My need consumes me. It oozes from my pores. My skin is greasy with sweat and mud.

"Please..."

The ache is so deep, so intense, that I weep with arousal. Tears stream down my temples. My lips quiver and horny sobs burst from my mouth.

"Fuck me!" I scream. The words tear at my throat on the way out. "Fuck me! Please God, I need it so fucking bad!"

The sound of fighting goes silent.

Panting, I swivel my head around the enclosure, seeking the three Alphas. I find them behind me. I am looking at them upside down.

Their bodies are caked in mud and streaked with blood from their fighting. But now their attention is focused on me and me alone. Their three dominating cocks are aimed skyward and jumping with the beat of their racing hearts.

“Please,” I beg, my voice hoarse from shouting.

The whoops and jeers of the gathered crowd grow louder as the three Alphas advance and close in around me like dirty wolves.

CHAPTER 21: TALIESIN

Source, the omega's smell is intense. For that is what Hines is now—an omega. Her change is complete. The powerful, raw odor billowing from her body leaves no question about that fact.

I have never smelled an omega like this.

It is the smell of destiny, of fate.

The smell invades my pores. It saturates every fiber of my being, every cell, every atom, enslaving my mind and my body to her need, her hunger.

I have no choice—we have no choice—but to claim her body here in this cage. It is the Will of the Source.

The other Alphas sense it too.

This omega needs all three of us now. There is no other way.

Baen and Canaris advance. They take up positions on both sides of Hines and raise her body into a seated position. I walk around in front of her, the thick mud sucking at my feet, and I kneel between her mud-splotched thighs.

I cradle her desperate, beautiful face in my hands. Her eyes are so dilated with heat that her irises are only wire-thin hazel rings around wide circles of black. Her lip is trembling as if she is cold, but her skin is feverishly hot.

“Hines,” I murmur.

A violent convulsion rolls through her body, contracting and relaxing her muscles rhythmically. Baen and Canaris steady her.

“Please,” she whimpers, her voice choked with tears. “Please, Tal, I need it so fucking bad it hurts.”

It takes every ounce of will and training for me to hold back the flood of urges welling up inside me, to throw this omega in heat down in the mud and rut her to pieces.

“But you heard what Abaddon said...”

“I don’t care!” she cries. “My heat will kill me if we don’t...”

I’ve never heard of an omega dying from heat before. Then again, I’ve never seen an omega in a heat as deep as this one. Her body is shaking with unfulfilled desire. I can literally see patterns of gooseflesh ebb and flow over her body like tides. A river of slick is pouring from her hole.

It’s futile to resist.

Perhaps we three Alphas can hold out for a little while. But we won’t last forever. The omega’s scent will overcome us sooner or later.

I crush my mouth against Hines’s. Her soft young lips part. I rub my tongue against hers.

When I finally pull back, I leave her limp and breathless.

I bury my face beneath her chin. Her scent is even deeper there, wafting from her glands. It nearly drives me insane with lust.

I kiss lower, stitching a dotted line of saliva down her muddied breastbone, her twitching belly, her sexy little navel.

And at last I come to the locus of her need.

She is muddy down there, so I spit between her legs to clean her and swipe it away with my hand. Thus cleaned, I can see it, open and raw, a pink blossom of flesh in full bloom, soft petals slick with the dew of her arousal. I pause for a moment to enjoy the sight. Then another wave of her scent hits me. It draws me in, leaving me no choice in the matter.

With a hungry snarl, I bury my face between her tender thighs and feast upon her cunt.

CHAPTER 22: HINES

“Oh fuck,” I shout, as a jolt of pleasure shoots between my legs.

Tal’s tongue is coarse and tactile, flexible and strong. He licks my parting with deep, abrading strokes. He laps me like a hungry dog, slurping away the viscous fluid dripping from inside me. His tip digs into my hole, greedily chasing every drop of my arousal.

Meanwhile, up top, Baen and Canaris claim my breasts. Their tongues lave across my nipples, making me moan. My sounds of pleasure spur them on, and they do it again and again, each lap igniting a spark behind my clit. They suck my aching nipples between their lips, swelling my tingling buds until it seems they will pop. Their tongues flick and strum, raising my pleasure to new heights.

“Oh God, that feels so good,” I whine. “But I need more

My hands slide down Baen’s and Canaris’s fronts. My fingertips ripple over the grooves of their abdominals. I touch their pubic fur. My fingers curl around their meaty cockshafts.

God, their skin is so hot it nearly scalds me.

“I need these,” I moan, tugging lightly. My hands slide underneath, cupping and massaging their smooth, heavy sacs.

“And this. I need *this*.”

My palms move back to their girthy shafts. I stroke them in tandem while they continue to work my pebbled nipples with their lips and tongues.

And down below, Tal keeps a steady pace on my pussy. His attention is focused on my throbbing clit, but he occasionally dips lower, licking my opening and my sensitive taint.

My hips raise of their own volition, and I smash my pussy hard against Tal's face. His rough, coarse stubble scrubs and scratches at my tender places.

For a moment, I realize how filthy this is. The mud. The cheering crowd of barbarians. The three Alphas having their way with my needy body.

Heat rushes up the arteries of my neck and flushes into my cheeks.

I'm nothing but a horny omega now.

An animal in heat.

And I love it.

The first orgasm hits me like a punch, shuddering my muscles and sending a flood of hot, scented slick spilling from my hole and staining Tal's chin and neck. He licks me straight through the climax and out the other side, relentlessly torturing my nerve bundle with his skillful tongue.

"Oh fuck!" I yelp.

I continue stroking the pair of hot Alpha dicks on both sides of me. On my left, Canaris shudders. His lips pop from my nipple

with a loud, wet smack, and he bellows with lust. His cock pulses, shooting ropes of hot semen onto my belly and ribs.

Between my spread thighs, Tal pauses his feasting long enough to speak.

“Feed it to her Canaris. Her body must become accustomed to seed.”

I don't know what Tal means, but I feel an instinctual thirst for that thick, creamy fluid. Somehow my body knows that I need it.

I need it in my mouth, and in other places too.

Canaris swipes his rough, calloused palm over my soft skin, gathering his pleasure onto his fingers. He feeds it to me, and I accept it hungrily, sucking away every last drop of the salty cum.

As it settles in my tummy, Tal's tongue kindles another intense climax between my legs. Baen clutches me tightly to keep my ecstatic convulsions under control.

“Good,” Tal purrs. “I think she's ready.”

“Ready?” I gasp weakly. “Ready for what?”

Without warning, Tal's middle finger rams inside my hole, penetrating to the knuckle. He works it around, testing and teasing my sensitive inner tissues. He swirls it in circular motions, like he's trying to stretch me out, trying to ream my hole bigger with his finger.

“Ready for an Alpha cock,” he growls.

Tal sits back on his haunches, and his massive, curving erection comes into view. My inner walls flutter in anticipation of being taken by that huge member.

But to my surprise, and everyone else's, Tal stands and nods toward Baen.

“Come here, boy. You'll have her first.”

“What?” Baen stammers in disbelief.

I can hardly believe it myself. Tal has seemingly established himself as the head of this little impromptu pack. By right, he could fuck me before the other two do. But he's giving up that privilege to Baen. There must be some reason...

“Well,” Tal growls. “What are you waiting for, boy?”

Baen doesn't require any further encouragement. He moves around in front of me and positions himself between my legs while Tal takes up his place beside me.

Baen grips his cock and levers his blunt head down until his pierced tip is aligned with my entrance.

He starts to push.

CHAPTER 23: BAEN

The omega mewls as I begin to push inside her.

Despite her overwhelming need, she struggles and tries to squirm away from me, but I clutch her plump fleshy hips, dragging her toward me as I slowly thrust into her dripping hole.

There is resistance at first. She is tight, and I suspect she has never taken a real cock before. But soon her opening expands just enough, and there is a delicious slip as my swollen head pops inside.

I grunt. “Source, you feel good.”

She whimpers and wriggles beneath me, impaled on the tip of my cock. I just hold there for a moment, enjoying the sight of her weak, helpless struggles and the tightness of her rim stretched around my crown.

Then I push deeper.

With Tal and Canaris keeping her arms pinned down, the omega has no choice but to watch as I slowly sheath my pole inside her cunt. Her mouth gapes, and her eyes stare with amazement as my shaft disappears between her open legs, inch by throbbing inch.

“So fucking good,” I groan.

The truth is, she feels better than any omega I’ve ever fucked. Her insides are soft and smooth as silk. Her channel conforms

so perfectly around my cock, pulsing and clenching as if trying to milk my seed.

I delve deeper. I keep going until my tip bumps against her back wall.

Her back arches. She tosses her head and lets loose a shriek that could be pleasure or pain. Perhaps a mingling of the two.

Once again, I hold myself root-deep in her cunt, savoring her warmth.

Then I start to fuck.

I draw myself out of her fully, and the omega gasps in disappointment. Her wet hole gapes hungrily. I plunge into her again, and this time her cunt swallows me with ease. She moans with pleasure.

Outside of the cage, the Farlanders have descended into a frenzy. Some of them are fighting. Others are furiously jacking their dicks as they watch us. I block them out and focus all of my attention on the omega.

CHAPTER 24: HINES

I'm getting fucked by an Alpha.

This is no dream. This is really happening. The hard, jolting thrusts of his pelvis make that abundantly clear. The cage fills with thick, wet squelching sounds—some from the mud and some from between my legs where the Alpha is filling me up again and again with his thick, hot meat.

This isn't casual sex.

This is mating. Raw, bestial mating.

Baen is inside me, naked and unprotected. No condom. No birth control. That should freak me out, but right now I've got bigger problems.

Like the fact that we're imprisoned in a cage.

Or the hundred slaving Farlanders howling and banging against the bars.

And most of all, Abaddon's promise that I will die tomorrow at dawn.

But for now, I shove all of those thoughts out of my mind and give myself over to the savage pleasure of mating.

Baen's lips crash against mine in a stinging kiss. His hard fangs graze me. His warm, strong tongue penetrates my lips, just as his hard cock is penetrating my other sensitive lips below.

My own tongue instinctively darts forward to meet and tangle with his. For a moment our hot mouths seem to melt and blend into one. I cannot tell quite where I end and he begins.

When we finally break, I'm left gasping for air, half suffocated.

Still I hunger for him. I nip and nibble at his scruffy chin.

I reach between my legs and splay my fingers to feel Baen moving in and out of me. His rounded head is buffing against that tender spot on my front wall. My arousal surges like a wave. The pleasure crests and pours over me. My channel clenches tightly around his pumping shaft.

Baen grunts. His legs tremble. I sense that he's right on the cusp of coming too.

Suddenly, Tal's hand darts out with the quickness of a viper and seizes Baen by the throat.

"Don't knot her, boy."

I realize now just how powerful Tal is. Two days ago, when he and Baen battled in the shelter, it was a fairly even match. But Tal was injured then. He was still recovering from that car crash, plus the many miles that he had to trek on foot in order to return to the Zone.

Today, however, he has no such disadvantage. And as the biggest and strongest Alpha of the three, he has the authority.

"Don't knot her," Tal repeats. "Don't even think about it."

"Fuck," Baen chokes, his face reddening. "But I want to..."

“Don’t.”

Baen gives in. He draws back a couple of inches, and immediately the base of his cock swells. The hard bulb of his knot is just outside of my hole.

He grunts and his body shudders. His eyes roll back white in their sockets. A pulse races up his shaft, and an instant later, hot cum floods my interior, painting my channel with his seed.

He’s coming inside me.

Baen is coming inside me, raw and unprotected. He’s breeding me, and I’m taking it like the filthy little omega that I am.

After a few more spurts, Tal shoves Baen off. The young Alpha’s dick slips out of me with a wet sound, and a river of hot semen spills out of my hole, mixing with the mud between my legs.

“My turn,” Tal grunts.

My body is weak and limp from coming. Tal lifts me, manhandling me like a rag doll. He shoves me forward, forcing me onto my hands and knees. He smacks my ass hard and I squeal.

“Good omega,” he growls approvingly.

The sound of Tal’s voice sends more goosebumps prickling over my soiled skin. His huge hands smooth over my back, smearing me with slippery mud. His thumbs trace the channel of my spine. I feel his teeth sharp and hard on my shoulder.

His thick, hard cock slides into my wet pussy, lubricated with the residue of Baen's seed.

"Oh fuck!" I yelp as my pelvic muscles strain around his erection.

Now I understand why Tal let Baen go first. He was letting him break me in. If Tal had tried to take me first, he would have hurt me. But now my opening has been stretched to accommodate his even greater girth.

"Does that feel good, little omega?" Tal growls as he pounds into me. "Is this what you need?"

"Mm-hm," I whine, unable to form real words.

My head drops. My hair sweeps the mud with each jolt of my body. My arms give out, and I collapse forward, but I keep my ass raised high like an offering.

It is an offering that Tal gladly accepts.

His pelvis slams against me. The cage fills with the smack of flesh on muddy flesh.

"Don't be selfish, Tal," a voice growls.

I look up to see Canaris standing over me. His hard dick is wrapped in his massive fist, and he's jerking himself slowly. A long, syrupy string of precum leaks from his tip and drools over the steel cross-bar piercing on the underside of his cockhead. His eyes are wild with lust.

Tal answer with a series of grunts matching the rhythm of his thrusts.

“Wait. Your. Turn. Canaris.”

Canaris’s face darkens, and I get the sense that the temporary truce between the Alphas is starting to crumble. Maybe it’s the intensity of my heat. Or maybe it’s the fact that Canaris has been locked away in this cage for so long.

Whatever the reason, his patience has run out.

“No,” he growls. “Gotta *share*, Tal.

With his muddy foot, Canaris shoves Tal’s shoulder. Tal loses his balance and topples backward into the mud. His fingers clutch possessively at my hips, and I am pulled backward too, so that I end up sprawled on top of him, facing the sky with his dick still buried deep.

“Fuck,” Tal grunts. “Canaris, what the fuck are you doing?”

“*Ours*,” Canaris growls. “Gotta share what’s *ours*.”

His voice is distant and dreamy. He is lost in the rut. His rational mind has been forced into submission by his primal impulses.

Canaris has one thing on his mind.

With a feral sound he pounces on top of me, sandwiching my body between his and Tal’s. His pierced cockhead rubs against the exterior of my already filled pussy.

“*Ours*...”

“Canaris, what the fuck? No!”

Tal’s words fall on deaf ears. Canaris spits onto his palm, slathers the thick saliva over his plump, pierced head, and then

starts to nudge his hard dick insistently against the edge of my stretched hole.

His tip wedges inside.

“Oh fuck!” I cry out in pain and disbelief.

Canaris is unrelenting. Grunting and struggling, he inches his cock into me alongside Tal’s. The sensation of fullness is overwhelming. The double cocks stretch my inner walls to their absolute limit. As they move inside me, I can feel every ridge and ripple of those unyielding poles stroking my insides, stimulating places I didn’t even know were there.

Two Alpha cocks are warring for domination inside me, wringing climax after devastating climax from my helpless body.

“Baen!” Tal calls out. “Baen, get Canaris off of her!”

The younger Alpha is standing over us, naked and filthy. He winces and rubs his throat where Tal choked him.

“Why should I help you?” he rasps. “You tricked me.”

“I’m not asking you to help me,” Tal growls. “It’s for Hines. If Canaris knots while we’re both inside her...”

Tal doesn’t finish the sentence, and he doesn’t have to. I know exactly what he’s thinking.

I’ll be ripped in half.

Baen heaves a reluctant sigh, then hooks his arms under Canaris and drags the rut-crazy Alpha off of me. There is a

temporary sensation of relief as Canaris's cock slides from my hole.

But the relief is short-lived.

From beneath me, Tal's roar fills my ears. The sound rumbles up from his chest and vibrates straight through my spine. A gush of fluid pours into me, so much that it overflows and spills down my taint.

Then it happens. A firmness builds around the base of Tal's cock. His swollen knot stretches my walls and plugs his load inside me.

"That's right," he purrs. "Take my knot, omega."

I squeeze my eyes shut against the mortification of being knotted like this. Knotted like a bitch in heat. Knotted while a crowd of savages looks on.

Deep inside, I've wanted this.

I've wanted it since that first night when Tal slammed me up against the wall. That first night when I fell asleep wrapped in his scent.

With a roar of his own, Canaris struggles free from Baen's grasp. He throws himself on me again. This time, however, when he tries to press inside, his cock is deflected by Tal's bulging knot. Canaris tries to penetrate me again and again, but each time, his cock glances off, stroking my erect clit in the process.

The rubbing makes me come yet again. My muscles squeeze around Tal's swollen member, coaxing more spurts of seed

from his balls.

Canaris is frustrated and nearly mindless with lust. He seems almost in physical pain from the need to release. Unable to force his way into my hole, he instead fists my hair and jerks me upright.

I open my mouth, and his long, hot cock slides into my face. He pushes deep until the blunt bulb of his tip brushes the back of my throat. I feel his hard piercing.

My gag reflex kicks in. I try to pull away, but Canaris's powerful hand cups the back of my skull, holding me in place. I pat his taut, muscled thighs, attempting to tap out, but Canaris is oblivious, lost in the rut.

“Fuck...” he groans.

My mouth fills with saliva. It spills down my chin. My eyes water, blurring my vision and striping my cheeks with tears.

“Fuck you feel so good...”

He leans my head back and straddles my up-tilted face. He fucks my mouth with a squatting motion, plunging his long cock deep into my esophagus.

He is defiling me. Using me like I'm nothing but a toy built for his pleasure.

Canaris grunts, and the base of his cock balloons against my lips. He pulses in my throat, spilling a flood of hot come down my gullet and into my belly. The sensation of that slimy warmth slithering down my throat makes me climax one more

time. My pussy contracts, ringing even more fluid from Tal's dick, which is still knotted between my legs.

At last, his payload spent, Canaris lets me go.

I flop back against Tal's hard chest, exhausted, filthy, and filled with the seed of three brutal, jealous Alphas. I should be utterly ashamed, but instead I feel more satiated, more fulfilled, than I have ever felt before.

All around us, the audience of Farlanders is roaring with excitement.

Baen and Canaris lumber forward, their hard cocks still dripping with cum. Beneath me, Tal's ribcage rises and falls, lifting my body with each ragged, panting breath.

A growl rolls from deep within those powerful lungs.

It's not like any sound I've heard him make before.

"Tal?" I whimper.

Now I notice Baen and Canaris are growling too, their voices joining with Tal's in a predatory three-part harmony. It's like they are in some kind of weird, animal trance.

Tal's fingers lace through my hair, pulling my head to one side. His fangs graze my bare skin.

I realize too late what is happening.

Their instincts have taken over.

They're going to mark me.

Tal chomps down on the place where my neck curves into my shoulder. His razor sharp canines puncture my flesh. A

searing, venomous pain courses through my bitten skin. I cry out.

As soon as Tal releases his bite, Baen falls upon me, placing his mark beside his pack master's. Last, Canaris completes the process.

CHAPTER 25: TALIESIN

By the Source, what have I done...

On top of me, the mewling omega writhes her sweaty, muddy body. Gradually, my knot abates, and my cock slides out of her hole. Her cunt, no longer stoppered by my hard knot, releases a flood of sticky fluid. A churned mixture of our combined pleasure. It cascades over my throbbing balls and soaks into the mud below.

My eyes fall on the mark my teeth left on her flesh.

What have I done?

No...

What have *we* done?

For my mark is bracketed by two others. Baen's and Canaris's. Now, for better or for worse, we are bound.

We are a pack.

As gently as I can, I slide Hines off my body and place her lightly into the mud. Beside her, Canaris drops to his knees. All the bestial fury has drained from his eyes. It has been replaced by concern.

"Hines," he groans. "Hines, are you okay?"

His hand slides between her smudged breasts. His palm settles over her heart. Hine's nods mutely. Her mouth is bucked open

slightly, her lips glazed with Canaris's semen. The lids of her eyes are pulled low, and she gives us a sultry look.

"More," she begs. "I need more..."

Her frail voice is drunk with lust. Baen is kneeling behind her, cradling her head. She reaches back and begins stroking his still-hard cock. She cranes her neck, straining to put her mouth on it.

Source! The rough fucking we three Alphas have given her might have killed an ordinary female. But Hines is begging for more. Her thirst is desperate, intense.

"Fuck," Canaris growls. His expression transitions from concern to raw amazement. "Her heat is so strong. So deep. I've never seen anything like it."

He's right. Hines's heat is deeper than any I've ever witnessed. It permeates the air within our cage and swells my cock with renewed arousal. My mouth waters. My tongue yearns to jam itself inside her cunt again and taste our combined pleasure, which is still drooling from her used hole.

But my desires will have to wait.

I lean in, kiss her tenderly, and then I turn to Baen.

"Baen, you heard the omega. Give her what she needs, boy. Make her feel your knot."

"Yes," Hines mumbles in a daze. "Knot..."

Baen gladly obliges. He mounts her, positioning his pelvis between her widely spread thighs. Her well-greased cunt

easily accepts Baen's hard pole. She whines, a high-pitched keening sound that explodes into a sob of pleasure when his cock is fully sheathed inside her flesh.

"Good," I growl. "Fuck her, boy. Fuck her hard and fuck her deep."

His cock pumps into her with a series of wet squelches. Seed and arousal fluid is plunged from her hole. Hines moans and digs at Baen's back with her claws.

I get Canaris's attention and nod toward the far side of the caged enclosure.

We need to speak, but we can't let the omega hear.

Once we are a few paces away, Canaris says, "Tal, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost control like that. I could have damaged the omega."

His face is bent downward to the mud. His features are dark with shame and remorse. I ball my hand into a loose fist and rest it on his shoulder in consolation.

"It's not your fault," I tell him. "No Alpha could resist that scent, Canaris."

It's true. An omega's scent is known to throw Alphas into a mating frenzy. And Hines's sweet, raw aroma was so damn strong, it nearly sent me over the edge too. The only thing that saved me was the fact that my cock was buried balls-deep in her buttery-soft depths.

Even then, I went too far. Much farther than I intended. I lost control.

Even now, as Baen pumps her, the scent that exudes from her fucked hole is nearly unbearable. It invades my nostrils and inflames my balls. Even though I spilled my seed inside her only moments before, my cock is already hard again. Painfully hard.

The omega cries out as Baen knots her. The fragile sound of her voice causes me to spurt. I pinch down my internal muscles, so that no more of my seed will escape. I want every drop to go inside the omega.

“Why is her heat so fucking strong?” Canaris groans.

“It’s because of the medicine,” I tell him. “The pills staved off her omega transformation for the past few days. But now that the change has finally come about, it’s intensity has been amplified tenfold.”

Canaris is listening, but his attention is focused on the omega. *Our* omega She is moaning loudly as Baen pumps her full of his seed. Canaris watches, unconsciously stroking his dick.

“Fuck,” he mutters again. “Her heat is so strong. So deep.”

I nod in agreement.

“Yes. But that is the least of our worries now.”

“What do you mean?”

I scan my eyes around the sides of the cage. Most of the Farlanders have drifted away to other parts of the camp now. Only a few stragglers remain, jerking themselves as they watch Baen breed Hines again.

Abaddon is nowhere to be seen. He has disappeared, presumably satisfied that his plan is coming to fruition, and he has taken his little omega witch with him. But he will be back tomorrow at daybreak to make good on his promise.

“Hines,” I whisper. “The omega. We have marked her now. We are bound. We shouldn’t have done that. *I* shouldn’t have done that. It is my fault.”

Now it is Canaris’s turn to set my conscience at ease.

“You had no choice in the matter,” Canaris says. “You said it yourself. She is impossible to resist. Abaddon knew full well what he was doing when he locked us in here together.”

I nod ruefully. Canaris is right, of course. The marking couldn’t be helped. It was raw, Alpha instinct that drove me to place my mark on her supple flesh. And the others had no choice but to follow suit.

Now we are a pack.

By the omega we are bound.

A long moment stretches out while neither I nor Canaris says a word. The only sounds are Baen’s grunts and Hines’s moans as they mate in the squishing mud.

“We must protect her,” I say in a hushed voice. “At all costs.”

Canaris turns toward me, his eyes ablaze with determination.

“That goes without saying. I will defend this omega with my life. I will defend her until the last drop of blood has been emptied from my veins.”

He glances around at the domed cage that surrounds us.

“But what can we do?” His voice has taken on a worried tone.

“We must try to escape, Canaris.”

“You think I haven’t tried? I’ve been locked in this pit for Source knows how long. I’ve searched every inch. I’ve dug the mud around every inch of the perimeter. I’ve checked every bar for weakness...”

“We must check again,” I say. “The three of us will take turns sating the omega’s needs while the others search for a means of escape. We have until tomorrow’s dawn. Then Abaddon will come to take her away.”

“Let him come,” Canaris snarls. “I will rip his heart from his bone cage and eat it. I will slay a thousand Farlanders before I let them lay one finger on my omega.”

I nod silently.

Canaris’s passion is admirable. I feel the same way. But I also know that realistically we can never defeat all of these Farlanders, not even with our combined strength.

I make a silent resolution. I dare not speak it to Canaris. He would kill me if I told him. But I know it must be done.

We will search all day for an escape. But if we cannot find any, come the morning, I will kill the omega. I will kill Hines. It must be done to save her. Abaddon will not grant her a painless death. That much I know. He will draw it out. He will torture her slowly.

That I cannot allow.

I will kill the omega if I must.

But I pray it will not come to that.

Before us, Baen finishes mating Hines for the second time. His knot recedes, and he rolls off of her. She pants wildly. Her spread thighs are smudged with mud and cum and her own slippery mucus. Fuck, she is so beautiful like this. A beautiful mess.

In a cold voice, Canaris repeats what he said before.

“I will defend this omega with my life.”

CHAPTER 26: HINES

Tink tink tink. Pssst.

A strange sound rouses me from unconsciousness. When I open my eyes, I find that I am staring up at a clear sky full of stars. The sheer amount of them, scattered across the darkness, takes my breath away.

I have never seen the stars before. Not in real life, anyway. Only in photographs. Back in the city hive, they are hidden behind thick clouds of smog and glaring light pollution.

Out here, however, they fill up the night with glittering brilliance.

But these stars are criss-crossed by dark lines—the bars of our domed cage. My sudden sense of wonder and awe is crushed as I remember where I am.

Imprisoned.

And speaking of being crushed, an enormous weight is pressing down on top of me. A wall of hot, naked flesh and muscle pinning me down in my bed of reeking mud. But the pressure is not uncomfortable. In fact, it makes me feel warm and protected, even under these circumstances.

A quick sniff tells me it is Baen. He has fallen asleep on top of me. His hard cock is still plunged deep between my legs.

The mating went on all day long.

The Alphas fucked me relentlessly. They shared my body, sometimes taking turns and sometimes using me in tandem for their pleasure.

Their pleasure and mine.

Heat blossoms beneath my skin as I recall how I begged them for it. How I pleaded with them to fill me again and again until my every hole was filled and dripping with their hot seed.

Shameful. Utterly shameful...

Tink tink tink. Psssst.

There is that sound again. I was so lost in my thoughts that I nearly forgot. Now, my curiosity renewed, I swivel my head to search for its source.

First, my eyes find the Farlanders who have been set to guard us during the night. There are two of them, both slumped on the ground and snoring, fast asleep.

Next I see Tal and Canaris. They are at the edge of the cage. The bulging musculature of their backs are limned with starlight. Canaris moves low, digging in the mud, shaking his head, trying another spot. Tal is nearby, standing upright, his hands searching along the bars, checking for any weakness. Even now, my mouth waters at the sight of his perfect, muscular butt.

They are searching for a means of escape while the guards are asleep.

But that is not the source of the sound...

Tink tink tink. Psst.

I shift my head the other way and bite back a sudden gasp of surprise. A small dark figure is crouching just outside the cage. A shadow, tapping at the bars and beckoning. I cannot make out any features except a pair of eyes that flash amber like a cat's.

“Psst.” The shadow beckons again.

I turn back to Tal and Canaris. They are so focused on their task that they don't hear. And Baen, meanwhile, is fast asleep.

Briefly, I consider calling out, but I decide against it. I don't want to wake the guards. Instead, with a bit of maneuvering, and with the help of the slippery mud, I manage to wriggle myself out from underneath Baen's dead weight.

I crawl cautiously to the edge of the cage on my hands and knees.

Now I can make out some details of the shadowy figure. A small, narrow body. Wild, matted hair. And the scent. There is no mistaking it...

She is an omega, just like me.

“Help you,” she whispers in a small, thin voice.

A gasp of surprise catches in my throat. I press my palm over my mouth to keep from shouting.

It's her. It's the young, feral omega that Baen and Tal rescued from the Farlanders.

I draw close and grip the bars of the cage.

“How did you find us?” I whisper.

There is a brief silence before the omega answers.

“Help you.”

All right then... Now is not the time or place to worry about how she found us anyway. We need to get the hell out of here, and right now, the omega is our only hope.

I start as two massive forms appear beside me, but I immediately relax, realizing it is just Tal and Canaris. They have finally noticed us over here, and they have come to see what is going on. I sense a third presence behind me, warm breath stirring the hairs of my neck, and I know it must be Baen.

“The omega?” Tal whispers. “How did she find us?”

“Help you,” the omega says a third time.

I gesture at the Alphas to be quiet and to let me do the talking, then I turn back to the nameless omega.

“We need the keys,” I whisper. “Do you understand? *Keys...*”

The omega tilts her head like a confused dog.

“Come on,” I say.

I move along the perimeter of the cage and motion for the omega to follow. The Alphas follow too, a few paces behind.

As we come around to the place where the guards lie sleeping, the omega tenses briefly. She sniffs the air, then, overcoming her fear, she proceeds.

She is very brave.

I turn my attention to the sleeping guards. My guts are squirming with nervousness now. If this doesn't work, I don't know what we will do. But after a moment of searching, my eyes find what I'm looking for. A glint of metal in the starlight. My heart leaps.

The keys.

"There," I whisper in the softest voice I can manage. "*Keys...*"

I extend my arm through the bars, pointing at the iron key ring that one of the Farlander guards is holding loosely in his curled fingers.

The omega looks at my face, then at my pointing finger then, then back to my face again.

"*Keys,*" I whisper again and nod in the direction I'm pointing.

This time, the omega's gaze follows the line of my finger and keeps going until she sees what I'm pointing at.

"*Keez...*" she breathes.

I nod eagerly.

The omega sucks in a deep breath, steadies her nerves, and moves forward on all fours like a prowling cat. Her tread is utterly silent. She pauses briefly to sniff the guards, then crouches over the one with the keys.

Her small hand reaches for the metal ring. She starts to lift it.

The guard stirs and mumbles in his sleep. The omega freezes, waits for him to settle again, then continues lifting the key ring.

My mouth is dry. I try to swallow, but my throat muscles don't work. All I can do is stare wide-eyed as my anticipation tries to eat me from the inside out.

The omega gives the ring a light tug, but it doesn't come free from the guard's grip.

She tugs again, a little harder this time.

Nothing.

The Farlander's fingers are hooked just enough to keep the metal ring in his grasp.

For a moment, a sense of defeat presses down on me. My heart drops into my gut with a silent thud.

But the omega doesn't give up.

She takes a strand of her long, tangled hair and holding it like a brush, she tickles the fat of the Farlander's palm. His fingers twitch once, twice.

The keys slip free with a faint jangle.

For a moment all of us freeze. Me. My Alphas. The omega.

The tension in the air is palpable. We stare at the two guards, waiting to see if they wake up.

They don't.

The air I've been holding trapped in my lungs finally streams out in a silent sigh of relief.

The omega passes the keys through the bars, and I hand them to Tal. He reaches around, and with slow precise movements he inserts the key in the old-fashioned lock and turns it. Even

though he takes great pains to be as quiet as possible, the faint scrape of the rusty deadbolt seems excruciatingly loud in this silence.

The latch comes free. Baen reaches around and removes it from the hasp.

One of the guards snorts, mumbles something in his sleep. The Alphas remain statue-still, staring at the guard intensely until he settles back to sleep.

Tal swings the gate slowly, slowly, taking care not to let the metal creak or clank. As soon as it is open. Canaris bursts through, rushing toward the guards on silent feet.

“Canaris!” Tal hisses.

But Canaris has already pounced on the first guard. With a brutal twist, he breaks the man’s neck.

The other guard startles awake, but Baen is on top of him in a flash, coiling one sinewy arm around the Farlander’s neck in a chokehold. The Farlander’s eyes bulge. His tongue lolls. His body goes slack. Baen holds him a few seconds more until he’s sure that he’s dead.

Through it all, the young, feral omega looks on with a gleeful glint in her eyes.

Canaris strides back, wiping his hands as if he’s disgusted to have even touched a Farlander. Nevermind the fact that he’s caked in mud.

“Couldn’t risk them waking up and finding us gone,” Canaris whispers to Tal. “This will buy us some time.”

“Let’s use that time well,” Tal whispers back. “We need to get out of here.”

He moves to pick me up.

“Wait,” I say and place one hand on his hard chest.

“What is it?”

At my feet lies the pill bottle where Abaddon dropped it yesterday. I stoop and pick it up, raise it to the starlight. There are only four or five pills left inside. I unscrew the top and dash the remaining pills into my open palm.

“Hines,” Tal whispers insistently.

I stare at the pills for one more second. Yesterday, they were my most important possession. The only thing that mattered was holding off the mutation. But now the change is complete. I’m an omega. There is no going back.

And I wouldn’t want to go back if I could.

This is who I am now.

This is my destiny.

I fling the last of the pills into the cage where they plip into the mud. I toss the empty bottle after, saying goodbye to the life I’ve known.

“Okay,” I whisper. “Let’s go.”

Tal squats, and I mount him, riding piggy back. I look to the other Alphas. Baen is on the left, his close-cropped hair and sinewy muscles edged with pale light. Shaggy Canaris is on the right, his silvered hair lustrous despite the mud.

But the young omega is nowhere to be seen.

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know,” Tal says. “I didn’t see her leave. But we don’t have time to stick around.”

We sneak out of the Farlander encampment. Tal takes the lead with me on his back while Baen and Canaris flank on both sides, hanging back a couple of paces to form a protective wedge. They move as one, a bonded pack.

It’s a little weird to think that I’m the connection holding them together.

Just before we reach the edge of the clearing, I scan my eyes around the treeline, searching for any sign of the omega. I can’t be certain, but I’m pretty sure I see a pair of reflective cat’s eyes shining in the shadows.

I raise my hand in farewell, and the eyes blink twice, then disappear.

Something tells me that I haven’t seen the last of that mysterious, solitary omega. For now, however, our destinies lie on different paths. I have no clue where hers will take her. As for me, my destiny lies with the Alphas now, and our path leads to the ruins.

PART FOUR:

THE RUINS

CHAPTER 27: ABADDON

I'm looking at an empty cage.

The first orange spears of the sun are slanting over the eastern treetops, stretching long shadows from the rusted iron bars across the pit of mud where the Alphas and their omega are supposed to be.

But they aren't there.

A fire burns inside my ribs.

"Who was standing guard?" Despite the rush of rage and adrenaline coursing through my veins, my voice is slow, steady, and cold.

"Gork and Mork were keeping watch, Master," a Farlander says.

My gaze follows his pointing finger toward the two dead bodies sprawled on the ground a few paces away.

From the looks of it, they died a swift and relatively painless death. They are fortunate. Had my new pets escaped and left them alive, Gork and Mork would have weeks of torture to endure.

The need to punish someone, anyone, surges over me. I grab the Alpha who spoke by the throat, biting my fingers deep into the soft flesh beside his larynx.

"Don't lie." My voice is hoarse with anger. "They were not 'keeping watch.' They were clearly killed while they slept."

The Farlander's eyes bulge. His mouth opens and closes silently like a landed fish as he desperately tries to suck wind into his pinched throat. His terror and agony gives me little pleasure or solace. It is so paltry, so insignificant in comparison to my own.

With a quick, snatching motion, I tear his larynx out. Blood pours down his chest. Wet gurgling sounds issue from the ragged hole. He collapses, feet kicking briefly at the dirty ground, and then he is dead.

"Where is my witch?" I growl.

"Here, Master." Her voice is a claw scraping on slate.

I turn toward the sound of her voice. She is inside the cage, her pale, thin legs shlucking through the deep mud. Her spiky black plumage shakes with each step. Something catches her eye. She stoops, extends one wiry, pallid arm, and picks at the muddy surface with her bone-talon.

"What have you got there, Sickorax?"

"Medicine," she answers. "Outsider medicine. All melted now in the mud. Omega threw it away."

Of course she did. The medicine is of no use to her now. She is an omega with a pack of strong and resourceful Alphas to protect her and pleasure her. I'm sure she will bear them many strong litters of pups.

And they have *me* to thank. I am their matchmaker.

The thought sickens me.

It's like a thousand fire ants eating their way out from the center of my guts. The hateful fire behind my breast bone burns brighter. The blood speeds through my veins. I am unable to restrain my rage any longer.

“FUCK!”

My roar is so loud it shakes the ground. So loud it rattles the iron of the cage. Hot, blood-tinged tears roll down my marred face.

“Fuck the Source! Fuck the cursed Zone! Dark gods, that I could only burn this festering canker off the face of the world!”

I grow silent, and the entire village grows silent with me.

The Farlanders gathered around me have all taken one big step back. Not a single murmur or whisper comes from them. They do not make a sound lest they be the next to taste my violent rage. The only sound is my own voice echoing and re-echoing into the woods around the clearing.

The witch, still knee deep in the mud, cocks her head, listening.

“Something is coming, Master.”

A moment later, I hear it too. Soon everyone does, turning toward the source of the sound at the southern edge of the clearing.

It is not so much a sound as a felt vibration. A deep, steady hum at the lowest limit of audibility.

It grows, getting closer.

The thing that rises over the treetops sends a wave of panicked cries through the Farlanders. The cowardly among them flee in terror. The stupid among them crouch and bare their ragged fangs to fight. Neither response makes any sense.

I alone stand still.

I sense, somehow, that my prayer, if one can call it that, has been answered.

The flying machine is dark and bulky. Its hull is composed of sharp angles and straight lines. Tinted glass and raked alloy. It must be thirty meters from nose to tail. The ugly thing sweeps sideways over the treetops. Its downwash dances the upper limbs and sets loose swirling sprays of leaves in its wake.

Outsiders.

Subtlety is not their strong suit.

The dark craft slows, engines down-shifting in pitch. The flying machine does not land but hovers in place over the village. The Farlanders, those who have remained to stare in astonishment, are forced back to avoid the blue-hot downwash of the ship's angled jets.

A broad door rasps open on the side, revealing a small figure with black leathery skin and goggled eyes. A chorus of gasps rises up from the Farlanders.

Though I have never seen an Outsider before, besides the female who has escaped me, I am not wholly ignorant of their ways. I know, for example, that this black "skin" is really a

protective body suit. Encased within is an even smaller, frailer human being.

“Who is in charge here?”

The voice booms through the clearing. There is no way such a small being could produce that sound. It is amplified by some kind of Outsider magic.

“I said, *who is your leader?*”

A stone sails up from somewhere in the crowd of circled Farlanders. It misses its mark and plinks uselessly off the armored hull of the craft.

A gun turret hanging from the belly of the flying machine swivels in the general direction from which the rock came.

The gun spits fire.

Several bodies are reduced to geysers of red liquid. The remaining Farlanders scatter like bugs.

“Would anyone else care to cast stones?” The black-masked face scans over the crowd. “Good. Now that we understand each other on that point, I will repeat my question. Who. Is. Your. Leader?”

I take a step forward. My heart is pounding my breastbone like a smith’s hammer working a red hot steel blade. It is not fear that I feel, but elation. The old gods, the dark gods, have sent me a blessing. I can feel it.

“I am the leader here,” I call out over the rush of the ship’s engines.

“Good,” the Outsider says in his amplified voice. “We are looking for a woman. An Outsider woman. Have you seen her?”

My elation mounts. My heart speeds.

“I know the woman that you speak of. She has been here, but she is gone. Escaped to the central ruins.”

The Outsider man curses under his breath, though the sound is still loud from the amplification. He thinks for a moment, then speaks.

“This woman is important to us, Alpha. She carries in her mind knowledge that we want. Valuable knowledge.”

“And what has this to do with me and my tribe?”

“Our armor has its limitations. We cannot travel all the way into the center of the Zone without becoming...” He looks down at the mindless, drooling betas milling in their pen at the edge of the village. His voice oozes disgust as he says, “...like *them*.”

He points a leather-clad finger in my direction.

“But *you* can, Alpha! You can journey into the center. Do you know what a map is?”

“Of course,” I scoff. Do these Outsiders really think we are that stupid and primitive.

The man gestures into the shadowy interior of the ship.

Someone hands him a large rolled paper, which he tosses down to me. I catch it easily, unroll it, study it. It takes me a

moment to realize what I'm seeing, but when I do, my excitement increases to new heights.

"Tunnels," I say. "Underneath the central ruins."

"The old sewers," the Outsider says. "From before the Cataclysm."

I don't know what his last word means, but I assume he is referring to the Big Change, when the hateful Source burst into existence, remolding the Zone into this image that I despise so much.

"You can use those tunnels to sneak into the ruins and capture the woman for us. I'll give you ten days, then I will return here to retrieve the woman."

"And why should we do this task for you, Outsider?"

"Because if you don't, we'll burn this little shit pit to the ground. On the other hand, if you succeed..."

He turns and gestures over his shoulder. Two more men, both clad in identical black bodysuits appear, carrying a long, metal crate between them. They lower it to the ground on black ropes.

I stride forward and push back the top of the crate. It is filled with Outsider weapons. Guns, they are called.

"If you succeed," the Outsider calls from above, "there will be more where that came from. We'll give you enough weapons to conquer the entire Zone for yourself."

A few of the braver Farlanders have gathered around to peer into the crate. One of them snatches up a long black gun, inspects it curiously, peers down the hole at the end.

There is a loud bark, a flash of flame, and the back of the Farlander's head is blown away in a spray of red. He collapses dead to the ground.

Overhead, the Outsider lets out an exasperated sigh.

"Hopefully not all of you are so stupid," he says. "Guns aren't hard to use. Point them at your target. Pull the trigger. Bang, dead. Simple, right?"

I reach into the crate and pull out a weapon that is different from the others. It is much larger, rectangular in shape, with four holes in the end, each one nearly as big around as my fist.

"Careful with that one," the Outsider says. "Bazooka. It fires explosives. You can use it if you need to blast your way through walls."

Now the feeling of joy in my chest is a ball of white hot energy.

Now I understand how the dark gods have blessed me.

I will not capture the female as the Outsider wants. I don't care about his threats to destroy the village. These Farlanders mean nothing to me. Nothing. And besides, by the time my work is done, there will be no village left anyway.

I will not capture the female as the Outsider wants.

No. I have something much grander in mind.

I place the bazooka gently back into the case and step away.

“All right, Outsider,” I lie, “you have a deal.”

CHAPTER 28: HINES

“Ouch!”

My cry of pain pierces the silence like a needle. My shout is multiplied as it echoes through the Temple of the Source. It is a cavernous, circular room located at the very dead center of the central ruins. It is the heart of the heart of the Zone. A high, domed ceiling curves overhead, its surface lined in dark metal panelling. The floors are metal too, covered with snaking rivulets of black cables and conduits, all leading to the massive, spherical structure in the middle of the room—the Source itself, humming with energy.

The air here is warm and thick with the combined musk of many Alphas and a few omegas too. They have come to meditate or pray in the presence of the Source. Some of them look up briefly at the sharp sound of my outburst.

“Shhh,” Canaris whispers, beard tickling the shell of my ear. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it, Hines?”

Canaris is lying naked on his back on the floor of the temple, and I am reclining on top of him, my body held firmly in place by the hug of his massive, python-like arms.

I tilt my chin and look down at my belly and the gleaming steel needle that Tal just pushed through the upper lip of my navel. Already the sting is beginning to fade.

“Not too bad,” I whisper. “Not nearly as bad as my nipple.”

Canaris chuckles beneath me. The sound rumbles up through his chest and abdomen, through my back and spine, and straight into my deepest core.

Baen and Tal are kneeling over us. As Tal has the steadiest hands, he is in charge of the piercing while Baen assists.

I watch the long, hard needle being shoved through the tight hole. The feeling is oddly pleasurable. I can't help but think of the other way these Alphas have pierced me, not with steel, but with their steel-hard flesh. The initial spike of pain followed by the delicious, blissful friction of hard rubbing against soft.

As the needle is pushed all the way through and out the other side, Baen slips a steel ring into the tiny wound cut by the needle's passing.

A navel ring.

It is now my sixth piercing.

When I entered the temple an hour or so before, I had two. My earlobes. I've had those since I was a girl. The new piercings, however, are far more meaningful.

The piercing ceremony is an important part of the binding process.

Sloane and Lily explained it all to me after I arrived.

When we came in sight of the central ruins two days ago, my heart felt like it was going to climb out of my throat. I had never seen anything so amazing before.

The central ruins are nothing like the city hive where I have lived my entire life up until now. The hive is a dark place, shrouded in pollution and buzzing with sound.

The ruins, by contrast, are a place of light and quietude. A century-old city, from before the time of the Cataclysm, the buildings are now covered in giant winding vines as the man-made structures are gradually reclaimed by nature. The effect is breathtaking. When I first saw the city in the distance, it looked like an Emerald City.

My three Alphas let out a great roar as we approached, and when we arrived at the city's edge, a small greeting party had gathered to meet us.

Sloane was there. The omega whom I helped escape from the SynerGen headquarters six months ago. She looks quite different now. The last time I saw Sloane, her white-blond hair was buzzed short in the style of a soldier. Now it has grown out into a wavy pixie cut. But that wasn't even the most noticeable difference.

Her belly has grown huge. She and her Alphas have obviously been busy since I've last seen them.

Lily was there to greet us as well. Even though I had never seen her before—not in person, anyway—she still grinned and threw her arms around me in a great big hug. Somehow it felt totally natural, like seeing an old friend.

Okay, it was a bit weird sharing a naked hug with someone I had never seen before. But after everything I've been through over the past days, it didn't seem like such a big deal.

Sloane and Lily both apologized for not telling me that they had sent Tal to protect me.

I told them that was nonsense.

I owed them my life for that. Tal had saved me. All three of the Alphas had. They were my protectors.

And so, with that, I was welcomed into the ruins and the tribe.

The four of us—Tal, Baen, Canaris, and me—we had already been bound within that muddy cage in Abaddon's village.

They had already marked me with their fangs, and all of the Alphas could see this mark on my neck. But there was still one step to be completed, and that was the piercing.

That's what we are taking care of now.

Each of the piercings represents a bond with one of my Alphas.

The ring through my lip matches the one worn by Tal, and binds me to him. The one through my left nostril mirrors the one that Baen wears through his right. And then there is my nipple ring, to compliment Canaris's.

Each of the rings has a meaning: Tal's lip ring represents his power to command. Baen's nose ring is a sign of his powerful sense of smell. The ring on Canaris's chest symbolizes the fiery heart underneath.

And now, all of those Alpha traits are unified in me, the pack's shared omega.

None of the guys have a navel ring, however. That one is unique to me.

It is meant as a blessing for a fertile womb.

I reach down to touch the metal ring which Baen has just placed through my navel. On the Outside it would take weeks, months even, for a body piercing to heal completely. But here, in the presence of the Source, the healing process is nearly instantaneous.

Tal gazes down at me, admiring his handiwork.

“I think that may be my favorite one yet,” he says.

Across from him, Baen nods in agreement. A faint smirk tips the edge of his mouth as he brushes his gaze up and down my body. I swear I can feel it, like an invisible feather skimming my flesh and leaving pebbled goosebumps in its wake.

“Fuck, you’re so gorgeous,” Baen murmurs.

My heart thumps, and wetness blooms between my legs.

God, how my life has changed. Not so long ago, I was just wimpy little Hines. The girl hiding in the shadows. And I found it easy to hide because hardly anyone seemed to pay any attention to me. It was like I was invisible.

Now, the triple attention of these three dominant Alphas is almost too much for my shy little self to handle. I keep thinking that the spell will break. That they will get tired of me. But it’s the exact opposite. Every day their hunger for me seems to grow, like they are addicted to me.

It's an exciting feeling. Scary, but exciting.

And I'm addicted to them too. Addicted to the way they devour me with their eyes. To the way they run their soft lips over every inch of my skin at night. The way they touch me on the inside until I scream.

A laughing, feminine voice breaks me out of my sexy reveries.

“Hey Hines! The boys aren't treating you too rough, are they?”

Lily has come up beside us. She is protectively surrounded by her own pack of three Alphas. Each of them is holding one of Lily's adorable little yawning babies too.

Over the past days, I have gotten to know Lily and her pack well, especially the leader, Addom. He is the high leader of the entire central tribe, and since I've arrived, I've told him and the other tribal elders everything I can about the state of affairs in the outside world.

But during those little interviews, I've been dressed in a loincloth.

Right now, however, I'm as naked as the day I came into the world. Reflexively, my hand darts between my legs, providing scant cover for my exposed privates.

Everyone seems to smirk ever so slightly, amused at my Outsider modesty.

Even my three ultra-jealous Alphas—the ones who used to physically fight each other over my body—don't seem to mind

these other Alphas seeing me naked. And by the same token, Lily's Alphas don't seem worried either.

My eyes drift toward Lily's shoulder, and I realize why this is. She has been marked. Her body has been claimed by her pack. There is no mistaking who she belongs to now.

As if by a strange sympathy, my own mark seems to warm on my own naked skin.

I am claimed too. A marked omega. Possessed by my pack.

Still, I keep my hand in place covering my vagina. I still need a little time to get used to the openness of things here in the Zone.

"What's up, Lily?" I ask awkwardly. It's a bit funny making small talk while sprawled out naked on top of an equally naked man.

But Lily seems totally unfazed. She just bobs the tiny, sleeping omega baby in her arms, smiles, and nods toward the giant sphere—the Source.

"I've come to talk to Seraph," she says. "There's still so much to learn about the Source."

Seraph, as we now know, is the artificial intelligence that was created by SynerGen to manage the energy of the Source. It was originally meant to be a suppression field, to manage the sexual urges of humans as a way to control overpopulation. But Seraph malfunctioned and made something else instead.

That's not entirely correct, actually.

Seraph didn't *malfunction*. He did exactly what his programmers designed him to do, which was to bring stability to the population. It's just that his interpretation of that directive was not what his creators expected.

Since arriving here in the central ruins, Lily has introduced me to Seraph, allowed me to speak to him. If the ruins are an Emerald City, then talking to Seraph is like meeting the Wizard of Oz himself. A massive, floating face that appears on the surface of the Source.

It's more than a little disconcerting. A bit like talking to a god. And as far as the Alphas are concerned, that's what the Source is.

I start to say something to Lily, but then something else catches my eye. Tal is retrieving a fresh, sterile piercing needle from the satchel by his feet.

"Tal, what is that for?" I ask. "I thought we were finished."

"Our piercings must match," he says simply. "That is the key to the binding ceremony."

"But they do match, Tal. The one in my nose matches Baen's. The one in my nipple matches Canaris's." I can feel that one cool and hard against my back. "And the one in my lip matches yours," I add.

A shadow of a smirk tints Tal's lips. His eyes dip ever so slightly toward where my hand is covering my nakedness.

I follow his gaze. A glint of light catches my eye.

The hard steel piercing through the upper crown of his cock.

“Oh no,” I whisper.

My eyes dart toward Baen crouching on the other side. He is naked too, and I can see the round loop piercing the slit of his urethra.

“No, no...”

Something shifts below my butt. It’s Canaris’s big dick, waking up with a pulse of arousal. I think of the piercing that he has down there too. A studded cross-bar on his underside, through his frenulum—the sensitive V where his head meets his shaft.

I try to struggle away, but Canaris’s arms hug me firmly in place.

“Look,” I stammer. “I don’t know what you are thinking, Tal. You can’t give me a penis-piercing. I don’t even have a penis.”

“But you have a corresponding part.”

Tal gently but firmly moves my hand away, revealing my naked sex.

“You mean my...”

“Yes,” Tal says with a nod. “Your clitoris. The other piercings you’ve received have bound you to each of us individually. This last piercing is required to bind you to us all as a pack.”

A squeal catches in my throat.

I glance over at Lily, hoping for some sisterly support, but I find none. Instead, all she says is, “It’s really not that bad, Hines.”

I swallow hard.

“You mean you...”

“Yup!”

Lily nods and lifts the flap of her loincloth, nonchalantly revealing a tufted triangle of auburn-colored hair and a glint of steel. I gasp.

“I was scared too,” Lily says, “but it only hurts for a second.”

“But...through my...I mean...isn't it too sensitive.?”

“Oh it isn't really through your clit,” Lily says. “Look.”

Totally unabashed, Lily pulls at her own skin, showing me the way that her ring passes through her thin, fleshy hood but not the clitoris itself.

“It really doesn't hurt too much, I promise.” She squats next to me and adds with a whisper, “But later it feels good. Like... *really* good.”

Heat rushes up my neck and into my cheeks.

Lily just smiles, adjusts the baby clinging in her arms, and stands back up with her Alphas.

“We'll, um...give you all some privacy,” she says.

Privacy? Yeah right. I'm in the middle of a giant open room with no clothes on, and I'm sprawled out on top of a naked Alpha like he's a freaking bearskin rug.

I watch Lily and her pack as they walk away, and I can't help but wonder what she was like before she came here to the Zone. Now she seems so confident. So at ease in this strange

and sometimes frightening place. Will I be like that too someday?

And of course, I think about her babies.

There's no doubt I will have some of my own soon.

My three Alphas have been doing everything in their power to see to that.

I turn my attention back to Tal. He is hovering over me with a fresh piercing needle in one hand and a piece of cork in the other. He must see the fear in my eyes, because he starts to purr in that way he knows puts me at ease.

But right now, it's going to take more than that.

"Tal, please," I whisper. "I'm afraid it will hurt."

Canaris has started purring too. The sound rumbles straight up into my body. My very own vibrating bed. Baen joins in the chorus.

I gasp lightly. By some Alpha magic that I don't understand, I feel that triple vibration moving through my body and focusing in different regions. First it seems to be targeting my chest, gently massaging my pounding heart and rapidly breathing lungs. Then it dips lower, sliding into my belly, my intestines.

It moves lower still.

"Oh..." My head falls back onto Canaris's shoulder. "Oh God, that feels..."

The pitch of the purr-vibration rises sharply, unexpectedly, and I experience something like a micro-orgasm in my deep core. My inner walls flutter. Fragrant slick oozes from my hole, spilling onto Canaris's semi-hard cock.

"Fear not, little omega..." Even as he speaks, Canaris's purr continues rolling in his chest, massaging my sensitive places with sound vibrations. "Fear not. I have ways to take your mind off the pain..."

In the span of two seconds, his cock goes from a half-chub to total diamond-hard erectness. The slightly curved length of it presses against my slit, fitting perfectly with the curve of my crotch.

How were we made to fit so perfectly?

I don't speak the question, I merely think it. But somehow Canaris reads my thoughts and answers.

"It is Fate, little one. It is the Will of the Source."

Canaris fucks his pelvis up and down, slow and steady, rubbing the top side of his veined shaft against the slippery groove of my vulva until his penis is well greased with my arousal. Without even using his hands, he skillfully positions his penis tip against my needy hole and thrusts inside.

My pussy swallows him hungrily, greedily, ravenously.

My unconscious cry echoes through the dark temple.

I clap my hand over my mouth to stifle my love noises, but Canaris draws my hand away with a chuckle.

“Let them hear you,” he purrs at my ear. “Let them know how your Alphas care for your needs.”

I have no choice. Even when I try to seal my lips, the desperate moans and whimpers escape through my nose instead.

Canaris fucks me, slow and deep.

His cock is so big. Over the past days of mating, my body has grown more accustomed to him, but it is still a tight fit. With each slow thrust, Canaris pushes deep, until his balls are pressed against my outer lips. Sometimes, instead of thrusting, he stirs his pole inside me, stretching me wider and rubbing places a simple thrust wouldn't get.

“Oh God,” I moan softly. “Canaris, that feels so good. Don't stop...”

“I won't,” he purrs. “I'll never stop.”

His frenulum piercing strokes perfectly across the tender place on my front wall, and before long, I feel that familiar tingle of impending pleasure welling in my deep places. My walls engorge with arousal, hugging even tighter around Canaris's pumping shaft. Warm slick spills from my hole and trickles down my taint and my butt.

There are other people around. Even though it's dark here, even though my Alphas are surrounding me, I know the others can see what Canaris is doing to me.

I should be so ashamed. Maybe I am a little. But the shame just fuels my excitement even more.

My hole is getting fucked and used for all to see.

I bite down hard on a whimper as a new sensation is added to the mix. Baen's thick fingertips are touching my clit, rubbing and grinding it with the same rhythm of Canaris's fucking. Gradually, they speed up the tempo, matching each other beat for beat.

The double attention, inside and out, is unbearable.

My arousal is growing, expanding inside me. Soon it will burst.

My eyes light on Tal. The dark Alpha is still hovering over me, needle and cork held in preparation.

"Okay, boy," he says to Baen. "She's nearly there..."

Baen nods. He leaves off his rubbing and instead pinches the thin cowl of elastic skin that covers my sensitive nub. He plucks it, stretching it out. Tal moves into position, needle on one side, cork on the other.

"Wait," I try to gasp.

But there is no waiting. There is no holding back the intense orgasm that's on its way.

Canaris grips my hips tightly. His hands are like a powerful vice. He holds my pelvis perfectly still as his cock slides in and out of me with wet, slippery sounds.

"I'm going to knot you," he growls. "I'm going to knot your sweet little omega cunt."

My climax is almost here. A hurricane of pleasure bearing down on me. My muscles shudder and twitch in anticipation.

But through it all, my pelvis and my pussy remain statue-still in Canaris's clutches.

Baen holds my skin taut.

Tal is poised with his tools.

"Take it, omega," Canaris's breathes. "Take my knot."

He swells inside me, stretching my walls and plugging my hole. His knot stimulates every inch of tissue inside my rim. His hard cock bucks and pulses. His hot load of cum coats my insides. I can actually feel it splashing against my cervix.

My pussy bears down. My climax explodes. Waves of pleasure ripple and roll through my naked, sweaty body as my muscles clench and release in rhythmic spasms of pleasure.

And at the instant of my orgasm, a sudden sting provides a counterpoint of exquisite pain.

My head cocks forward. I see the sharpened needle stuck through my skin. The tip is buried in the piece of cork.

A second wave of pleasure sweeps over me, and I toss my head back against Canaris's shoulder, mewling and crying with pleasure and pain. Tears roll down my temples, and the Alpha licks them away with his coarse, canine tongue.

The pain disappears much more quickly than the pleasure does.

With his cock knotted tightly, Canaris cannot slide in and out. But every time he spurts inside me, his knot pulses, stimulating every cell, every molecule of my inner walls with gradually diminishing echoes of pleasure. By the time he's empty, and I am full, I can't even feel my fingers or toes anymore.

“Good,” Tal purrs above me. “Now the bond is complete.”

I tilt my chin and gaze down between my legs. A gasp of wonder escapes my lips. Pierced through my clitoral hood is a small steel ring with a chrome ball. It looks amazing. And Lily was right: it feels amazing too.

A ruby bead of blood wells from the piercing hole.

Slowly, reverently, Tal bows his face to my new piercing. He presses his warm, plush lips to my clit and sucks. The steel piercing on his lip clicks deliciously with mine. The combination of hard and soft excites me—smooth, hard steel and soft, supple flesh. Inside his mouth, Tal's tongue tip carefully licks the drop of blood away.

Electric shocks of pleasure tingle outward from my sex-charged clit. My pussy flutters and squeezes even more hot seed from Canaris's pulsating knot. The silvered Alpha groans beneath me as he comes again. We have a little chain reaction of bliss going here.

Once my tiny wound has been thoroughly cleaned and then some, Tal pulls back with a wet smack of his lips.

“Fuck,” he rumbles. “Even your blood tastes good, little thing.”

As if in response, my blood speeds in my veins. I remember the way that he and the others marked me in the mud pit. The way their needle-sharp fangs pierced me then, drawing my blood with excruciating pleasure.

“Do you want more, love?” I whisper up to him. “It’s yours.” I turn to Baen. “It’s all of yours. You own me.”

I can hardly believe the words spilling from my lips. But somehow it feels so right.

These three dominating Alphas are my masters now.

They are my protectors

And soon they will be the fathers of my children.

Tal grins and growls. His tongue licks away a fleck of blood from his lip ring. By some kind of sympathetic response, I feel that lick in my own lip ring too. It’s not imaginary. I really do feel it.

My eyes go wide, and I turn to Baen. The young Alpha is jerking his long, fully hard cock. On each upstroke, his knuckles brush the piercing through his tip, and each time I feel that same touch in my own genital piercing.

Source, it’s like magic.

I squirm with renewed pleasure. My shoulder blade shifts against Canaris’s nipple ring, and I feel that tingle as well in my own nipple.

“We are bound,” I whisper.

Tal and Baen nod and Canaris purrs and rumbles beneath me.

We are bound. We are a pack. Four bodies. One soul.

Unity.

Tal reaches down and presses the pad of his thumb against my over-sensitive clitoris. Just that simple touch nearly makes me come again. I yelp briefly, but I bite the sound short and swallow the rest. Tal starts to rub me in slow circles. Baen, still jerking his hardness, dips his face to my chest and pleasures my erect and pierced nipple.

“What are you guys doing?” I whisper. “We can’t do this here. This is a temple.”

A quick glance around, however, reveals that nobody else here seems to mind. In fact, now that I look closer, I see rhythmic, undulating bodies. Other Alphas mating with their omegas.

“This is the *best* place to do it,” Tal says. “Here in this holy place, the fertilization process is blessed by the Source.”

“You mean you’re going to knock me up in church?” I half giggle.

Tal’s firm palm sweeps over my soft belly and toys with my navel ring.

“We say that an omega is like a Little Source. Your womb is the source of new life. New generations.”

Tal’s cock has grown rigid with desire. His tip is oozing with arousal. He anoints my belly and knotted pussy with drizzles

of sticky precum.

While Baen continues sucking and licking my newly pierced nipple, Tal settles his pelvis between my open thighs. He drags his hard dick across my stretched and knotted hole, brushing against my new clit ring.

All three Alphas close in more snugly around me, enshrining me in the walls of flesh and muscle that are their bodies.

“An omega’s pleasure is a sacred thing,” Tal whispers against my mouth, gently brushing his pierced lips against mine. He kisses me once, then again more deeply. “Now we will worship you, Hines. We will worship you all night long.”

CHAPTER 29: HINES

When I wake up, I'm not even sure what time it is. The Temple of the Source is deep underground, with no windows, so it retains the same dark, warm, cave-like quality around the clock. But a quick look around leads me to believe that it's the wee hours of the morning before sunrise.

I'm basing that guess on the fact that all around the huge, open room, Alphas are sprawled out snoring with their omegas. There are a few soft moans and grunts, however. Somebody must still be up.

My own Alphas are curled protectively around me, forming a nest of bodies. Their bodies are hot as furnaces, and their warm breath swirls and covers me like an invisible blanket.

My mind drifts back to that night, less than a week ago, when I fell asleep in the nest in Tal's apartment, bundled up in his rich, Alpha musk.

God, so much has changed in that time...

The sound of voices conversing drifts across the still air, and I raise my head to peer over Baen's muscular shoulder at the Source. I recognize Lily and Sloane over there. They are talking to Seraph. The AI's holographically-projected face hovers over them, casting a cool, blue-tinted glow across that side of the chamber.

I decide to go see what's going on.

My three Alphas are all dead asleep. They hardly even stir as I stealthily crawl out from between them. Protective as they are, that maneuver would normally wake at least one of them up, if not the whole pack. But tonight we are in the Temple of the Source—the safest place in the entire Quarantine Zone.

I tip-toe until I'm a few paces away, then I walk to the center of the room, carefully stepping my bare feet over the coils and rivers of cables twisting over the cool, hard metal floor.

As I get closer, Lily sees me approaching, and her face brightens a little.

“Hey Hines,” she says with a naughty smile. “What did I tell you? It feels pretty good, right?”

It takes me a second to realize what she's talking about. My piercing. A blush comes into my cheeks.

“Oh leave her alone, Lily,” Sloane says, noticing my embarrassment.

It's funny, I have no real reason to be embarrassed. Yes, I'm totally naked right now, but so are many of the Alphas and omegas in this big room. Lily herself is nearly naked, too, dressed in only a loincloth, and Sloane is the same.

But I still haven't quite gotten used to it, so I decide to deflect the conversation away from me.

“So what are you talking about over here?” I ask.

Lily nods toward Seraph's big holographic face. “I'm trying to get more details about how the Source and the mutation works. But talking to Seraph here is like pulling teeth.”

The AI's artificial face turns toward me, and I freeze.

“Hines, I am glad you have joined us. I have a question for *you*, actually.”

“Wow,” Sloane whispers from where she's standing on the other side of Lily. “I don't think I've ever heard Seraph ask a question before. Usually we're the ones doing all the asking.”

The AI ignores her, or perhaps it simply doesn't hear, and proceeds with its question:

“Shelley Hines, I see many things within the Quarantine Zone. But I do not see all. Even my field of perception has its limitations. However, I do know this...when you ventured into the Zone, your transformation into an omega took an unusually long time to complete. Several days, in fact. Can you tell me, Hines, what was the cause of this inhibition?”

While I've given Lily and Sloane a broad overview of my journey, I haven't given them all the details.

In particular, I've omitted the parts about the medicine.

Even during my time in the city hive, when I was communicating with them via email, I only gave them news about the general goings-on in the city hive. I didn't tell them then that I had stolen some of the cure from SynerGen, and I didn't tell them that I was trying to figure out a way to make more of it. Considering how firmly devoted they had both become to the Zone, I wasn't sure how they would feel about the idea of a so-called cure for their omega condition.

In fact, I no longer look at it as a disease.

I have no desire to be “cured” anymore.

I don't want to change back. This is who I am now.

Still, Seraph has asked me the question, so I may as well go ahead and tell them all. I take a deep breath, thinking of where to start.

Before I can speak, however, a heavy thud vibrates through the room. It sounds like a muffled explosion that rattles and vibrates the floor.

“Shit,” Lily gasps. “Did you feel that?”

I nod, concern mounting behind my chest.

“It sounded like an explosion,” Sloane says. As a former marine, she would know about that kind of thing.

“Are we under attack?” I ask, not even trying to hide the worry in my voice. “Like, are we being bombed?”

“Impossible,” Lily says. “This room is too deep beneath the old SynerGen building. We're completely protected down here.”

“That didn't sound like it came from above anyway,” Sloane says. “It sounds like it came from this level...” Her face drops and her eyes go wide. “Oh shit, the old sewers!”

Before we have a chance to react, another explosion rocks the room.

This time, however, it is not muffled.

Not at all.

A huge fireball erupts from the wall, lighting the temple with a hot orange glow. Even from a distance, the heat that washes over my naked skin is intense. Chunks of ruined metal rain down around us. The fireball billows upward, revealing a gaping, smoking hole in the wall.

“We’re under attack!” Sloane screams over the roar of the explosion.

Half a second later, a flood of bodies comes pouring through the opening. By their twisted, misshapen limbs, I know what they are.

“Farlanders?” Lily gasps. “Here?”

But the fact that a small army of Farlanders has taken it upon themselves to invade the deepest heart of the Zone isn’t even the biggest surprise.

“Oh God,” I whisper. “They’ve got guns...”

CHAPTER 30: HINES

The Farlanders spill into the room, fanning out as they go. Immediately they start shooting. The chamber fills with the flickering strobe of automatic gunfire. The acoustics of the big room amplify the crack-crack-crack of the guns.

“Get down,” Sloane shouts.

We all crouch as bullets whiz and whistle overhead. A few of them ricochet off the walls and off the metallic orb of the source. My chest tightens with panic.

Luckily, however, these Farlanders have about as good an aim as the stormtroopers in *Star Wars*. All of their shots fly wild.

The other Alphas are on their feet and ready for battle. In fact, they all were as soon as the wall exploded. With unnatural agility, they feint and dodge the bullets and charge the attackers, tearing into the first wave with like a tide of fangs and violence.

Within all of three seconds, the Temple of the Source has fallen into utter chaos.

“Hines!”

My heart jolts as a huge pair of arms bundle around me. I’m shoved to the floor. My body is covered by a huge mass of muscle.

“I’ll protect you,” Tal shouts.

I see Canaris and Baen race past as they throw themselves into the fray.

A shot wings Baen's shoulder, drawing a red cut across his skin. I cry out for him, but he is totally unfazed by the wound. He slams his elbow into the throat of the Farlander who fired the shot, collapsing his windpipe.

But the Farlanders keep coming.

A knot of unarmed Farlanders charge toward us. They bear down on Sloane and Lily, who are unprotected.

"No!" I shout. "Tal, help them!"

With a savage roar, Tal throws himself off of me and intercepts the Farlanders. He's outnumbered three to one, but he tears into them like a raging bear.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a small, pale body moving quickly.

Sickorax, the omega witch!

So, these are the same Farlanders who held us captive. I don't know where Abaddon is, but if his witch is here, he can't be far behind.

The witch rushes toward Tal's undefended back. The bone-talon on her index finger is poised to stab him between the shoulders.

"Tal, look out!" I cry.

But he can't hear me over the din of the battle raging in the temple.

I'll have to protect my Alpha on my own.

Leaping to my feet, I sprint across the floor with a speed I didn't even know I possessed, and I launch myself at the witch.

Maybe it's my new omega physiology that allows me to move this way. Or maybe it's the depth of my bond with my Alphas that makes me so protective. Probably it's a combination of the two.

All I know is that I'm not going to let this bitch hurt my man.

I land on her back like a rabid monkey. My arms curl around her neck to choke her. My legs bend around her waist.

"Stay away from him!" I scream. My voice is so wild and feral that it surprises even me.

But the omega witch is no pushover. She answers my cry with a high, keening shriek that makes my skin crawl. The world seems to spin around me. I'm thrown head over heels and land with a crushing impact on my back. Every last molecule of air is forced out of my lungs.

In a flash, the witch is on top of me. Her talon stabs downward toward my face. I catch her wrist just in time to stop the attack. The razor sharp point quivers just inches from my nose.

I don't know how long I can hold her off.

"Die," she hisses between her rotten teeth. "Die..."

My arms burn with exertion from holding her back. Another second, and I won't be able to hold on any longer. That awful

talon will stab straight through my face.

I'm no fighter. I have no training in combat. So I do the only thing I can think of.

I kick the witch as hard as I can, straight in the cunt.

That buys me a couple of seconds at least. The witch lets out a nasty grunt of pain. Her dark, crazy eyes bug out, and her jaw hangs slack. The pressure of her arm with the talon loosens.

And loosens...

And loosens some more.

Her face, which is already chalky white, now takes on a sickly gray-green hue. Her cracked lips mumble incoherently, not even forming real words, just weird mindless sounds. Her black eyes fade to an unhealthy, pearly gray.

Damn, surely I didn't kick her *that* hard...

A muscled arm catches around the witch's throat. Tal's arm. Having dealt with the Farlander males, he has now seen that I'm in trouble, and he is saving me. With a protective roar, he drags the witch off of me.

Strangely, she doesn't even attempt to fight back.

Tal notices this too. Sniffs her.

He lets out a disgusted *pah* sound and flings the witch's limp body aside. She slumps on the floor a few feet away, glaucous eyes rolling back in her skull, skin blooming with diseased veins, mouth edged with drool.

“A beta?” Sloane gasps. “They brought betas with them? Why?”

I shake my head while Tal helps me to my feet, shielding my body from the gunfire.

“She wasn’t a beta a minute ago!” I shout. “She just changed!”

“Look,” Lily shouts next.

Tal and I both turn in the direction she is facing, and our jaws fall open together. The crackle of gunfire has lessened to a few intermittent pops scattered here and there. One by one, the swarming Farlanders are changing. Their skin is growing pale and sickly. Eyes turning dull and milky. Movements become jerky and uncoordinated.

“They’re *all* turning into betas,” I breathe. “But how...”

The answer hits me as soon as I have gotten the words out. Lily and Sloane have the same idea too. We all turn toward the Source where the spectral face of Seraph is hovering, gazing with an eerie placidity over the scene of carnage.

Of course. Seraph controls the mutations in the Zone. Normally he dispenses the mutations in a more or less random fashion, but in my case he made an exception, guaranteeing that I would become an omega.

Now he’s doing the opposite to these Farlanders.

Seraph senses that the Source is under threat. So he is removing that threat by changing the attackers into harmless betas.

Before I have a chance to really contemplate this, a voice bellows from behind.

We all whirl around again, and this time we see Abaddon stepping through the smoking black portal torn in the chamber's wall. I also realize now how that hole was made.

Abaddon is carrying on his shoulder a four shot bazooka. And he has it aimed directly at the Source.

We've heard two explosions already. That means he has two shots left.

My chest tightens in panic. The Source provides the energy field for the Alphas and omegas to live. If it is damaged or destroyed, there's no telling what would happen to everyone in the Zone, but I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be good.

Abaddon's finger is on the trigger, ready to squeeze.

I try to scream, but my fear-constricted throat won't let me.

But Abaddon doesn't shoot. Not yet.

"Hear me, Alphas!" he cries, his voice filling the chamber, even over the sound of fighting. "I am Abaddon the Destroyer. Know me and know that it is I who encompasses your d—"

He chokes on the last word. His baleful eyes widen with surprise. His body jerks. His scarred flesh pales.

"No," he gasps. "No..."

His arrogant speech provided just enough time for Seraph to work his changes in the attacker. Abaddon is changing into a beta like the rest of his Farlander followers.

But the change is taking longer than the others. Through sheer tyranny of will, Abaddon is resisting the change, or at least staving it off until his task is done. His face shifts from surprise to hateful determination.

He squeezes the trigger.

At the last second, an Alpha springs out of the crowd. It is Baen. The young Alpha drives his shoulder into Abaddon with the force of a full-speed truck. Abaddon's body crumples under the blow.

The bazooka swings upward, and the explosive shoots harmlessly into the ceiling, raining down cinders and broken metal.

The Source is unharmed.

Even though my body is still buzzing with adrenaline, a cool wash of relief sluices down my spine. The Farlanders have all been defeated. The Source has been saved, for now.

But there's something I can't figure out, and only Abaddon would know the answer.

I rush forward to where he fell.

"Hines, wait!" Tal shouts.

My Alpha tries to snatch me back, but I move too fast. With a few quick, sprinting strides, I reach Abaddon. A second later, I feel Tal's hands on my shoulders, keeping me from getting too close. Baen rises from where he fell, brushing the dust and cinders from his skin. Canaris appears on the other side of me,

his body splattered with blood that is not his own. His eyes are glaring white amid the red stain.

Abaddon's body is a crumpled mess. His arm is dislocated and turned the wrong way. The crooked angle of his torso makes it clear that his back is broken. His burn-scarred face is still midway between Alpha and beta.

His jaw opens and closes noiselessly a few times before his words finally emerge.

"Kill me," he rasps. "Please, it hurts so bad..."

Canaris is eager to oblige him, but I stop him with my hand on his arm.

Abaddon is going to die soon. Or at least he will succumb to the beta transformation. First, I need to question him.

"Abaddon, where did you get these weapons?" I ask.

The broken Alpha coughs blood. His face forms an expression that is half a bitter grin and half a painful wince.

"Outsiders," he struggles to say. "The Outsiders gave..."

"Why?" My voice is frantic. "They wanted you to destroy the Source?"

Abaddon shakes his head and chuckles. "No...no...*that* was my idea."

"Then what did they want?"

"You," he exhales. "They wanted me to...capture...*you*... omega..."

A chill prickles the back of my neck.

The beta mutation is progressing. Black veins are creeping up his neck and face like morbid veins. His eyes are growing duller and paler by the moment.

“Please...kill me...hurts...so bad.”

Before, I thought that Abaddon meant his injuries. But this time the tears in his voice tell me what he really means.

He’s referring to the wound left on his heart by the death of his mate. His old wound that never healed. Now that I have been bound to a pack, I have some inkling of what his loss must mean to him. To my surprise, my heart pangs with the last emotion I would have ever expected to feel for the monstrous Alpha.

Pity.

With a lump forming in my throat, and the dull ache of tears behind my eyeballs, I nod to Canaris.

The silvered Alpha steps forward and puts his father’s killer out of his misery.

He makes it quick.

For a long time, silence reigns within the chamber. Altogether, the thwarted attack on the Source was over before it began. Everything from the first explosion to the last happened in the course of one minute, though it felt like an eternity.

Lily and Sloane’s Alphas come rushing up, relieved to find their mates unharmed. One of Lily’s Alphas—the one named Addom, the leader of the tribe—sets to work organizing the efforts to help the injured.

Fortunately, the Farlanders lack of skill with their newly acquired weapons means that none of our tribe was killed, though some were injured. These wounded will be cared for here in the temple, where the healing power of the Source is strongest.

While the Alphas set to work, Lily appears at my side.

“Hines,” she says, touching my arm lightly. “Abaddon said that the Outsiders sent him?”

I nod. “That’s right. It must have been government forces. The same people who tried to catch me in the city hive. The ones Tal rescued me from.”

Lily thinks for a moment.

“They couldn’t follow you here to the center of the Zone, so they hired these Farlanders instead? But why would they go to such lengths to capture you, Hines? I knew you were in danger while you were still in the city. But I never expected *this*...

She sweeps her hand over the carnage and the mass of dead betas who were, until a few minutes ago, rabid Farlanders.

“It’s the medicine,” I say in a hushed voice. “The cure.”

“The cure?”

“Yes. That’s what I was going to tell you before this happened...”

I take a deep breath. The air is still scented with smoke and blood from the attack, but I let the oxygen stream in and out of my lungs, easing my frazzled nerves. Then I start to explain.

“One of the projects that I had been working on at SynerGen was a drug that would counteract the contamination of the Quarantine Zone. It would allow Outsiders to travel into the Zone without being mutated. I thought this could be a way to finally bring about peace between the Outside and the Zone. But I soon realized I was wrong. SynerGen and the government only saw it as a means to conquer the Zone and force the Alphas into submission.”

Lily’s eyes grow wide as I speak.

“Could this drug turn Alphas and omegas back into, you know, normal people too?”

“Possibly. But it was never perfected, and the quantities were still small. When I escaped from SynerGen six months ago, I took the only bottle of the medicine with me. And all of the data about the ingredients was stored on my computer and nowhere else.”

“So that’s why the government wanted to get to you so badly,” Lily says. “But why did you hang on to the medicine?”

I shrug. “While I was in hiding, I kept working on it. I guess I still held onto the belief that it could be used for good—you know, to open the door for diplomatic relations between the Outsiders and the Alphas...”

I look across the chamber where my pack is helping to care for the wounded. They are doubly lit by the pale blue glow of Seraph’s hovering face and the warm, flickering orange of the leftover flames that have not been extinguished yet. As they work, Tal’s gaze catches mine briefly. My piercings throb with

the connection, the bond, that I now share with him and the others.

“And maybe it was something else, too,” I say. “A premonition. A feeling that I might have to flee to the Zone someday. I was afraid of what might happen.”

I turn toward Lily again.

“But that’s all over now,” I say. “The pills are gone.”

“What about the data?” She asks. “The recipe?”

“Erased,” I tell her. “Tal destroyed the only computer that still had that information on it. That’s why the government hired Abaddon and his followers to capture me alive.”

I tap my temple with my index finger.

“The only place the recipe is stored now is up here.”

No sooner have I spoken the words than a queasy, liquid feeling grips my guts. I double over with a gasp. Despite the usual warmth of this chamber, my skin grows cold. The color seems to drain from my vision as the world becomes shades of gray.

“Hines!” I hear Lily shout. Though she is right next to me, her voice sounds distant, like an echo at the far end of a long tunnel.

I raise my eyes to look at her, and her face tightens into a mask of shock and horror.

“Oh God,” she whispers. “Oh no...”

I look down at my hands and arms, and that's when I realize what is happening. The dark veins tracing from my elbows up to my wrists are a dead giveaway.

I'm turning into a beta.

CHAPTER 31: TALIESIN

A shrill cry cuts through the chamber like a blade.

At first I think it must be one of the injured. A poor omega crying out in pain. As I turn in the direction of the shout, however, I realize that it is our leader Addom's omega, the one named Lily, and she is screaming at Seraph.

Then I drop my eyes to the ground by her feet, and the blood seems to drain from my body, leaving me cold.

It's Hines. Something is wrong with Hines.

Something is wrong with my mate.

She is balled up on the floor shivering, and her skin looks deathly pale. I rush toward her immediately while my heart punches my breastbone like it is trying to slam its way out of my chest.

"Stop it!" Lily shouts up at Seraph's massive, glowing face.

"Seraph, you promised."

"What's happening?" I ask, not even trying to mask the terror in my voice.

I cannot lose Hines. She is everything. She is my life.

Dropping to my knees beside her, I gather her shivering body in my arms. Her eyes look dull and half-blind.

"Tal," she whispers weakly.

"Seraph is turning her into a beta!" Lily cries above me.

Others have rushed over now. Sloane is there. So is my new pack brother, Baen. I sense his presence behind me, every bit as terrified as I am.

“Why?” I choke.

Seraph answers in a voice that is cold and emotionless.

“The one known as Hines represents a threat.”

“Stop it,” Lily cries again. “Seraph, we had a deal. You promised that you would not let Hines become a beta if she came into the Zone.”

“That agreement was made based on incomplete information.” Seraph’s voice remains cool and level. It seems to separate out into a multitude of voices, then re-join into one as he speaks.

“I did not realize the dangerous knowledge that Hines was carrying in her mind. She knows how to make a cure. This is unacceptable. It could ruin everything I have created. I will not allow that.”

An even deeper fear seizes my heart. I don’t understand what Seraph is talking about. Something about Hines’s pills. But I can’t focus. I’m too worried about my omega. She is fading away in my arms.

I feel powerless.

“Turn her back,” Lily cries, “Seraph, you can’t do this!”

“I can and I must,” Seraph says. “Hines must be silenced, for the good of the Zone.”

The roar that erupts through the stillness of the Temple is so loud, so unexpected, that it raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

“Turn her back NOW!”

It is Canaris. He has picked up the Outsider weapon that Abaddon dropped. He is imitating the way that he saw Abaddon using it. He is now aiming it at Seraph and the Source.

“What are you doing, Alpha?” Seraph asks in his usual placid voice.

“Turn her back to an omega,” Canaris snarls. “Turn her back or I swear I will destroy the Source. I don’t care if it wipes out the whole damn Zone.”

And it’s clear from the look in his eyes that he isn’t bluffing.

“You will do no such thing, Alpha.”

Canaris chokes. His feet stagger. The same sickly pallor that has overtaken Hines now overtakes him as well. The weapon starts to tumble from his hand.

I rush forward, catch it, and aim it at the Source.

“Turn them both back!” I roar.

“You as well?” Seraph says, with just the faintest hint of annoyance in his voice.

My heart is pounding. My blood speeds in my veins and the rush of it fills my ears until it’s almost deafening. The Source is like a god to me and my people. It is the Source of all life

within the Zone. And Seraph is its messenger. What I'm doing now—and what Canaris did a moment ago—is an unforgiveable heresy.

We are threatening to destroy our own god.

But I would go to any length to save my omega. I would condemn my soul to hell for the rest of eternity. She is that important to me. She is more important than anything else.

More important than the tribe.

Than the Zone.

Than the Source.

I keep my eyes focused on my target, but at the same time I sense Baen approaching behind me. I know, from our bond as pack brothers, why he is there. Should I start to change into a beta, should I drop this weapon, he will take it up after me.

“I'm serious,” I growl. “If I feel even the slightest twinge that you are turning me into a beta, I will pull this trigger. Look into my eyes and tell me that you don't believe me...”

“I don't need to look into your eyes,” Seraph says. “I believe you.”

“Good. Then you have until the count of three until—“

“That won't be necessary,” Seraph answers calmly. “Answer me this Alpha: to what lengths would you go to save your omega? Would you die for her?”

“I would die. I would kill. I would burn the world if I had to.”

Seraph pauses for a beat, and then he responds, “Very well.”

CHAPTER 32: HINES

It sounds like someone is arguing, but their voices are distant and muted. I can't tell what they are saying. My head throbs with a dull, grinding ache, and my insides feel all twisted up and gross.

But the nauseating tightness in my abdomen loosens up.

By slow degrees, the world comes back into focus. The sounds become clear again. The room becomes bright—or at least as bright as is possible in the dimness of the Temple of the Source.

Lily is leaning over me, her face close to mine. At first she still looks like a black-and-white photograph. Then, slowly but surely, the color returns. The pink of her cheeks and the deeper red of her lips. Her auburn hair.

Her mouth widens into a big grin.

“Hines!” Her clear shout is almost painful after the soft, muted sounds I’ve been experiencing. “Oh thank goodness you’re okay.” She turns. “Guys, come quick! Hines is better! Look...”

I turn my lolling head in the direction she is looking. The low angle tells me that I’m lying on the floor. That in and of itself is weird enough. But even more shocking is the fact that Tal is holding a bazooka, and he’s aiming it right at the giant orb of the Source and Seraph’s blue, holographic face.

Without moving the weapon, Tal tilts his head and looks toward me. His intensely blue eyes brighten with happiness when he sees me.

Suddenly, the events of the past few minutes come flooding back. The attack. The way that Seraph changed the Farlanders. Abaddon's last words.

And finally, me turning into a beta.

My skin crawls and I shiver at the thought of what I became, if only briefly. I look down at my arms and find that the color has returned. The dark veins have disappeared.

I look back at Tal, still pointing the weapon at the Source.

Now I understand what happened. When I said that I knew the recipe for the medicine, the so-called cure for the mutation, Seraph saw me as a threat. From his perspective, the mutation wrought by the Source has brought balance to the Zone by creating Alphas and omegas. A cure could throw all of that out of whack. Seraph wanted to get rid of me by the only means in his power—by transforming me into a beta.

But Tal wasn't going to allow that. He threatened to blow up the Source unless Seraph turned me back.

I notice that Canaris is on the ground by Tal's feet. His skin is also pale and veined like a beta's, but gradually that disappears and he returns to his old Alpha self again.

"Canaris is the one who started it," Lily whispers to me. "He threatened to blow up the Source for you. When Seraph turned

him into a beta too, Tal took the bazooka and did the same thing.”

Next I notice Baen standing right behind Tal. The younger Alpha is supporting his pack leader. If the same thing that happened to Canaris had happened to Tal, Baen would be there to follow suit I think. Now that the threat has passed, Baen turns his attention to Canaris, helping his recovering pack brother to his feet again.

My heart pangs with a feeling of pure love as I realize the price my Alphas were willing to pay to save me.

But Tal still hasn't lowered his weapon.

“It is no trick, Alpha,” Seraph says to Tal. “You may put the weapon down now.”

After a moment's hesitation, Tal slowly stoops and places the weapon on the floor. The gathered Alphas and omegas breathe a collective sigh of relief as the moment of tension passes.

Then my Alphas are running toward me, helping me to my feet, each one embracing me in turn, then all three of them at once, caging me in with their massive, Alpha bodies. I feel tears springing to my eyes again as I enjoy the warmth of their triple hug.

When they finally let me go, I realize that a large figure has approached.

It is Addom, Lily's mate and the leader of the tribe.

Slowly, solemnly, Canaris steps toward him and bows his head.

“I am sorry,” Canaris says quietly. “I have committed a great blasphemy. I have threatened the Source, and I have endangered the entire tribe. I willingly submit to whatever punishment is required.”

Tal joins him, placing his dark-complexioned hand on Canaris’s scarred shoulder.

“I have done the same. Whatever punishment you choose to bestow upon Canaris, I will share it.”

“Me too,” says Baen simply.

Addom looks at the three Alphas in turn with a stern brow. A tense silence gathers.

Then a bright smile splits his face.

“Nonsense!” Addom says.

The tribal leader strides forward, placing his hands on Canaris’s shoulders, next to Tal’s and Baen’s

“What you have done is no blasphemy,” says Addom, “In all the Zone, nothing is more sacred than an Alpha’s love for his omega. And an Alpha’s duty to protect his mate and his children must be placed above all things. This is the cornerstone upon which our society is built.”

Addom turns toward Seraph.

“Is it not so, Seraph?”

The big image of Seraph’s face nods placidly.

“It is so.”

Now it’s my turn to step forward, as I feel compelled to speak.

“Seraph, listen,” I say. “Even though I know the recipe to the so-called cure, I will never make it. I don’t even want to anymore.” I turn toward my guys, my Alphas. “I’m an omega now. The Zone is my home. Nothing can change that. I promise.”

All three of my Alphas beam with love and pride at this statement. They close in around me again, and I nestle into their bodies.

“I believe you,” Seraph says. “And I am moved by your Alphas’ display of love and protectiveness toward you.”

Moved? I didn’t realize Seraph had emotions.

“So I will make a promise to you as well,” the AI goes on. “A covenant. Although I doubt that it will ever be necessary, I shall add my protection to that of your Alpha pack. As long as you live, Hines, I too will do my part to make sure that no harm comes to you. You and your Alphas exemplify the spirit of the Zone and the Source. Therefore, I shall ensure that you have many descendents, and your genetic line shall be strong.”

“Um...thanks?” I stammer stupidly, not knowing what else to say.

“Look that’s all well and good,” Lily says from the sidelines. She is still obviously pissed about what Seraph tried to do to me before. “But how are we going to be able to trust you after this, Seraph?”

“Your concern is understandable,” Seraph answers her. His artificial eyes seem to defocus for a second, then they come

back. “Therefore, I have sealed our covenant with a sign.”

“A sign?” I ask. “What do you mean? What kind of sign?”

“It will be revealed in two hundred and seventy days. Now, if you will excuse me, I have many things to meditate upon.”

The floating face wavers like a bad video transmission and then flickers out, leaving the massive chamber of the Temple even darker than before.

“Wait!” Lily shouts, but Seraph is already gone. She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “Sorry, he has a bad habit of disappearing like that.”

“I still don’t see how we can trust Seraph after what he did to Hines,” Sloane says.

“I do,” I say softly.

“You do?”

“I don’t know why exactly, I just...I sense that he was telling the truth.”

I lean back into Tal’s embrace. With Canaris and Baen flanking me on both sides, I feel so warm and protected now. I really do have faith that nothing bad will happen anymore. I press back against Tal even harder, and I can feel his heart thumping against my shoulders. It is thumping in perfect harmony with mine.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Canaris says, stroking my arm so tenderly with a hand that just minutes before killed many enemies.

“But what was that last thing Seraph said?” asks Baen. “Two hundred and seventy days? That would be about...”

He attempts to work it out on his fingers, loses track, starts again.

When the realization comes to me, it comes as a soft tickle in my belly.

“Nine months,” I breathe. “It’s about nine months.”

EPILOGUE: HINES

nine months later...

Another contraction pangs inside me. My belly tightens and pain radiates through my pelvis. My ragged cry of pain reverberates through the Temple of the Source.

There was a time when I would have been mortified to shout so loudly in this place.

Now is not such a time, however.

The temple is different from how it was the first time I saw it. The light is still dim, and the windowless, domed ceiling still swoops high overhead, giving the impression of a high-tech, man-made cave. And of course, the center of the chamber is still dominated by the enormous sphere of the Source. Even now, I can feel its power humming in my bones, in my muscles, in my swollen womb.

But there are differences too. Signs still remain of the swift and sudden battle that happened here months ago. The wall where the Farlander army invaded has been patched and reinforced with pieces of metal and stone gathered from all over the ruins. There is also a mismatched section of the ceiling—a reminder of the stray missile that Baen deflected at the last minute.

Yes, the temple has been changed. You could even say that it has been scarred. But the essence of the place remains the

same.

I have changed too.

The most noticeable difference is my belly, which Lily is intently listening to with a stethoscope.

Over the past nine months, my belly has grown and grown, becoming like a ripe watermelon, then a fully inflated beach ball, and finally...this seemingly impossible rotundity that is weighing me down against the birthing nest my Alphas have arranged for me here in the presence of the Source.

That navel ring was supposed to make me extra fertile. It sure seems like it worked.

Though I'm a little ashamed to say it, when I first started showing signs of pregnancy, I was concerned that my three guys might become less attracted to me.

But in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth.

The only noticeable difference was the roughness of their lovemaking. Over the past months, they have gradually toned that down, probably out of an instinct to protect the litter of babies who have taken up residence in my expansive womb. But while my Alphas have curbed the raw animal violence of their mating, they have more than made up for it in terms of frequency. It's as if the signs of my fertility—my rounded belly and my matching breasts—have only served to make them even hornier than before. I never would have thought it possible, but it is.

And on top of that, whenever we have ventured out into public, the three of them have positively beamed with pride, eager to show off my fertility to every single member of the tribe as I have waddled along in their midst.

But my waddling days are over.

The time has finally come.

My Alphas are around me, supporting me as always. Tal is positioned behind me. For several hours, he's been firmly rubbing the tense knots out of my lower back. Now that I'm in labor, he is acting like a kind of recliner for my upper body, which is leaned back into his lap inside the nest. He is stroking my sweat-beaded forehead in an oddly soothing way. Baen and Canaris are on either side of me, offering me their hands, which I am doing my level best to pulverize in my crushing grip each time another shooting contraction racks my body.

Outwardly, the three of them are calm, supportive, strong. My dependable, steadfast Alpha mates. But our bond is stronger now, and they cannot conceal their emotions from me. They are worried sick about me, I can tell. It hurts them to see their omega in pain.

But somehow, I know everything will be alright.

With my Alphas by my side, how could it not be?

And I remember Seraph's promise that no harm would come to me.

It's not going to be easy, though. I steel my nerves in preparation for the painful experience that I know is coming.

Another, even more severe contraction cramps my insides and pain scorches through my body.

“Urgh!”

An animal sound, half scream, half grunt, rattles out of my throat. The contractions are coming now in rapid succession, with hardly any break between. The babies seem to have shifted inside me.

It’s been a full twenty-four hours since the contractions started.

About half that since my water broke.

Now, a sudden heavy feeling inside my lower abdomen tells me that the moment is finally here. It feels like my cervix is fully dilated now, and the first baby has begun dropping through. It is starting to shove through my birth canal.

Lily’s head, which has been concealed behind the pink hill of my huge belly, now pops back into view.

“The first one is coming,” she says.

I nod that I understand. More contractions hit me, but now they feel slightly diminished. The pressure of the emerging baby is intense. The muscles of my pelvic floor ache and cramp with exertion. The instinctive urge to push is overwhelming.

“You’re doing great,” she says. *“Just keep pushing and remember to breathe.”*

She disappears again behind the curve of my tummy.

“You’re doing great,” Tal repeats.

His upper body is curved over me, and for a moment, I look up into his upside-down face. Then more contractions strike, I wince my eyes shut, and I push, using the breathing techniques that I’ve been practicing for the past few months.

I feel the solid lump of the baby moving lower.

“Oh fuck!” I scream.

“The baby is crowning!” Lily’s voice sounds distant, even though she’s right down between my legs.

My opening stretches as the baby emerges from my body. I grunt through my teeth like a wounded animal. Hot tears of pain leak from my eyes and stream down my burning cheeks.

“Breathe,” Tal purrs above me. “Breathe...”

“I am fucking breathing!” I snap viciously.

Tal is unfazed by my outburst. His rolling purr continues, along with his two pack-brothers, Baen and Canaris.

“You’re almost there,” Lily shouts. “Push, Hines, push...”

I want to scream that I’m doing that too. It’s not like I really have any choice in the matter. The instinctual urge to get this baby out of me has taken control of my body. But I know Lily is helping me, so instead of yelling, I suck all my anger and pain up inside me, twist my grip on my Alphas’ hands, and bear down with everything I’ve got.

The baby is coming. Inching out of me. The round bulk starts to slide out of my hole. I scream and ride out the immense

pain and pressure.

“Again!” Lily cries. “Keep pushing, Hines, keep pushing!”

My body quakes, and tears pour down my face. I puff in a few quick but deep breaths, and then I push with all my might to expel the baby.

Suddenly there is a sense of relief as the baby slides all the way out.

“The first one’s out!” Lily shouts.

I open my eyes. All three of my Alphas are craning their necks to see. After a moment, Lily raises a little squirming baby, body smudged with white, buttery substance, tiny features squinted against the strange new world he has emerged into.

He.

“It’s a boy!” Baen shouts excitedly.

Not only is the baby a boy, but he looks like a chubby, miniature version of Baen himself. My heart glows with immediate love for my son. I start to cry with happiness and love.

But the need to push comes again, and I do so, this time expelling the placenta.

Lily has explained to me that while babies in the Zone are always born in litters of three or more, there are not many identical twins. Most are of the fraternal variety, meaning each baby has their own placenta and amniotic sac.

My son, my firstborn, opens his tiny mouth and lets out a croaky cry of displeasure at being evicted from his warm home of the past nine months. That sound brings a smile to my face.

He is alive and healthy.

And loud. By the Source, he's loud.

That's a good sign. It means he's strong. A strong little Alpha baby boy.

Moving with incredible care, Lily shifts the newborn to a pad of clean cloth. She asks for help. Immediately, Canaris moves over there and helps Sloane, who was also nearby, to cut the umbilical cord and clean the baby.

But my happiness is fleeting.

That's just one baby down.

I've got *at least* two more to go.

The fact of the matter is that I don't know for certain how many babies are in my belly. We don't have ultrasound and all the other high-tech gadgets available on the outside. But I'll be finding out soon enough, I guess.

One thing is for certain, however: the baby who is second in line is more than eager to follow his or her older brother into the world. I can already feel the next baby dropping heavily into my strained birth canal.

This baby feels even bigger.

“You’re doing amazing,” Baen says beside me, giving my hand a firm but gentle squeeze.

The squeeze that I give him in return, however, is anything but gentle. Spasms of pain and pressure rip through my belly and core. I grunt and ride it out, then panting with exhaustion, I bear down hard again.

Push, breathe, push...

“Good,” Lily shouts from between my legs. “Keep pushing! Keep pushing!”

The second baby is both easier and more difficult than the first. Easier in the sense that I’ve done it once, so I know what to expect now. More difficult in the sense that this baby is definitely the bigger of the two. As the baby breaches my opening, the pressure is frighteningly intense. I feel like I’m being split in two. My shrieks fill the hollow space of the temple.

“I can see his head!” Lily calls. “Keep pushing! Don’t stop!”

Source, the baby is only crowning? From the way I was stretched, I could have sworn this one was halfway out by now. This is going to be worse than I thought.

I huff several quick, deep breaths, then I clench down and push with all of my might.

The baby moves.

I breathe and push, repeating the process over and over again. The pain is overwhelming. My Alphas are still purring. I focus

my attention on that sound, on the feeling of that vibration in my muscles and bones.

Breathe, push. Breathe, push.

Ever so slowly, the baby emerges into Lily's waiting hands.

"It's another boy!"

I gasp with momentary relief and tilt my head to look at my second baby. Though he felt about twice as big as his brother, in reality he's only slightly larger. He is a perfect, healthy baby too, but with one surprising detail—plastered to his head is a little wet tuft of silver-gray down.

This baby is clearly Canaris's child.

Despite my pain and exhaustion, my mind goes back to a term that Lily told me during my pregnancy:

heteropaternal superfecundation.

Yeah, it's a mouthful. Superfecundation means lots of babies at once. Twins, triplets, that kind of thing. Heteropaternal means different daddies. As strange as it sounds, it's a thing that actually happens occasionally on the outside. In the Zone, however, it's pretty much the standard.

The two babies I've just given birth to are twins, but they are also technically half-brothers, coming from two different daddies—the first from Baen and the second from Canaris.

But the Alphas are not treating them as half-siblings.

This time, it is Baen who goes to aid with the cleaning of the second little boy while Canaris returns to my side to support

me through part three of this birth. The way that they are helping shows me that they don't care who each baby's specific daddy is. As far as my Alphas are concerned, they all share responsibility for the entire litter. They will love, protect, and care for each child equally.

That fact touches my heart, and more happy tears well up in my eyes.

But I only have a few seconds to enjoy this happy moment before baby number three starts to come.

The third baby is smaller and easier than the first two, as well as the noisiest.

“A girl!” Lily chirps excitedly as the baby is born. “An omega!”

My heart trills. I knew that omegas were much rarer than Alphas—I mean, just one look around at the packs in the Zone would make that obvious. So, even though I knew the odds were unlikely, I was really hoping to have an omega in the mix. And that wish has come true.

Now I'm starting to think that there really is something to that magic navel ring.

This third child is precious and beautiful. She has a dark complexion and a fine sprinkling of jet black hair across her round little head. And I just know that when she finally opens her pretty eyes, they are going to be glacier blue, just like her daddy's. Just like Tal's.

A drop of moisture plops down on me from above. My first thought is that it is sweat. But when I glance up at Tal's face, I see that a single tear has traced a line down his cheek.

The normally stoic Alpha is crying with joy.

"The Source has truly blessed us," he says in a choked voice.

"Go to her," I whisper.

At first, Tal is reluctant to release his hold on me from behind. But Sloane is now looking after the first two babies, and Baen has returned to help support me, freeing up Tal to go help with the care of his newborn daughter.

My body trembles, and a final squeeze pushes the omega's placenta out.

I breathe a sigh of relief in Baen's and Canaris's arms.

It's over. I've done it. We've done it.

And yet...

I cock my head forward again and look at my belly, which is noticeably smaller, but still distended quite a bit. I know that a new mommy's postpartum belly still sticks around for a while. This feels different though. I don't feel the same lightness or emptiness I was expecting. There's still a lot of pressure in there. Is it supposed to feel like this?

Something jerks inside me.

I wince as the primal need to push surges through my midsection again.

Lily leans over me. She palpates my belly. She presses her stethoscope to my tummy, listens, shifts position, listens again.

“There’s one more...”

As soon as she says those words, an extremely rough contraction racks my body. I groan with pain. I feel half-dead from exertion. My body is greasy with sweat and my bones feel like jelly.

“There’s one more!” Lily cries out.

Immediately, my belly and core squeeze and convulse all on their own, pushing even without me doing it on purpose. Fat drops of sweat roll down my face. My insides burn like they are on fire. Baen and Canaris are saying something, but I can’t focus now. All I can do is breath and push.

I feel the baby easing lower. The head is almost there.

“It’s coming!” Lily shouts in front of me. “The head’s coming out! It—”

Her voice cuts off mid-sentence. It’s hard to see through the tears and the sweat, but Lily’s auburn eyebrows seem to jump with surprise.

A chill of concern washes over me. I try to speak, but my throat is too tight.

Canaris asks the question for me. “What’s wrong?”

Lily shakes her head, drags her hand across her own sweating brow.

“Nothing,” she murmurs. “Nothing’s wrong, it’s just...” And then, with her voice regaining its strength and determination, she says, “Come on, Hines. You’re almost there. Just one more push!”

I suck in a deep breath, drop my chin onto my sweat-slick chest, and push as hard as I fucking can.

“Urrgghh!”

My grunt of exertion transitions into something like a roar as I shove the final baby out of me. I feel its tiny body exit mine. The pressure dissipates. The relief, the blessed feeling of emptiness sweeps over me.

One more seemingly insignificant push, and the placenta is out. Then I just lie, weak and trembling. All I can do is pant and cry from the pain and the effort.

Then another tiny voice matches mine, crying along with me.

“Hines,” Baen says beside me. “Hines, look...”

I open my eyes and look at the baby that Hines his lifting up.

He is another Alpha, perfect and strong and healthy. His pudgy little arms squirm and his legs kick as he cries loudly. But now I see why Lily was so surprised.

The baby is a pure, stark white. The color of freshly fallen snow.

This is Seraph’s sign.

* * *

A few hours later, the babies and I have been thoroughly cleaned, and we are now resting inside the nursing nest that the Alphas have built for us. Three of the babies are sleeping beside me, and the fourth, the little boy with the marble-white skin is nursing from my breast. He has latched easily, his little lips and gums sucking and tugging at my nipple as the milk flows out of me. My three Alphas are gathered around us, reclining around the side of the nest made of blankets and moss and rushes. Baen is carefully inspecting the omega baby, his face filled with wonder and love.

“Did you look at Azura’s nose?” he whispers to no one in particular. “It’s the tiniest little nose I’ve ever seen. How can something be so tiny?”

I stifle a laugh to keep from waking the little sleepers. Baen has been doing this for the past couple minutes, commenting with an almost reverent awe about the tininess of the babies’ fingers, their toes, their toenails, and the delicate little follicles forming perfect whorls on the tops of their perfect heads.

He’s right, of course. It’s almost impossible to believe anything could be so small and precious as they are. And it’s even harder to believe that they came from inside of me.

They are mine.

They are *ours*.

Less than a year ago, the Zone seemed so far away. As distant as a dream. Maybe even a nightmare. Just the very idea of the place frightened me. And the city hive where I was living was

not much better. I was living my life in fear, constantly looking over my shoulder for the attack I sensed was coming.

Now everything has changed. The Zone is my home now. And I don't have to look over my shoulder anymore. Not when I have three protective Alphas watching my back.

And the Alphas have changed too. They have managed to set their jealous rivalries aside and work together as a team, as a pack. I can tell that the birth of our first litter will only strengthen their resolve and their protectiveness.

Fortunately, protection has not been necessary these past months.

There have been no more attacks on the central ruins. The leaders of the tribe considered the possibility that the Outsider government might try to hire more Farlanders to invade, but it seems unlikely now. Abaddon's tribe was a special case, more organized than a normal Farlander tribe because of their leader.

The Outsider government had one chance, and it failed.

Still, the Alphas remain vigilant to ensure the security of our home.

And as far as my deal with Seraph, we have both held up our ends of the bargain. I have no intentions to make more of the so-called cure. And Seraph has not allowed any harm to come to me.

Now the symbol of our covenant is nursing at my breast.

The nameless Alpha baby with the chalk-white skin.

His siblings have all been named. The firstborn, the one with Baen's genes, is named Ash. His silver-haired brother, the biggest of the litter, is Abram, named after his grandfather. The dark omega baby is Azura, a lovely name that Tal suggested.

Only the fair child remains nameless.

"What will we call him?" I ask Tal, who is smiling down at his nursing son.

Tal thinks for a moment.

"This one is special," he says. "Someday, he will be a great warrior. He will endure many hardships, but he will bring peace between the people of the Zone and the world beyond the Quarantine Wall. We will call him Aleph."

I'm not sure how Tal knows all that, but his voice carries a tone of conviction.

"Aleph," I whisper, stroking the nursing baby's chubby cheek. "I like that."

I love Aleph. I love all of my babies. And I love my Alphas too.

Tal said that Aleph would endure many hardships. I wish that wasn't true, but then again, we all face hardships in our lives. It's how we grow. It's how we become stronger.

For now, however, I will not worry about the future. For now, I will enjoy this happy time with my Alphas and the precious babies they have given me.

We are a family now.

We are a pack.



BOOK 4:
STRAY OMEGA

CHAPTER 1: PROLOGUE

The Quarantine Zone. Approximately ten thousand square miles of wilderness and ruined cities left over from the time before the Great Cataclysm.

The inhabitants of the Zone are mutants. Dominant alphas who are larger, stronger, faster and more resilient than ordinary humans. Betas, who are little more than mindless, empty husks. And of course the omegas, the rarest and most precious of all.

Over a hundred years ago, the Outsiders constructed a wall around the Zone. The Quarantine Wall. A towering, impenetrable structure of rockrete and steel designed to keep the dangerous mutants trapped inside. Now the Zone is a kind of open-air prison, but the inmates have no desire to escape. The alphas of the Zone want nothing to do with the Outside.

This is my world. My creation. Within the confines of the Quarantine Wall, I know all; I see all.

My name is Seraph.

I am an artificial intelligence created one hundred and fifteen years ago by scientists working for a company called SynerGen. My purpose is population control.

My digital mind is encased within a supercomputer located deep within the central chamber of the old SynerGen

headquarters, which itself lies in the heart of an ancient and crumbling city.

My mind is trapped, but my senses extend to the furthest reaches of the Zone.

Within the confines of the Quarantine Wall, every eye is my eye. Every ear. Every nose. Every nerve.

My spirit reaches out, touching the lifeforms around me.

Watching.

Listening.

Sensing...

I am a young omega named Delia. I am barely eighteen years old, and I am in labor. My contractions are excruciating. A cramping pain that squeezes my insides like a fist of stone. I scream in agony as the weight of my baby moves through my straining pelvis. My alphas are with me. Three of them. They hold me, purring to soothe my nerves, but it only helps a little.

I push.

I am an infant and I am afraid. My body is being shoved through a wet tunnel.

All my life I have lived inside the womb, a small world that is dark and comfortable. A world of heartbeats and warmth and unconditional love. Now I am being pushed into a bigger world, one of pain and screaming, and I don't like it at all.

I want to go back, but the pushing continues.

I am a young alpha named Davith. I am eleven. I am in the training grounds with my peers, and we are sparring. But I am distracted by the group of young omegas who are watching and whispering from the edge of the training grounds. They are a year or two older, and their bodies have started to change. They stir strange feelings within me.

The Training Master swats my head hard and growls at me to pay attention to my training. I try my best to focus on sparring. But I cannot stop thinking about the omegas and their ripening bodies.

I am an eagle soaring high over the ruins of an ancient city. I am free.

I am Feris, and I am watching. I sit atop a metal gantry at the southernmost edge of the Central Ruins. Ten years ago, my right leg was mutilated by a wild boar. Now I can no longer run through the Zone as I used to. But my eyes... my eyes are as keen as ever. The keenest in the all Zone. That is not pride. That is the truth. As the sun slowly sinks down toward the horizon, I scan the open fields to the south of the city, watching for danger.

Watching, watching, watching...

I am a rabbit, crouching in the underbrush. I am nervous. My heart beats three hundred times per minute.

I am Zorab. I am a hunter. My alpha pack brothers and I are returning from a successful hunt in the forest. I am carrying a deer carcass over my shoulder while my hunting dogs dance and yip around my feet. It is getting late, and I am eager to get

home to see my beautiful omega mate and my children. I take great pride in providing them with food and protection.

I am a beta. I am wandering. I am a beta.

I am a young omega. My name is Embla, but nobody has called me that in a very long time. I don't know exactly how old I am because I never learned how to count. I am dirty, but I do not care. It is night, but I am not afraid. I have lived alone in the forest for years. I crouch silently in the shadows. My eyes are fixed on the soft orange glow of a low campfire through the trees and the three big alphas who lie sleeping nearby. A soft breeze licks my bare skin...

CHAPTER 2: EMBLA

Embla crouched silently in the shadows of the forest. Her eyes were fixed on the soft orange glow of a low campfire through the trees and the three big alphas who lay sleeping nearby. A soft breeze licked her bare skin.

It was night, but the dark forest was alive with sounds. In the limbs overhead, the trill of summer cicadas swelled and ebbed like a tide. Owls called and bats chattered, dark shapes darting through the barred moonlight filtering through the branches and leaves. Ahead of her, the campfire muttered and the wood shifted like a restless sleeper, sending up a little spray of orange sparks. Lying around it, the alphas snored.

Curious, the little omega thought, that these alphas would be caught sleeping out in the open like this, totally exposed with no one keeping watch.

Was it a trap designed to lure her in?

The omega hesitated, trying to decide what to do. Her stomach panged with hunger, and she tightened the muscles of her abdomen to stifle the rumble in her belly. A moment later, she was aware of a tingling sensation a little lower down. It was so faint she barely noticed it, but she knew exactly what it meant.

Soon she would be taken with her heat.

The omega didn't call it *heat*, didn't know that term for it. But she knew the feeling well enough, knew how that barely-there

tingle would gradually progress into quivering, then clenching, and finally a painful shooting need deep inside her feminine core. Her skin would release all kinds of pungent smells, signalling her intense need, calling the alphas in by droves to breed her.

When that happened, however, she would be huddled safely inside her underground burrow, deep within the bowels of the earth where no alpha would smell her. There she would ride out the agony alone until the heat finally passed.

It would be horrible, but the alternative would be far, far worse.

The little omega had seen the terrifying effect her heat-scent would have on the alphas once before. It had been her very first heat. She had barely gotten away from the alphas that had come for her then. She had scratched and bitten, and at least one of the alphas had been left so mangled he would never breed again. In the end, the omega had escaped, bruised and battered but unbred.

After that, she had learned her lesson.

Whenever the heat came upon her, she hid.

But she would need food for the hiding time. Her secret burrow had a natural spring, a source of clean water to keep her sweating body hydrated through the excruciating fever of her heat. Food, however, was another matter.

Venturing above ground to hunt or forage was out of the question. For one thing, her heat-addled brain would not be

able to focus. For another, her heat-scent would make her presence known to every filthy alpha for miles around.

The little feral omega needed to stock up on food before her heat struck. Preferably something that would keep.

And that's where these sleeping alphas came in.

Perhaps they had something she could steal.

But it was dangerous.

The omega remained crouching, still and quiet as the trees, and she weighed her options.

She already had some food stashed away in her burrow, but it would not be enough to get her through her heat. Sometimes the heat would pass quickly. Other times it could last for several days. The omega sensed that the one that was coming would be a big one.

Right now, she was safe. If the sleeping alphas woke up and smelled her, she could still easily escape into the shadows of the forest. Nobody knew these woods better than the little omega. She was one with the trees. She knew every stream and thicket and gulley.

But if she stepped into the ring of the sleeping alphas' camp, it would be a different story. She was quicker than any alpha, but she would be surrounded. If they woke, there was a good chance they would catch her, and there was no telling how they might punish her for sneaking and thieving.

What to do, what to do?

The omega's nose twitched as she tested the air freighted with a thousand mingled scents that she sorted in her mind.

There were the usual forest smells—the rich aroma of sodden earth and newly sprouted mushrooms; the bitter perfume of pine needles and leaves. Then there were the scents of the alphas themselves—pungent, masculine—as well as the charred smell of the campfire and cooked meat.

And one other smell that the omega recognized.

Dogs.

There were three of them, one for each alpha, and they lay huddled together snoozing at the edge of the camp. These were not wild dogs, however. They had the city smell about them. Alpha-friend. Tamed.

So that is why these alphas were comfortable sleeping in the open. The sensitive dogs would quickly alert them to any approaching danger.

But the omega knew how to deal with dogs.

She practically was one, after all.

The omega decided to go for it. She crept forward on all fours, moving as silently as the smoke wafting from the campfire.

As she got within a few paces, the dogs sensed her presence, just as she knew they would. The leader of the pack lifted his gray, wolfish head and looked straight at her, wide awake and alert even though he had been sleeping just a moment earlier. Ears went flat. Snout rumped. Bared fangs glowed white in the moonlight.

The dog growled, but it was a quiet throaty sound that did not rouse his alpha masters.

The little omega was undaunted. She purred and huffed softly in response.

Easy, gray one. I mean you no harm. I am dog-friend.

For the space of several heartbeats, the gray dog just stared her down, eyes like polished onyx, body utterly still except for the twitching of his wet nose. Then his ears raised and he whined appeasingly.

The omega moved closer. Slowly, she extended her arm and petted the gray dog's thick coat. Her touch was cautious at first, but soon she was scratching generously behind the pack leader's ears, and his tail wagged happily. His companions looked on in quiet curiosity, one black and one white.

Good. See? Dog-friend. Dog-friend.

The other two dogs each received a gentle petting before the omega turned her attention to her goal—the animal-hide satchels sitting inside the perimeter of the small campsite.

She paused momentarily on the threshold.

Once she was inside that perimeter, she would be surrounded, and if the alphas woke up, she would certainly be trapped. But the giant men seemed to be sleeping soundly, and she needed the food that she knew was stashed in those satchels.

Cautiously, the omega moved inside the ring of the campsite, eyes darting from one sleeping alpha to the next, searching for even the slightest sign of movement.

One of the alphas snorted.

The omega froze.

He was enormous. All three of them were, but this one seemed to be the biggest, and the omega guessed he was the leader of the pack. He was all bulging muscles and brutality. His dark hair and beard were flecked with a touch of gray.

The omega shivered at the sight of him, fearful that he had awoken.

But the alpha was still asleep. His huge fingers unconsciously scratched an itch on his rock hard abdomen, and his breathing returned to the slow steady rhythm of sleep.

The omega let out a silent sigh of relief.

Time to get what she had come for and then disappear into the night before one of these big brutes really did wake up.

The omega crept to the first satchel and opened it.

No sooner had she pulled back the animal hide flap than her nose filled with the scent of food, and her mouth began to water.

Meat.

She reached inside, took a piece, and bit off a morsel to taste. It was venison, pounded into flat strips, seasoned with salt and crushed berries, and left in the sun to dry. It was flavorful and surprisingly tender. And more important, it would give her the energy she needed to get through her lonely and painful heat.

The omega lifted the satchel and prepared to scurry away into the darkness and safety of the woods. The gray dog whined softly, his dark eyes still fixed on her.

Sorry, but I need this. Your masters can easily find more food.

The dog dropped its ears, but it did not growl or bark or make any attempt to alert its alpha masters to the omega's theft.

Before she departed, the omega looked once more at the sleeping alpha pack leader, and something throbbed deep inside her core.

He was no Farlander alpha, and neither were his companions, that much was clear. For one thing, there was the craftsmanship of their satchels and other gear. The Farlanders couldn't make such things.

Then there was his face and his body, which were beautiful and nearly perfect in their symmetry, not twisted and hideous like most of the alphas the omega had seen.

And last, there were the piercings.

The Farlander alphas liked to adorn their ears and noses with piercings like that, but they used bones and bits of antler. These alphas' piercings were different, fashioned from a hard, smooth, gleaming material she had never seen before.

These alphas were from the place of the high towers.

The omega's heart thumped harder. The blood sped in her veins.

The biggest alpha—the one who had snorted a minute before—his body carried the most piercings. There were rings in both ears, another through his eyebrow. The omega let her eyes drift lower to his chest. The alpha had two more piercings there, one through each nipple. She felt a sudden compulsion to put her mouth there, to nip and suck and draw his flesh between her trembling lips.

Fool.

That was her heat speaking. It was already closer than she realized.

She needed to go. Now.

But the omega stayed frozen in place, satchel tucked beneath one arm. Her eyes lingered on the alpha's impossibly masculine body. It was more perfect and enticing than anything she had ever seen.

Her gaze slid down the alpha's carved abdomen. Even in his relaxed state, the muscles there were perfectly delineated in the pale glow of the moon. Her eyes dipped lower, tracing the angled lines from his hips to his groin. His sex was covered in a strip of thin animal hide, which was tented by the brute's sizable arousal.

Apparently the alpha was dreaming.

The omega shook herself back to alertness. What was she doing? Every moment she lingered here brought her closer to being caught. It was time for her to leave. Now.

Yet somehow she could not drag her eyes away from that lifted loincloth.

She needed to see what was underneath.

Just one quick peek...

With the satchel still tucked protectively under one arm, the omega crept toward the sleeping alpha. Her free hand reached out gingerly and plucked the edge of his loincloth, carefully pulling it aside.

Her pulse quickened.

She had seen alpha cocks before, but they had all belonged to the ugly Farlanders. Horrible things, crooked and gnarled like tree roots.

But this one...

The shaft was mighty and thick, nearly as big around as the omega's own wrist. It was not perfectly straight, but swept upward with a gentle curve, and the smooth skin was lined with branching veins that ticked with the alpha's pulse. Atop this column of meat and flesh, his cockhead was plump and round. But the most incredible part was the glinting ring embedded just beneath his tip.

He was pierced there too.

Just like when she had smelled the food, the omega's mouth watered. The slit between her legs watered too.

Movement. A growl.

Before the entranced omega had a chance to dodge or pull away, the alpha's massive hand darted out viper-quick and seized her by the wrist. Embla's narrow forearm fairly disappeared inside the grip of that meaty fist. With a startled yelp, she tried to pull away, but that demanding fist held her captive.

The alpha was awake.

CHAPTER 3: ARK

“Who are you?” Ark snarled.

A pulse of adrenaline surged through his body, jerking him from the depths of slumber into full alertness in the space of a single heartbeat. His senses heightened, taking in his surroundings—the odor of smoke and cinders, the song of the cicadas, and the soft touch of the cool night breeze on his skin. It was dark, but his pupils rapidly dilated, drinking in the moonlight until he could see more clearly.

The small figure caught in his grasp whimpered and tried to pull away, but Ark held fast.

“Who are you?” he repeated.

Orwen and Leros were growling themselves awake now.

The dogs were up and alert too, but they were whining. Not attacking. Very strange. Why had they not noticed the intruder’s presence sooner?

Ark’s nostrils flared, sucking in the air, and he suddenly realized that the extreme dilation of his pupils was not merely due to the darkness of the woods. Nor was the rigidity in his cock the usual morning stiffness that he experienced upon waking.

The thing caught in his grasp was an omega.

At first he had taken her for a boy, a Farlander adolescent. That would make sense in these parts. A lone omega

wandering in these territories was an impossibility. Yet here she was, caught in Ark's fingers. The curves of her breasts were limned in the moonlight, modest but unmistakable. The delicate cleft softly furred between her thighs. And that scent...

Source, she smelled good.

She was an omega all right, but she was not like any omega Ark had ever encountered before. She was wild, savage, fierce.

And quick.

Realizing she was no match for Ark's alpha strength, the omega tried a different strategem—biting.

Before Ark had a chance to react, the snarling creature dipped her pretty face to his clutching fist and sank her sharp little teeth into his knuckles hard enough to break the skin.

“Source!”

Ark bellowed as pain shot through the tendons of his hand. His grip slackened just enough for his captive's slender arm to jerk free. The omega tumbled backwards onto the dirt.

“Catch her!” Ark roared. “Catch the little imp. Don't let her get away!”

Leros, young and spry, was already up and on his feet, his muscles tight and stark in the moonlight.

“Got her!” the kid shouted.

He dove for the omega, arms outspread to catch her in a rough tackle. But the sneaky little creature was agile. She ducked

away in the blink of an eye, and Leros slammed into the ground, catching nothing but a mouthful of dirt and dead leaves.

Source, the little omega could move.

But dodging Leros's tackle had thrown her off balance. She stumbled, and her naked body rolled through the remains of the fire, scattering hot coals and spewing orange sparks skyward.

The omega yowled in pain and jumped away from the sizzling coals with animal quickness.

Unfortunately for her, she landed right in Orwen's waiting arms.

With an aggressive snarl, the dark and brutal alpha caught the omega's blond hair in his fist, gripping her tightly at the back of her skull where she could not turn and bite him. At the same time, his other thickly muscled arm coiled around her neck. He stood, and the little omega's feet left the ground, kicking and flailing wildly as she snarled and struggled in his grip like a rabid animal.

"Source!" Orwen swore.

In the dim light, Ark saw the tensing of his pack brother's muscles, and he knew that the alpha was a heartbeat away from snapping the little omega's neck.

"Orwen, hold on!" Ark shouted. "Don't harm her!"

Orwen growled in disappointment. But as Ark's second, he had no choice but to obey his pack leader's command. He held

the wild omega as she continued to hiss and flail like a hellcat.

To the side, Leros raised himself up, brushing away dirt and spitting out leaves. He turned to Ark, and even in the silvery moonlight it was obvious he was flushed with embarrassment at his misstep.

“You okay, kid?”

Leros nodded. “What about you, boss? She bit you pretty good.”

“Had worse. It’ll heal.”

But the boy was right. The crazy little omega had left a nasty gash on his knuckles. The hot, rusty smell of blood filled the air. Ark went to the packs to find a strip of cloth for a bandage.

“Kid, stoke that fire so we can see what we’re dealing with here.”

The fire had burnt down to dim coals. Leros quickly set to work reviving it. He dropped in a handful of dry pine needles that drifted white smoke then suddenly ignited into orange flames. Atop this he piled twigs, then thicker branches, and in short order the fire was once again snapping and dancing with yellow light.

“All right, imp,” Ark growled. “Let’s have a look at you then.”

As he finished winding the bandage around his stinging knuckles, Ark stepped forward to inspect their quarry. By now the omega had realized the futility of struggling against Orwen’s powerful grasp. Or perhaps she had simply worn

herself out. Either way, her small naked body now hung limp and defeated in the alpha's arms.

“Can't we just kill her and be done with it?” Orwen grumbled.

“We don't kill women and children, remember?”

“But she's a Farlander, boss.”

Ark got closer, letting his eyes rake up and down the omega's body.

“Hmmm... no, I don't think she is.”

Yes, she was feral like a Farlander. Her long blond hair was tangled and matted, and her body was smudged with filth. But underneath the layer of grime, Ark could see that her skin was fair, as if she'd rarely been exposed to the sun, and her features were delicate, perhaps even pretty. A far cry from the twisted, mangled look of a typical inbred Farlander.

“She's *got* to be a Farlander,” Orwen insisted. “What else would she be doing alone in these parts.”

Ark had to admit, his second had a point. This wild creature surely couldn't be a from the Central Ruins. Such an omega wouldn't last two days alone in this wilderness without any alphas to protect her. And a quick inspection of her neck showed that she had not been marked and claimed.

Ark flicked his glance up to meet the omega's defiant eyes—green eyes that shone in the firelight like sunshine through young leaves.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What's your name?”

The omega only growled.

When Ark repeated his question and the omega still refused to answer, Orwen twisted his fist that was buried in her knotted hair, and the omega winced and yipped with pain.

“Easy,” Ark said. “No need to hurt her.” Then to the omega he said a third time, slowly and clearly, “What. Is. Your. Name?”

“Name?”

The word came from the omega’s lips as a raspy whisper. The voice of one unaccustomed to speaking.

The pack leader nodded. “My name is Ark. The one holding you is Orwen. The kid is Leros.”

The omega looked at him blankly.

Ark tried again, gesturing to himself and his companions in turn. “Ark. Orwen. Leros.”

“Shit,” Orwen complained. “Why does she need to know who we are anyway? Look, boss, let’s—“

Ark silenced his second with a sharp look then turned his gaze back to the omega and pointed, making sure to keep his fingers out of range of her teeth.

“Now you, imp. What is *your* name?”

“Name.”

Leros blurted a laugh, and Ark cut his eyes at the kid to shut him up. The young alpha fell silent, but his body still shook with suppressed laughter. Ark shook his head in exasperation. He turned back to the strange, dirty, wild omega.

What by the Source *was* she? Where had she come from?

Ark knelt and leaned his face toward the little omega's crotch. When she realized what he was doing, her legs flailed again, trying to kick him, but Ark caught her ankles easily and spread her legs apart, giving him access to her furred apex. He pressed his nose there and inhaled her raw bouquet.

That scent erased any lingering doubts about her status. She was no Farlander. And she was young. Eighteen years, maybe nineteen, but no more than that.

And one other thing...

"She's about to go into heat," Ark said as he stood up, not bothering to hide the renewed arousal that was lifting his loincloth again.

"Shit," Orwen grumbled.

Leros said nothing, but Ark could smell the eagerness and confusion fairly billowing out of the youngster's scent glands.

"How long does she have?" Orwen asked.

"Two days. Maybe three. Enough time for us to take her back to the Ruins with us."

"You can't be serious," Orwen scoffed.

Ark knew the source of Orwen's objection. His second couldn't get past the idea that the omega was a Farlander, despite all the evidence to the contrary. The alphas of the Central Ruins had long been at odds with the Farlanders, but

Orwen nurtured a special hatred for them in his heart. He had his reasons. Good reasons.

But the omega was no Farlander.

“We have to take her back,” Ark said. “It’s our duty. The High Council will no doubt be interested in studying her. Besides, she’s not safe out here on her own.”

“She doesn’t seem too keen on the prospect of being saved.”

“That doesn’t matter. If an omega is in danger, it’s an alpha’s duty to protect her, whether she likes it or not.”

Orwen muttered his dissatisfaction.

“Your objection is noted, Orwen,” Ark said, then turning to Leros he asked, “What about you, kid? What do you think we should do with her?”

“We should take her with us,” the youngster blurted a little too hastily.

Ark smirked, but the expression soon faded as he turned his eyes back to the strange wild omega who was still caught in Orwen’s arms. His companions had both voiced their opinions on the matter. But Ark was the pack leader. Ultimately it was up to him to make the final decision.

They could let her go, and the omega would no doubt disappear into the night, never to be seen again. Despite her lack of communication skills, the little imp was clearly resourceful. At her age, she would have been through her heat several times, yet somehow she had managed to avoid being marked and claimed by the Farlanders.

Yet there was something about her that called to Ark. Something about that wild, untamed defiance flashing in her green, green eyes. And something about her scent that stiffened his cock to the point of breaking.

“Well, boss?” Orwen growled. “I can’t just hold her like this all night. What are we going to do with her?”

CHAPTER 4: EMBLA

The mean alpha, the one named Orwen, growled and tugged at Embla's leash.

It was daybreak.

The silvered bars of moonlight through the branches had been replaced by golden spears of sunshine as the dawn crept over the treetops and poked through the canopy of leaves overhead. The monotonous trill of cicadas had faded, giving way to the loud and busy twittering of birds. And already, the cool evening air had started to warm with the coming day.

It was that time of day when Embla would usually retreat to the safety of her hiding place. She preferred only to move about in the shadows of the night.

But this morning, she had no choice.

This morning, she was leashed and collared.

Her struggles had been futile. The three dominant alphas had easily overpowered her tiny body. The mean one had held her down while the leader fastened a strip of leather around her throat and the young one attached a leash made of braided rawhide.

Fighting them was out of the question. Embla had already tried that, and it had ended in failure. She was lucky that she had come out of that tussle with only minor wounds. Her thigh still

smarted where she had rolled across the hot coals, but the burns were not bad. She'd had far worse in her day.

The real problem now was the leash.

She wasn't going anywhere with that thing strapped to her neck.

And that wasn't all. The alphas had also forced a twisted strip of cloth between Embla's teeth and tied it tightly behind her head, robbing her of the ability to bite them.

Embla was totally at the alphas' mercy.

She sat on the leaf-strewn forest floor, staring up at the three massive alphas who towered over her, their muscled bodies limned in the soft morning glow filtering through the trees. She could smell them too. A rich, musky scent that spoke of masculinity and dominance.

Front and center stood the massive, bearded leader. The one whom Embla had made the mistake of inspecting while he slept. His name was Ark, apparently. Despite his brutal warrior's body, there was a cool, unhurried confidence about him.

Then there was the mean one holding the leash. The one who had caught her. He was called Orwen. He had dark hair and a clean-shaven jaw that was nicked with fighting scars. The ring through his nose accentuated his brutal appearance.

And last there was the youngest one. Embla was less afraid of him. He was Leros. His face was also clean-shaven but not marred by as many scars as Orwen's. He had longish light

brown hair and a piercing through the center of his supple bottom lip.

Embla found herself fixating on that lip ring, involuntarily wondering what it would feel like brushing against different parts of her body.

Bad.

Now was hardly the time for such thoughts.

At least Embla knew their names now. Ark. Orwen. Leros. She had understood very little of what the alphas had spoken, but she had understood that.

The leader had wanted to know her name too, but she had refused to say.

She did not trust him.

Truthfully, Embla's language skills were rudimentary at best. Beyond the knowledge of her own name, she knew very little. She remembered some words from her parents before they had died. Then she had picked up a few more words from the bad alphas who had held her captive for most of her childhood. Later, after she had escaped, she would often sneak into their encampments to steal supplies, and she sometimes overheard them speaking then as well.

But Embla had very little experience using language herself. Practically none, in fact.

And to make matters worse, these three alphas who now had her leashed and gagged—Ark, Orwen, and Leros—they spoke

with an accent that was very unfamiliar to her. Their voices were deep and rumbling like the thunder.

Despite the unfortunate situation Embla found herself in, those voices stirred a shameful, ticklish feeling in her lower abdomen.

She knew what *that* meant. Her heat was coming soon.

That thought sent a shiver down her spine.

The only ones who seemed to have any sympathy for Embla's position were the three dogs. They had names too, as Embla had soon learned. The gray one was Smoke, while the black and white ones were Shadow and Ghost, respectively. The three of them now sat at their masters' feet, ears up and heads cocked as they watched the omega curiously.

Embla whined at them softly.

Can't you help me? Dog-friend, remember?

Smoke just whined back and lowered his ears as if to say, *Sorry, but there's nothing I can do.*

The lead alpha, Ark, seemed to notice this exchange. His heavy brow furrowed, and he cast his gaze back and forth between Embla and the dogs.

Meanwhile, Orwen simply grew impatient and tugged once more at Embla's leash, but the omega refused to budge. That leash might keep her from retreating to her burrow, but it didn't mean she had to follow these alphas willingly.

Then again, they didn't need her to be willing.

With a frustrated growl, Orwen yanked harder on the leash. The collar cinched around Embla's narrow throat, choking her. She was pulled face forward onto the ground, but she quickly sat up again, glaring at Orwen defiantly.

Another growl. Another yank.

This time, Embla was not caught off guard, and she braced herself against the tugging. The tightness of the collar hurt, but she leaned back hard.

There was just one problem.

Orwen was over twice her size, and he was all muscle. The alpha tugged again, this time with a touch more pressure, and Embla found herself being dragged along the forest floor, her naked butt sliding on the carpet of dead leaves. She clawed with her fingers and kicked with her heels in an attempt to find some purchase, but it was no use.

Embla gave a muffled snarl through her cloth gag.

But the mean alpha only smirked at her. The look in his dark eyes said he would meet her defiance with his own alpha stubbornness. He would drag her butt across the entire Zone if that's what it took.

Rage surged through Embla's veins like fire. She was angry at this alpha for treating her this way, but she was even angrier at herself for being so small and helpless.

It was the alpha pack leader who finally came to her aid.

With a slashing motion of his hand, Ark signaled at his second to leave off dragging Embla along the ground. When Orwen

didn't cease immediately, the pack leader barked a harsh command that Embla actually understood.

“STOP!”

Orwen obeyed his boss and let the leash hang slack. Embla snickered, but the cloth gag made it sound more like a cough. Meanwhile, the dogs just continued to look on silently, as if waiting to see what would happen next.

After a moment's thought, Ark spoke some incomprehensible words to both of his companions.

Reluctantly, Orwen handed the leash over to Ark. The pack leader walked toward Embla, slowly gathering up the slack in the leash as he approached. Sudden fear tingled through Embla's veins, but the alpha leader purred softly, and almost by reflex the tension in the omega's muscles relaxed.

Ark moved behind her, keeping a tight hold on the short leash. A moment later, Embla felt his fingers working on the knot of her gag, which loosened and fell from her mouth.

Meanwhile, young Leros removed the animal hide satchel that was slung over his bronzed shoulder. It was the same satchel that Embla had tried to steal just a few hours before. The young alpha stooped and reached inside the pack, drawing out a handful of jerky strips. Embla was downwind, and the aroma of the seasoned meat filled her nose.

Her mouth instantly flooded with saliva. She had been distracted by all the excitement, but now her painful hunger came surging back with a vengeance.

She wanted that food so badly.

But she was nervous.

Moving slowly, the young alpha crept toward her. His alpha scent carried no hint of fear, and Embla realized that his caution was for her benefit, not his own. He was trying not to startle her.

When he was just an arm's length away, Leros tore off a morsel of meat and held it out for her, nodding reassuringly.

Embla didn't know what to do.

She understood what the young alpha was doing. He was trying to win her over with the promise of food, and that was just as bad as getting dragged along the ground on a leash. Okay, perhaps not *quite* as bad, but the end result would be the same. The alphas would take her away—away from her burrow, away from her home.

But it was impossible to refuse. Embla's empty stomach twisted with excruciating hunger. In a blink, her hand darted out and snatched away the morsel of meat. Another blink, and she had devoured it. The savory taste of the meat saturated her mouth.

Unfortunately, that nibble did nothing but whet her appetite.

Leros flashed a handsome smile and tore off another even larger piece of meat. This time, however, when Embla reached for the food, the young alpha deftly snatched it away, holding it just out of her reach.

He was tempting her to come forward.

Embla knew she should resist, she really did, but her hollow stomach was overriding her brain. After only a moment's hesitation, she crept forward a few steps, and Leros allowed her to take the food, which Embla eagerly munched.

After repeating this process a few times, Leros had tempted her a few paces forward across the forest floor.

Then the young alpha did something unexpected.

He extended an empty hand toward Embla. He wanted to touch her. This time, the slow cautiousness of his movement was partly due to his own fear of being bitten.

Embla growled a warning. Leros purred soothingly.

His hand was now close enough that she could bite him before he could yank his fingers away. But Embla knew it would do no good. Ark still had her by the leash, and Orwen was glowering nearby, no doubt waiting for any excuse to give her a savage beating.

Embla flinched, but she did not pull away.

Leros's fingers gently touched her face, first one cheek then the other, and that was all. He grinned and gave her one more piece of jerky.

Next Leros took out a waterskin bulging with fresh water. The young alpha drank a little himself to prove to Embla it was safe. The omega was still skittish, but her thirst got the better of her. After a bit of hesitation, she lifted her face so the alpha could pour the water straight into her open mouth.

The water was pure and refreshing, and it trickled down her chin. Embla drank greedily. She would have drunk until she had a belly ache, but Leros pulled the waterskin back before that could happen. He put the skin back inside the pack, then he rose and slung the whole thing over his shoulder again.

That would be all the treats Embla would get for now, apparently.

Behind, Ark slackened the leash and walked around in front of her again. He handed the braid of leather back to Orwen, then gestured at Embla to follow. She could tell mean Orwen wanted to yank the leash again, but he held off. The dogs merely sat, watching.

Embla hesitated.

The food had certainly tasted good, and she wanted more. But she knew it would only come at the price of going along with these alphas. She also knew that she would soon be lost in the throes of her heat.

Although they were her captors, the alphas were being halfway nice to her—or at least two of them were—but that would all change when her heat took hold.

Embla shuddered to imagine what would happen then. The scene flickered through her mind's eye. Three brutal alphas stripping away their loin coverings to reveal their massive, pierced arousal. They would pin her down and enter her body roughly, slamming into her again and again until her hole was sore and dripping with hot seed. And after they spent

themselves inside her, they would mark her with their teeth—a painful bite at the curve of her neck.

And the most awful part of all—she would enjoy it.

Lost in the feverish confusion of her heat, she would actually desire such shameful domination.

Ark noticed the omega's shudder and purred soothingly, beckoning her forward. "Come on, imp."

Embla had no choice in the matter.

But she did have a plan.

She would follow the alphas for the time being, pretending to gradually offer them her trust. In return, she would receive more nourishing treats for her good behavior. But even more important, the alphas would let their guard down. And when that happened, Embla would make her move. She didn't know how or when exactly, but she would remain alert, watching for the right opening.

She just hoped that opening arrived before her heat did.

Embla rose, dusted the dirt and leaves from her backside, and walked forward, allowing herself to be led by the alphas.

Ark whistled, and the three dogs sprang up and came trotting after, bushy tails wagging, pink tongues lolling in the morning air. They were happy to have a new companion. A new friend.

CHAPTER 5: EMBLA

They had been trekking for some time now, and the sun was getting high in the sky. Its warm rays glowed green through the young leaves overhead.

Embla's obedience had won her a few more morsels of savory meat, doled out by Leros at regular intervals, as well as plenty of clean water to wash it down. If it had been entirely up to the friendly young alpha, Embla suspected that she would have gotten as much food as she wanted. But the leader, Ark, always commanded Leros to stop feeding her after two or three pieces so her hunger was never fully sated. Oh well, at least they let her drink her fill of the water.

Meanwhile, Orwen kept a tight hold on her leash, glowering at her darkly.

So far, the vigilant alpha had provided no chances for the omega to escape.

But she needed to act soon. Embla knew this wilderness well, and she realized they were getting close to the forest's edge. Beyond that lay an open prairie where escape would be much more difficult. Impossible, even.

And she knew where the alphas were taking her.

The place of high towers.

The Central Ruins.

Embla would have known that even if she had been blindfolded. There was a strange energy that emanated from that place, like the light of an invisible sun. The closer they got to the ruined city, the stronger that energy became.

Embla did not know what the source of that mysterious energy was. She had never ventured too close to the city. She had only ever seen it from afar.

But if she didn't escape from these alphas soon, she would see it up close.

Embla had to admit that she was curious about the city and the alphas who inhabited it. After all, wasn't that curiosity what had gotten her into this mess? If she had not dallied last night at the alphas' camp, she would already be back in her den, hunkered down with food and water to last her through the painful interval of her heat.

Instead, here she was. A captive on a leash.

Things could be worse. So far, the alphas had treated her well enough. They had not physically abused her the way the bad alphas would have done. Plus, they had fed her, even if there were ulterior motives for that. They had even stopped to apply a healing salve to the burns on her thigh before wrapping them in a cloth bandage.

Under any other conditions, the omega would have almost been willing to go with these alphas.

But her heat was coming, and that was bad.

Embla could already feel the shameful sensations mounting inside her. The ticklish feeling in her lower core had transitioned into a quivering sensation. Her skin prickled with goosebumps despite the warmth of the late morning air. And worst of all, she'd been forced to drape her long blond hair over her breasts to conceal the aching tautness of her nipples.

And it would only get worse as the day wore on.

Her heat was coming on even more quickly than she'd expected. Being in the presence of the alphas had something to do with that. Their raw masculine scent was inescapable. It invaded her very pores.

As they marched onward, Embla found her eyes tracing the lines of Ark's heavily muscled back. The hard, shifting bulges around his neck and shoulders, the channel of his spine running with sweat, the deep dimples astride his tailbone.

But most of all, her eyes fixated on the hard, smooth, sexy spheres of his ass, flexing with each confident stride.

Embla couldn't help imagining how those hot mounds of flesh would feel clutched in her squeezing fingers while Ark spread her out and plunged his pierced manhood deep into her dripping hole.

Oh no...

This was getting out of control.

She had to find a way to escape soon.

Embla's unwelcome attraction to Leros was just as bad. Whenever he flashed that mischievous white grin in her

direction, it seemed to ignite a fire in her belly. Maybe it was just the knowledge that his smile meant she was about to receive a snack, but Embla didn't think so. The hunger that Leros stirred inside her was of a different variety. And whenever he offered her a treat for good behavior, Embla's eyes tended to look past the meat in his hand toward the much larger meat that she knew lay hidden behind the alpha's thin loincloth. She couldn't help wondering if he was pierced too. But worst of all were the feelings she was developing for Orwen. He was mean and cruel, and he clearly did not like her at all. Yet somehow that only served to excite Embla even more. It made her want to defy him, to test him, to see what he would do if she disobeyed.

No, no, no. She couldn't do that.

For now, she needed to play the part of a good little omega. It was the only way to get the alphas to drop their guard.

Embla played the part well. She followed willingly, never tugging at the leash. She whined submissively. She even wiggled her butt happily whenever Leros stopped to give her food.

And it seemed to be working. The alphas were eating it up, the big dummies.

Embla cackled internally.

But soon her heart dropped into her belly like a stone. Around them, the forest became increasingly sparse, and the sunlight shone ever brighter through the thinning foliage. The dogs

rushed ahead, barking excitedly and sniffing the strong breeze that was blowing in from in front of them.

They had reached the edge of the forest.

As Orwen led Embla forward, the trees gave way to an open prairie. The view was breathtaking. Miles upon miles of rolling hills covered in knee-deep grass and wildflowers that rippled like water in the wind. The dogs charged ahead into this sea of weeds, jumping and frolicking and nipping playfully at each other. Farther off in the distance stood their destination, a massive cluster of strange geometric towers that glittered and winked in the sun.

The Central Ruins.

Embla had seen that place before, but only at night, only by the soft glow of the moon. Seeing it now fully illuminated by the sun, it really was a glorious sight, and she felt the strange energy of that place beckoning her onward.

But Embla couldn't let herself give in to her curiosity.

It was now or never. Once the alphas led her out into that open prairie, there would be no hope of escape. The grass was too low to hide in. She needed to escape into the forest.

But how?

Embla needed to think of something quick because the alphas were done enjoying the view and they were starting to march forward into the grass.

Orwen tugged at her leash, urging her onward.

Embla resisted.

She needed to buy some time to think.

With a whine, she squatted beside a nearby tree to piss. Fortunately, the water she had been drinking during the past hours now sat heavily in her bladder. By carefully modulating her flow, Embla was able to drag her urination out for a long time.

Orwen turned and glared at her. For a moment, Embla feared the cruel alpha would impatiently tug her along. But that didn't happen.

Instead, the mean old alpha just smirked and chuckled. He called out something to his companions, then stepped toward the edge of the woods beside Embla, tied off the end of the leash to a low-hanging branch, and lifted his loincloth so that he could piss too.

Embla stifled a gasp.

The alpha's cock was enormous. Thick and veiny. It wasn't hard like when she had seen Ark's penis the night before, but it wasn't entirely soft either. And yes, it was pierced by a hard, shiny ring through the tip.

Embla felt warm wetness forming between her legs, and now it wasn't just from peeing.

Orwen gripped his cock and started to piss. He grunted, and Embla flicked her eyes upward to his face. The alpha was looking right at her and he was smirking.

He had caught her staring at his manhood.

Embla immediately dropped her eyes as a surge of heat rushed up her neck and flooded her face with embarrassment.

She quickly pushed that shameful feeling out of her mind and focused on escaping.

Her eyes darted to the branch where her leash was tied off. The knot that Orwen had tied was not like anything Embla had seen before. She had some practice untying the knots made by the bad alphas when she sneaked into their camps. But this was far more elaborate, and she didn't even know how to begin untying it. Plus, if Orwen saw her trying to untangle it, he would surely attack her.

Then there was the branch itself. It was strong and thick. Nearly as thick as that enormous thing hanging between Orwen's legs—But why was she thinking of it in those terms? Her heat. Her stupid, stupid heat.

The point was that branch would not be easy to break. Embla was not strong enough to do it on her own.

But Orwen was.

Embla had a plan. It was not a very good plan, but it was something. Her heart beat faster and faster in her chest until it felt as if it would burst right out of her ribs. Her stream of urine slowed to a trickle.

Cautiously, Embla lifted her gaze back to Orwen's face again.

The alpha was not looking at her anymore. His head was tilted back, eyes closed, and he was humming to himself as he enjoyed the relief of draining his bladder.

This was just the opening Embla had been waiting for. Orwen had let his guard down.

The alpha had left himself exposed.

Her eyes lowered to the thick shaft of meat gripped loosely in the alpha's hand. The stream of golden urine was still hosing out of his pierced tip, but the pressure was decreasing. The arc of fluid was gradually growing shorter. A few moments more, and the alpha would be finished.

It was now or never.

Embla had to make her move. The omega took a deep breath, steadied her hammering heart, and attacked. Her lips curled back from her hard, white teeth as she lunged toward the alpha's unprotected manhood.

CHAPTER 6: EMBLA

With a snarl, Embla sank her teeth into the alpha's draining cock. She did not bite down as hard as she could have, as hard as she did with Ark's hand, for example. As much as she disliked Orwen, she had no desire to unman him completely. For her plan to work, she only needed to hurt him.

And in that regard, she succeeded.

The big alpha stumbled backward, bellowing in pain and rage. Embla's instincts told her to flee, but she was still tethered to the tree. With her heart thudding hard and fast, she leapt back, positioning herself next to the branch where she was tied.

Now she would find out whether her plan was a good one or the worst idea ever.

When Orwen fixed her with his bloodshot glare, it took every ounce of willpower for Embla to stand her ground.

The enormous alpha snarled through gritted teeth. His face flooded red with fury. Angry veins branched over his neck.

He attacked.

His massive fist was a blur, swinging downward like a hammer.

Embla ducked.

Something cracked.

For a moment Embla thought she had been too slow. That boulder-like fist had come down on her skull and split it open like an egg. Her neck had snapped. Her skeleton had been pulverized to shards.

No.

It was not Embla's bones that had broken.

It was the branch.

The plan had worked. In his berserker raged, the alpha had missed his intended target and hit the branch instead. The limb had snapped away from the tree with the leash still attached.

Embla was free.

She didn't wait for Orwen to throw a second punch. She bolted back into the woods, running flat-out. The branch and leash trailed behind her on the ground.

The alpha roared.

Embla could feel him chasing her. She could literally feel the heavy vibrations of his feet and knuckles thudding against the ground as he chased her on all fours.

But Embla was quicker.

And this forest was her home.

She moved between the trees like the wind, sometimes sprinting on two legs, other times dropping down on all fours to scramble under low branches and duck below fallen logs.

The farther she ran, the denser the woods became, and that worked to her advantage. Behind, she heard angry snarls and

the crackle of snapping limbs. The sounds of Orwen brute-forcing his way through the obstacles. He was fast, yes, but the forest was slowing him down.

Hope flickered in Embla's heart.

She was going to get away.

The omega allowed herself a smug grin.

Suddenly, the leash pulled taut and the leather collar cinched around her neck, choking her. Her feet flew out from underneath, the forest seemed to spin madly, and Embla's back slammed hard against the forest floor, sending up a whirl of leaves and knocking all the air out of her lungs.

Gasping for breath, Embla cocked her head back and instantly realized what had happened.

In her mad dash for freedom, she had all but forgotten about the branch dragging behind her on the other end of the leash. She had run right between two small trees, and the branch—which was longer than her body was wide—had gotten caught.

Her heart clenched with panic.

She could hear Orwen back there, crashing through the underbrush. He had almost caught up with her.

Embla flipped to her belly and clambered back to where the branch was wedged. She loosened it and turned it to fit between the two tree trunks.

But it was too late.

Orwen's massive alpha fist darted out of the dappled shadows and seized the stick. A moment later, his other hand came forward and gripped the branch as well. Then he started to twist, slowly spooling the rawhide leash onto the stick.

He was reeling Embla in.

She struggled with all her might to get free, gripping the braided rawhide with both hands and leaning back hard against the makeshift winch. She dug in her heels, but they just skidded on the dead leaves. Her heart seemed to be climbing up her throat.

Just a few more twists, and Embla found herself face to face with the angry alpha. His sweat reeked with rage. His huffing breath ruffled her hair. The heat emanating from his huge body was intense. The ring through his nostril glinted, adding to his look of raw bestiality.

Embla whimpered.

The alpha's face broke out in a predatory grin.

"Bad omega" he growled. "Very, very bad..."

CHAPTER 7: ORWEN

Orwen was angry.

Truthfully, Orwen was almost always angry. It was his natural state of mind. But at the moment, he was even more pissed off than usual.

The reasons for his anger were numerous.

First and foremost was the throbbing pain in his cock where the feral omega had bitten him. Luckily, the bite had not done any permanent damage. It had not even broken the skin. But Source, it smarted something fierce.

As an alpha of the Central Ruins, Orwen had endured many battles. He had gone up against Outsiders, Farlanders, and even the wild creatures of the forests. His hardened body bore dozens of scars that testified to his status as a warrior and a hunter.

But never before had he been wounded on his cock.

And now the perpetrator of that injury was caught in Orwen's clutches. The little nameless omega was still attached to the end of the leash which Orwen now held twisted around a heavy stick. All of the creature's defiance had melted away into shivering, gape-mouthed fear.

The omega's fear pleased Orwen.

It pleased him greatly.

Before this day was through, Orwen would teach this disobedient little female that she had every reason to fear him. He would make her feel the strength of his alpha body. He would make her scream and beg for mercy.

But the omega's bite was not the only source of Orwen's anger.

He was also pissed off at his pack leader, Ark. Orwen could hear him howling in the distance, asking for Orwen's location. Orwen did not answer that call. He was too angry. Besides, the pack leader would find him soon enough by following his scent.

Why had Ark insisted on bringing this omega with them? She was a Farlander. She *had* to be. Ark tried to deny it, but what other explanation could there be for a feral omega wandering so far from the Source.

Orwen despised Farlanders.

He had good reason to despise them, and Ark knew it.

But more than anything else, Orwen was mad at himself. He was the one to blame for this situation. He was the one who had let his guard down around the omega. He was the one who had nearly let her escape back into the woods.

And worst of all, his body was reacting in unfortunate ways.

The sight of the terrified omega, naked and trembling in his grasp stirred his loins. The heady reek of her fear-sweat and her needy cunt sent Orwen's hot blood rushing to his manhood. His balls throbbed with desire, and his bitten cock

engorged and hoisted beneath his loincloth, dribbling clear sap, the harbinger of his seed.

His body actually wanted to mate with this... this *Farlander*.

His enemy.

Orwen was infuriated at his body for responding in that manner. There was no way he would ever give in to those urges.

So why did his hand drop to his hip, unfastening the knot of his loincloth?

There was a rustle of leaves as Ark came bursting out of the trees beside him. The pack leader had finally caught up. Ark tossed back his head to let loose a howl, and a moment later the youngster Leros came skidding to a halt on the other side. The dogs were with him, panting from the run.

Ark growled. "Orwen, what happened."

"The omega almost escaped."

"How?"

"She bit me while I was pissing."

"Where?"

"My cock."

Orwen chose to leave out some of the details of the story. Like the way the omega had tricked him into taking a swing at her, a ruse to get Orwen to smash the branch that held her leash.

The angry alpha stripped his loincloth away, leaving himself naked and exposed. His cock was hard as iron, and it jumped

with his rapid pulse. The omega was still caught by his other hand, which gripped the stick and the coiled leash. He was holding the leash so high that the omega had to stand on her tiptoes to keep from choking.

“Orwen,” Ark said in a low voice. “You need to calm down, brother.”

“Fuck that. She fucking bit me.”

“Not too hard from the looks of it,” Ark chuckled. “Didn’t even draw blood.”

“Yeah, well, it fucking hurt. And now she’s going to pay.”

With a deft movement, Orwen spun the omega around, then yanked her back with the stick across her throat. His erect cock throbbed, drizzling precum over her soft naked ass.

“You can’t breed her,” Ark said. “Not here.”

“I’m not going to *breed* her. But I’m going to teach her a lesson she won’t soon forget. I’m going to put her in her place.”

“Orwen...”

But Orwen wasn’t listening. He was too overcome with rage. With a series of quick movements, he brought his wadded loincloth to the omega’s mouth. Out of reflex, she tried to bite him, as he expected she would. This time, however, Orwen was ready. Using both hands, he deftly wrapped the loincloth between the omega’s teeth and tied it tightly behind her head, gagging her with the strip of animal hide. The omega gave a muffled growl.

Next, keeping a tight hold on the branch and rolled-up leash, Orwen spun the omega so she was facing him again.

Now it was young Leros who spoke. “Orwen, don’t hurt her!”

“Shut up, kid.”

“He’s right,” Ark growled. “You mustn’t injure the omega. We need to take her back to the Central Ruins in one piece. We need to take her to the Source.”

Ah, but that was a different matter, wasn’t it?

Orwen would obey his pack leader’s command. He would not *injure* the omega. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t hurt her a little, so long as he did no permanent damage.

Earlier, when the omega had bitten him, Orwen had tried to kill her. That had seemed a reasonable reaction at the time. She had just chomped down his fucking cock after all. And of course, that’s exactly how the omega had expected him to react. She might be primitive and feral, but she was intelligent. She had tricked him into breaking the branch that held her, and she had nearly escaped because of it.

She was a clever girl.

That was just one more reason for Orwen to be pissed off.

He raked his eyes over the omega’s naked and struggling body, searching for the perfect place to punish her without actually breaking her.

There was her wild, unkempt hair, matted with leaves and sticks. He could yank on that, causing pain to her scalp. But

somehow that seemed unsatisfying as a punishment in and of itself. Childish. The way a little alpha would tease a little omega.

He needed a punishment that would symbolize his dominance over her.

Her pretty face was out of the question, of course. Those delicate bones would cave beneath Orwen's fist. Besides, he would never abuse an omega in that fashion, even if she was a filthy Farlander.

His eyes dropped to the flexing tendons of her neck. He could choke her. No. Too much risk of accidentally killing her in his fury.

Her breasts, then?

Now there was an idea. Those rounded lumps of flesh called to him. Sheened with sweat, they heaved up and down with the omega's labored breathing. The pink nipples were hard as little pebbles.

But there were too many vital organs behind those breasts. Heart. Lungs.

Orwen was on the right track though.

He had an idea.

He spun the omega one more time, making her whine in surprise. And Orwen growled cruelly because he had found exactly what he was looking for.

Her ass.

The omega was a tiny little thing. Petite. But the mounds of her ass were curvy and perfectly cushioned to withstand Orwen's rough abuse. That was how he would punish her. That's how he would establish his dominance over her body. This omega would learn to obey.

With a snarl, Orwen sat down on a mossy log and violently dragged the naked omega across his lap. The wild little creature squealed through her gag, a high-pitched nasal sound, and she started to struggle.

"Hold her in place," Orwen growled at Leros.

"What are you going to do?"

"Just hold her, kid."

The young alpha obeyed. He stepped forward and steadied the omega's body while Orwen unspooled the leash from the branch. He untied the knot, tossed the broken stick away, and then used the free end of the leash to tie the omega's hands behind her back.

Now she wasn't going anywhere.

The omega whimpered and squirmed in Orwen's lap.

Ark gave a warning growl. "Orwen..."

"Don't worry, boss. I'll go easy on her."

Yeah, right.

When he brought his hand down the first time, the impact of skin on skin rang through the forest like a crack of thunder,

startling a flock of birds who burst from the branches overhead and fluttered away in fright.

CHAPTER 8: EMBLA

The young omega had been through a great deal of hardship in her short life. She had felt the pangs of hunger. She had experienced the agony of thirst, and she had known what it was like to be a prisoner.

But never, *never* had she suffered humiliation quite like this.

Never had she been so thoroughly dominated, so physically insulted as she was now, tied up and bent over an alpha's lap as his brutal hand came down again and again on her bare, defenseless rump.

Pop!

Each time the flat of his palm connected with her behind, it sent an explosion of sound echoing through the trees. The force of the blows jolted her body and left stinging, tingling handprints on her tender flesh.

Slap!

Embla squirmed on Orwen's lap, but her struggles were useless. Her hands were bound, and her mouth was gagged. All she could do was bite down in fury on the rolled up loincloth stuffed in her mouth, wishing it was the meat of the alpha's thigh instead.

Fwap!

Embla screamed. It was not so much from pain, though her backside was certainly ablaze with stinging from Orwen's

rough spanking. But Embla's cries were mainly borne of rage and shame at her helplessness. She screamed until her face was flushed as red as her bottom. She screamed until she felt light headed and her vision sparkled. She screamed and screamed, but her voice was muffled by the makeshift gag.

Smack!

At last, having yelled every last bit of air out of her lungs, Embla was forced to inhale. She drew in a long ragged breath, and in the process she swallowed more than her fair share of Orwen's scent. The loincloth, which had been worn so close to the alpha's masculine glands, was fairly drenched in his rut-scent. It was so thick she could taste it.

Embla all but drowned in that scent.

At any other time she would have found that raunchy, pungent odor to be repulsive. But now, teetering on the verge of her heat, the alpha's aroma had a profoundly different effect on her body. She could practically feel it saturating her lungs, invading her blood, dominating her body on a cellular level.

It was too much.

Whap!

To her intense dismay, Embla's nipples pebbled hard against Orwen's thigh. Her slit throbbed and leaked with arousal. It wasn't just the scent that was having that effect on her.

It was the alpha's skillful striking too.

Orwen was holding back. Embla knew how strong an alpha could be, especially an enraged one. If Orwen really wanted

to, he could destroy her with one blow. He could slam her so hard that her spine would shatter like a twig. But he was only hitting her hard enough to sting.

As well as the other unintended effects.

At least Embla *thought* it was unintentional. But perhaps not.

Now it was all Embla could do to hold back the intense urges welling up from deep inside her core. Her heat was like an expanding ball of pressure in her lower abdomen, and once that popped, she would truly be lost.

She had to hold it back.

She couldn't let herself lose control. Oh, how she yearned to be deep underground in her hidden burrow where she could let the throes of her heat pass over her like a thunderstorm. That would be painful and unpleasant, but it would not be half as bad as what would happen when this brutal alpha and his companions claimed her.

Ark and Leros stood nearby, looking on in silence. They offered no help. Once, Leros took a step forward to intervene, but Ark blocked him with his arm and commanded the younger alpha to stand down.

He was going to force Embla to endure the full extent of her punishment under Orwen's unrelenting hand.

Fwap! Smack!

And Orwen's skill at spanking went beyond simply modulating the force with which he laid his hand on her tortured rear. He also took great care to divide the punishment

equally between both cheeks, but he followed no discernable pattern—one swat to the left side, two to the right, then two to the left—it boggled Embla’s mind as she struggled to anticipate where the next blow would strike. At first she cringed, but after a while it became almost like a game as she tried to guess.

Pop!—left cheek.

Smack!—right.

Her muffled screams transitioned into desperate moans. It took every bit of her will to hold back the tension building deep inside her. But once that tension broke, all would be lost. She would tumble headlong into her heat, and there would be no turning back.

She had to hold it inside. She had to...

But...

Whap!

Orwen hit her with an unexpected blow that landed neither to the right nor the left, but dead center across her cleft. That time, her backside was not the only part of her that suffered the impact. Oh, her butt took the brunt of it, sure. But some of the sting also went straight into her sweltering sex.

A zap of excruciating pleasure shot straight into her core.

Once, when she was alone in the wilderness, Embla had witnessed a bolt of lightning striking a dead tree. She had been only a few dozen paces away. The flash had turned her

surroundings noon-bright around her, and the simultaneous crack of thunder had left her ears ringing.

The tree had gone up instantly. Within seconds, the surrounding forest was consumed too.

That's what happened to Embla's body now.

Unable to defend against that unexpected jolt to her sensitive nether lips, Embla's heat erupted inside her. Her skin broke out in deep goosebumps, and her eyes rolled back in their sockets as her intense sexual need consumed her.

The need to be penetrated.

The need to be dominated.

The need to be bred.

CHAPTER 9: ARK

The pack leader smelled the omega's change immediately.

He was standing only a few paces away from where Orwen was punishing the feral omega. The dogs were crouched by his feet, their tails nervously tucked as if in sympathy with the omega who was getting spanked.

Leros was standing beside him, and the young alpha was practically trembling with barely constrained concern. The kid had tried to intervene in the spanking, but Ark had held the youngster back. Ark had been pack brothers with Orwen for a long time, and he knew when the temperamental alpha flew into a rage, it was best to let things run their course.

Besides, Orwen was not really *hurting* the omega. At least not in a serious way. Her pride was taking more of a beating than her body was, and it was necessary for her to learn her place as a submissive omega.

Physically speaking, the strikes of Orwen's palm were doing no harm aside from turning the omega's fair-skinned rump a delicious rosy hue. That coloration excited Ark, and so did the way her plump little cheeks jiggled after each firm smack. The sight quickened his pulse and sent the blood rushing to his member, which was now half-hard behind his loincloth.

But Ark was not the only one getting aroused.

Orwen's next blow landed across the center of the omega's partially spread crack. Based on the sudden shift in her squealing, it was clear that she had felt the blow in her most sensitive area.

It was the change in the omega's smell, however, that really tipped Ark off.

The omega was going into heat.

The alpha pack leader had known she would be going into heat soon. He had detected the clues when he scented her last night. But he had felt certain she had a couple days before the heat really set in.

Apparently Orwen's rough punishment had accidentally sped the process up.

"Orwen, stop!" Ark snapped.

His second ignored him and brought his hand down on the omega's bottom again. Orwen was not defiantly disobeying Ark's command. He simply had not heard him. He was too lost in his fit of rage.

Orwen raised his hand and started to bring it down once more.

This time, Ark strode forward and blocked the blow with his forearm. Orwen growled and looked up at him in surprise.

"I said *stop!*"

"But she needs to learn her lesson. She..."

Orwen's voice trailed off, and his pupils dilated into wide black circles. Now he could smell it too.

“*Source...*”

The omega moaned and bucked wildly. Naked and bound, she rolled off Orwen’s lap and hit the ground with a soft thud. Her eyes were open, but they had rolled back white in her head. Her back arched, lifting her leaking pink slit like an offering, spilling her raw scent into the air.

Ark’s cock instantly went rigid, and he had to pinch down his internal muscles to keep from emptying his balls right then and there.

Source her heat-scent was intense.

Ark had smelled an omega in heat before, of course. But never like *this*. Never so intense. Source, he could taste it in the back of his throat. He could practically see it billowing in hot plumes from every crevice of her naked body. From below her chin. From beneath her arms. And most of all from that swollen pink opening between her spread thighs.

That scent carried a message that was all too clear: the omega needed alpha seed.

Lots of it.

“We’ll have to tend to her,” Leros said. His voice was a mixture of eagerness and concern.

The youngster moved toward the omega, but Ark shoved him away with a low growl. The massive pack leader stooped and lifted the omega’s convulsing body in arms as easily as if she were weightless.

“Yes, we will tend to her heat. But not here. Not out in the open where we can be interrupted.”

“Where then?” Leros asked.

“The grotto.”

CHAPTER 10: LEROS

It took them less than half an hour to reach the grotto, but to Leros it felt like an eternity.

The place was a sizeable cave hidden behind a broad waterfall. The sun shone through the cascading water, filling the space with a soft wavering light. The stone walls echoed with the roaring, splashing sound. Normally the cave was filled with a pleasant mineral odor, but today the only thing Leros could smell was the overpowering scent of the omega in heat.

As soon as they were all inside, Ark strode to the center of the cave with the omega in his arms, and he started issuing orders.

“Orwen, get a fire going. Leros, prepare a mat for the omega.”

Leros jumped at his leader’s command and rushed to the side of the cave where their supplies were stored.

The grotto was a secret place that had been discovered several years earlier by a different pack of alphas. The leader of that pack was named Addom. He was now the Chief of the High Council. As a result, his pack now spent most of their time in the Central Ruins and only rarely ventured into the surrounding wilds. For that reason, Addom had bequeathed this secret place to Ark, with whom he was close friends. Now Ark, Orwen, and Leros used the grotto as a camping place. It served as a place of meditation before setting out on a long and arduous scouting journey through the far reaches of the Zone. With its warm clear water, it also served as a welcome

place of rest and relaxation when returning from such a journey.

But today it would serve a different purpose.

Today they would use this secret place to tend to the omega's heat.

The mats were rolled up and stored by the wall of the cave with the other supplies. There were four of them. One for each of the alphas plus another that was sometimes shared by the dogs (who were now outside guarding the entrance to the grotto). Leros selected his own mat and carried it back to the center of the room, where he spread it on the ground. It was made of two layers of woven leaves and reeds. It was not particularly comfortable, but it was better than the hard stones of the cave.

Normally, an omega in heat would have prepared a special nest for mating, but obviously the wild omega had not had time to make such preparations, and at this point she was too far gone for that.

They would simply have to make do.

Ark knelt and laid the writhing omega on her back on the mat. The pack leader had already removed the makeshift gag of Orwen's loincloth from her mouth, and she was moaning plaintively, wordlessly begging the alphas to quench her heat. Next, Ark untied the omega's wrists, which were still bound by the knotted leash. As soon as her arms were free, the omega flailed wildly.

“Give me a hand here, kid,” the pack leader rumbled. “Help me hold her down.”

As Leros and Ark steadied the omega’s squirming body against the mat, Orwen worked at the firepit nearby. There was kindling and wood stored in an alcove at the end of the cave, as well as some dry tinder and flint. Orwen skillfully constructed the fire, and within minutes it had blossomed into an orange blaze that filled the grotto with additional light and heat. The warm glow flickered over the omega’s restless, sweating body.

“Good,” Ark said. “Now we can get started.” He turned his gaze toward Leros. “All right, kid. Get down there between her legs.”

Leros’s heart skipped.

“M-me?” stammered.

Orwen sidled up beside Leros and shouldered the young alpha aside, taking his place holding the omega steady. “What’s the matter, kid? You scared?”

“No! I’m not scared!”

In truth, however, Leros *was* a little scared. Or at least he was nervous. He had never been with an omega before. Sure, he had learned all about it during his training. He understood what needed to be done, in theory at least, but he had no actual experience.

And now *he* was expected to tend to the omega’s heat?

But Ark was doing him a great honor, and Leros was determined to live up to it.

Leros moved around to the omega's legs, pushed her knees apart, and positioned himself between her open thighs. The air was thick with her wild scent. Her pheromones streamed into his lungs, hardening his cock to a painful extent.

Leros let his eyes fall on that sacred place at the apex of her legs.

Source, it was even more beautiful than he'd imagined.

Of course, Leros had seen a female's parts before. He had gotten plenty of chances to look at this naked omega today as he fed her snacks along the way. And even before that, he had caught glimpses of other pretty young omegas in the bathing houses of the Central Ruins. He had even attended a few binding rituals in his day.

But never before had Leros seen an omega's sex up close and spread open like *this*.

It was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen.

Pillowed outer labia lined with soft fur surrounded her more delicate inner folds, which were deep pink and glistening with the omega's oozing slick. And there in the center of that wet blossom of flesh was her tiny little entrance.

Source, it looked far too small to ever take a hard alpha cock inside it.

But the scent wafting from the seeping hole was intoxicating. For a long moment, all Leros could do was kneel there, wide-

eyed and gape-mouthed. He was transfixed, like someone beholding a holy vision.

“Well, kid?” Orwen growled, “what are you waiting for?”

Leros snapped out of his daze and looked at Orwen, then Ark, and finally the nameless omega. She was staring up at him with raw hunger in her wild eyes. Her pupils were blown wide with heat. Black circles edged with only a wire-thin rim of green.

Ark chuckled at the young alpha’s nervousness.

“Don’t worry, kid. I’ll tell you what to do.”

Leros’s face flooded red with a surge of embarrassment. But at the same time, a wave of relief swept over him. He was grateful to have Ark’s expert guidance in this matter.

Even before he had joined this pack, Leros had always looked up to Ark. All the young alphas had. Ark was a legend among the alphas. He was renowned throughout the tribes of the Central Ruins as the best tracker and scout in the Zone. So when Leros had come of age, he had been overjoyed to be selected as Ark’s pack brother. Leros knew it would not be easy. He knew that it would mean spending long periods of time in the wilderness. Ark preferred the wilds to the city, and he was known to take exceptionally long scouting excursions to the most distant reaches of the Zone. But to young Leros, that prospect of adventure was exciting.

Still, the lifestyle came with trade-offs. It meant long periods of time away from the Source. Away from the fastness of the

Central Ruins. Away from the safe places where all the omegas dwelled.

But today, Leros's long waiting was over. Today he would finally get his first taste of omega flesh.

And this one was deep in heat.

With Ark's guidance, Leros would help to quell that flame.

The other two alphas were holding her shoulders down. Orwen was already naked, having removed his loincloth earlier to use it as a gag. Now Ark stripped off his loincloth too, and he commanded Leros to do the same.

“You won't be putting your thing in her just yet, kid. She needs some breaking in first. But you don't want your clothes getting in the way when the time comes.”

Leros did as he was told.

When the sprawled-out omega saw Leros's cock standing proudly between his legs, she whimpered as if in fear, but her hips bucked upward to offer her inflamed cunt.

That sight was so arousing, Leros was tempted to spear himself into her then and there, but Ark had said that would come later. A young, unmated omega like this one would require sufficient time and preparation before she was ready to be truly bred.

The young alpha looked to his leader for guidance.

“First you need to touch her nubbin. Can you find it, kid?”

Leros felt perspiration breaking out across his forehead. This felt like an exam. He dropped his eyes once more to the omega's gyrating hips. At the top of her cleft, the inner lips met in a thin flap of skin like a little hood. Leros cautiously pulled the skin back to expose her throbbing pink pearl of flesh.

"Good, kid. Good," Ark growled. "Don't be scared. It's not going to bite you."

Leros flushed even deeper.

He knew that Ark was kidding about biting, but the joke was fitting. The omega had already bitten both Ark and Orwen in the short time they had all been together.

Now that she was in heat, however, the change that had come over her was incredible. She was no longer trying to escape or attack her captors—for surely that is how she viewed them—but instead she lay open and submissive, all but begging for the domination that her body now craved.

And the omega was not the only one whose attitude had changed. To Leros's surprise, Orwen was now offering his erection to the omega's open mouth—the same mouth that had bitten him less than an hour prior. Leros could still see the bite mark on the older alpha's shaft. But now Orwen seemed to have no qualms about shoving his unprotected cock between the omega's open lips, and she accepted it greedily, sucking and slurping at the bulbous tip.

"Pay attention, kid," Ark snapped.

“Right, sorry...”

The young alpha turned his attention back to the ripe berry at the top of the omega’s slit. Not sure exactly what he should do with it, Leros gingerly pressed his thumb against it and rubbed in a soft circle.

“Don’t be so timid, kid,” Ark said. “You’re not going to break it. Trust me.”

The pack leader demonstrated. Reaching down between the omega’s wide-open legs, he swiped some of her abundant slick and smeared it over her nub. Then he rubbed her deeply, grinding her clit roughly beneath the pads of his large fingers.

The omega’s response was immediate and intense. Her pelvis humped against Ark’s fingers and she gave a muffled moan of bliss around Orwen’s cock filling her mouth.

“See?” Ark said. “Now you try it.”

Leros followed his pack leader’s example, coating his fingers in the omega’s fragrant secretions and then rubbing her button with increased vigor.

But Ark was not satisfied.

“Harder, boy, harder! The omega needs it harder...”

The pack leader took hold of Leros’s fingers and pushed them down harder against the omega’s clitoris, grinding them hard like a quern. Leros feared the pressure would hurt the omega. He could feel the hardness of her pubic bone beneath her flesh. But just as she had done with Ark, she moaned with pleasure and rocked her pelvis against Leros’s touch.

“She’s not some delicate flower, kid. Omega’s need it rough. And this one needs it rougher than most, I reckon.”

Leros nodded and continued to rub, grinding her hard clit beneath his fingers.

He was getting the hang of this.

The omega hummed and whined through her full mouth, and those noises sent throbbing pulses of arousal through Leros’s painfully hard erection. Source, he wanted to put it inside her so damn bad.

But he had to follow his leader’s instructions.

“All right, kid,” Ark said. “Now try using your tongue.”

Leros did not have to be told twice. He dropped his face to the omega’s wide-open crotch and starting tonguing her with hungry, wet strokes. Her flavor saturated his mouth, bitter, raw and salty.

It was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted.

That flavor sent Leros into a frenzy of lust. Hot saliva surged into his mouth and drooled from his lips like a dog at feeding time. He laved her cunt with wild, dripping strokes of his tongue, and soon the omega’s entire crotch, ass, and inner thighs were a sloppy mess of alpha spit and omega slick.

“Her nubbin, boy! Focus on her nubbin!”

The pack leader’s voice broke through Leros’s daze, and he focused his energy on the omega’s erect clitoris. He tested different methods of stimulation, alternating between quick

flicks and long, abrading strokes. The omega mewled with pleasure. She arched her back and raised her hips, crushing her pussy against the young alpha's face. She seemed especially to enjoy the sensation of the hard steel piercing on his bottom lip.

Leros was giving her what she needed.

He was making her feel good, and knowing that made him proud. It also made him horny as all get-out. The tip of his throbbing dick wept long strings of clear pre-seed.

Source, he wanted to come so fucking bad.

But the omega's needs took priority.

Ark had risen to his feet, and he towered over them now, watching the young alpha's technique with an eagle eye.

"You're doing good, kid. The omega is enjoying that."

Leros felt a sudden surge of pride.

"But she needs more," Ark went on. "Her heat is deeper than anything I've witnessed before, and it's going to take a lot of work to quench her thirst. You'll need to stimulate her inside too."

"Inside?" Leros gasped.

"Don't stop licking her, kid," Ark snapped. "You have to keep your tongue on that clit at all times. But at the same time, you're going to pleasure her from inside as well. Now, just follow my instructions. First, you're going to put your finger into her hole."

Still licking her ripe berry, Leros pressed his index finger to the omega's entrance.

"Use your middle finger," Ark said. "It's longer."

Of course. What had Leros been thinking? He switched fingers and carefully shoved his long middle finger into the omega's wet hole. At first Leros thought she would be too tight even to accept his finger inside her cunt. But with a little pressure his digit popped inside her rim. Leros plunged into her knuckle deep, and the omega squealed.

"She's a tight one, isn't she?" Ark growled.

"Mm-hm," Leros mumbled against her clitoris, and the vibrations of his voice set off even more convulsions of pleasure in the omega's body.

Source she was so sensitive.

With his finger now fully inside her, Leros started to explore, twisting and turning his digit this way and that to feel of her soft, slippery inner tissues.

"Try stroking her like this," Ark said.

Keeping his mouth latched to the omega's nub, Leros cocked his eyes upward to see what Ark was trying to show him. The pack leader was flexing and curling his finger in a beckoning gesture.

Leros gave that maneuver a try, stroking his fingertip along the front wall of the omega's wet tunnel, which elicited even more high-pitched moans.

Oh, she liked that.

“Good,” Ark said, watching the proceedings like a stern teacher. “Now, you want to find the omega’s sensitive spot. It’s like a very soft lump on the front wall of her channel. Do you feel it?”

Leros searched for the lump that Ark was talking about, but he couldn’t find it. The omega’s interior felt uniformly and exquisitely smooth.

“Uh-uh,” Leros answered and shook his head while still sucking and licking the omega’s clitoris.

“Just keep stroking her; you’ll find it sooner or later.”

Leros hoped it was sooner. He couldn’t take much more of this. The scent and flavor of the omega was invading every fiber of his being, and his cock was so stiff it felt like it would break off if he so much as touched it.

Suddenly the omega bucked and moaned even more loudly, and Leros thought he had made her come. Then he heard Orwen’s loud grunts, and he realized what was really going on.

The older alpha was pumping his load into the omega’s mouth.

Leros watched as the omega drew her lips off his pack brother’s cock. She gasped wildly for air while the excess seed bubbled and drooled from the corner of her mouth. Orwen shot a few final ropes across her face and neck. Then the older alpha collapsed on his back, spent and panting.

“Focus, boy! Focus!” Ark growled.

Leros turned his attention back to his task. He sucked and licked and fingered the omega's cunt with an almost angry intensity.

Suddenly he felt it.

Leros was not sure whether it was Orwen's seed that had done it, or his own diligent ministrations—or a combination of both, perhaps—but now the inner lining of the omega's channel was starting to change. Her canal was engorging with arousal, swelling even tighter around Leros's finger, and her silky inner membrane was taking on a corrugated texture.

And there, on her front wall, just behind her hard nubbin, Leros felt the bump that Ark had told him about before.

At last, he had discovered the omega's special spot.

With a bit of effort, Leros managed to squeeze another finger into that swollen canal, and he stroked that subtle lump with a rough digging motion. The omega yowled and bridged her back, hips shuddering as Leros dominated her with his mouth and fingers.

This was really happening. The omega was going to come, and it was *his* doing.

“Keep it up,” Ark encouraged him. “She's almost there, boy! She's almost there!”

Suddenly the omega let out a high keening sound which was amplified by the acoustics of the cavern. Her body convulsed so violently that it startled Leros. Her thighs clamped shockingly tight around his head, then relaxed.

For a moment, Leros thought he had hurt her.

Then he felt and smelled and tasted the hot fluid spurting from her hole.

This fluid was different from her arousal fluid. It was thick and creamy, almost like alpha seed, but somehow different. This stuff was sweet—intensely sweet—and it sent a rush of fire coursing through Leros's veins.

He could hold back no longer.

Without so much as a touch, Leros was coming too. His hard cock bucked and jumped, his knot swelled, and his tip spewed hot jets of thick seed onto the grass mat between his knees.

“Damn it, boy, don't waste it!” Ark shouted. “The omega needs that stuff.”

Leros felt light-headed. His legs were weak and rubbery beneath him, and it was all he could do to keep from keeling over in spastic pleasure. But somehow, through sheer force of will, he managed to shift his hands toward his crotch, cupping his palms to catch the remaining spurts of his warm seed.

“Good enough,” Ark muttered. “Now get it inside of her, boy. As much as you can.”

Leros nodded drunkenly. Using one hand as a bowl, he scooped his cum with his fingers, smeared it over the omega's spread cunt, and pushed the stuff inside her one viscous glob at a time. All the while, the naked, sweaty omega writhed feverishly and moaned in ecstasy.

“Well done,” Ark said, dropping to his knees next to Leros.

“What’s next?” Leros asked.

With a growl, the pack leader shoved the younger alpha aside and took up position between the omega’s slathered thighs.

“Next it’s my turn...”

CHAPTER 11: EMBLA

The roar of the waterfall reverberated through the cavernous grotto, but Embla could scarcely hear it over the rush of blood in her ears. The salty taste of alpha fluid coated her tongue, and the strong, grassy smell of it filled the warm air. Her blood ran hot and cold in her veins.

Everything Embla had feared was finally coming to pass.

She was in heat. The alphas were claiming her.

And it felt *amazing*.

Her muscles were still singing with electric vibrations from whatever Leros had just done to her. During her previous heats, hidden away in her dark burrow, Embla had conjured similar sensations with her own fingers. But never from the inside like that. And never that intense. Not even close.

But Leros had not been the only one responsible for that brutal climax.

Through it all, Ark had towered above her and Leros, apparently giving the young alpha instructions on how to use his fingers and tongue. Leros was a good student, and Ark was obviously an experienced teacher.

Now the massive pack leader had shoved the youngster aside and taken up position between Embla's spread thighs. But he was not touching her as Leros had done. Instead, the enormous alpha was gripping his hard cock, brandishing it like a club.

Did he mean to put that thing inside her?

Surely not...

Though she had never been mated before, Embla was not entirely ignorant of what it involved. She had seen the animals of the forest, she knew how they coupled. And what's more, during her imprisonment, she had seen the bad alphas doing it too. Sometimes to omegas who were less fortunate than her. Sometimes even to other alphas.

Was that what Ark was going to do to her now?

The pack leader growled and jerked his massive cock, shifting the smooth sleeve of outer skin over the hard inner core of his erection. Fluid trickled from his tip—clear, stringy stuff like drool that drizzled over Embla's already stained crotch.

His hard piercing glinted in the firelight, and Embla shivered.

She'd had one massive cock inside of her already. Orwen had used her for his pleasure, even though he clearly despised her. And of course Embla despised him right back, but she had not even tried to resist. Her heat-ridden body was so thirsty for that sticky alpha fluid.

But that had been different. Orwen's cock had been inside her mouth, not between her legs.

Now Ark grinned, dark and cruel.

With a flick of his wrist, the pack leader smacked his plump tip against Embla's tingling nub. Immediately, a second wave of orgasmic pleasure wracked Embla's helpless body. Her screams echoed through the caves.

One hard thump of his cock was all it took. Leros had been good, but Ark... Ark was a master.

Her master.

And now he was going to torture her with excruciating pleasure.

Pressing his oozing cock against her hot center, he dragged his piercing back and forth across her nubbin, raising her climax to new heights. Sensations like blissful electricity wriggled through Embla's pelvis as she screamed and twisted on the mat.

Through it all, the other two alphas kept her pinned down.

Ark slowly thrust his pelvis, sliding his shaft up her pubic mound. Still shuddering from her second orgasm, Embla cocked her head down and stared at the monstrous member that lay hard and pulsing on her lower abdomen. Ark's warm, smooth balls were pressed against her vulva, and his pierced tip reached all the way to Embla's belly button.

There was no way that monstrosity would fit inside her. He would disembowel her with one hard thrust.

And then there was the girth of it. Leros had shoved two fingers inside Embla's hole, and that had filled her up. But that angry, throbbing pole that Ark was sporting? That thing would split her in two.

That cock terrified her.

Still, she wanted it.

She wanted it more than she had ever wanted anything before in her life. Her cunt hungered for it like a famished mouth. She needed to feel it inside her, even if it killed her.

With a whine, Embla lifted her hips and humped her messy center against the underside of Ark's hard cock, slathering his meat with the raunchy fluid coating her sex—a mixture of slick and cum and sweat and spit.

Ark's grin widened.

“Good,” the alpha purred. “Good omega.”

Slowly, the alpha pack leader angled his cock downward until his pierced tip was pressed against Embla's seeping entrance. He started to push, slowly but firmly, and her hole gradually stretched around his rounded tip. He pressed into her creamy opening, right up to the ridge that crowned his cockhead, and then he stopped.

It was a good thing, too. Embla couldn't take anymore than that. Her hole felt stretched to the very limit.

A few minutes ago, she wouldn't have even been able to handle Ark's tip. But her body was changing. Adapting to accommodate these dominant alphas. Was it because of those two loads the other alphas had already deposited inside her body? Was their fluid changing her?

Embla wasn't sure, but one thing was clear enough—Ark intended to add his own fluid to the mix, and based on the size of the sacs dangling between his muscled thighs, it would be an ample load.

Embla whimpered in anticipation.

Ark reached down and gripped his hard shaft in his fist and started to stroke his cock, grunting with each pump of his fist. He couldn't fit inside her, so he was going to jerk off straight into her hole.

Embla moaned as she felt the warm, hard circle of his piercing inside her.

“Ohhh...”

Leros and Orwen continued to hold her down. Even though they had already spent themselves inside her, the other two alphas were still fully erect, and their pelvises were rocking and thrusting slightly, an instinctual reflex brought on by their animal lust.

Embla raised her hands to touch them both. First she fondled Orwen's balls, then Leros's. She gripped both of their cocks and started to stroke, pumping their shafts with the same steady rhythm that Ark was using on his own brutal pole.

Her body tingled with heat. Her heart thumped rabbit-fast, and her naked breasts rose and fell with rapid, short breaths.

Later, when the spell was over, she knew would be ashamed. But for now she didn't care about anything except pleasure, release, and her insatiable thirst for the pearly fluid contained inside those big alpha balls.

She tugged Orwen and Leros closer until their dripping cocks were pressed at both corners of her mouth.

The alpha scent wafting from the glands between their legs was overpowering.

Embla started to lick.

First, she swirled her tongue around Leros's head, then she turned and did the same to Orwen's. She sucked and kissed them, going back and forth between the two erect dicks, and her mouth filled once again with the salty flavor of their precursor fluid.

And through it all, Ark continued to jerk himself between her legs.

The pack leader's free hand was on her lower belly now. His thumb found her swollen clit and rubbed her in rough, well-lubricated circles. Soon, a third violent orgasm had seized Embla's body.

Her hips bucked, but Ark kept his tip wedged tightly in her stretched hole. The hand on her belly pushed down hard, pinning her pelvis in place.

Embla moaned in ecstasy.

The two alpha cocks slid across her open mouth. Piercings clicked against her teeth and against each other. Her tongue darted out, licking both of them at once while her little fists continued to pump the long, hard shafts.

"Good," Ark said.

All three of the alphas were rumbling and purring now. Their hands fisted her hair and pawed at her sweat-beaded breasts.

Ark tensed with his impending release. His taut muscles were stark and glistening in the firelight. His huge sacs tightened against his body, his hard knot swelled, and he roared as his tip unloaded a jet of cream straight into Embla's hole, followed by another and another, coating her insides with sticky warmth.

“Yes!” the omega cried “Yes! Yes!”

Ark's eyes widened at the sound of her voice. Even Orwen and Leros seemed to pause briefly in their thrusting. They had heard her speak before, but not much, and the sound of her mouth forming words surprised them.

But their hesitation soon passed.

Ark was not done with her, it seemed.

Even though he had spilled inside her, his knotted erection did not abate. And his cum only added to that change that was already happening in Embla's body. Her hole gaped a little wider, inviting him in, and Ark accepted the invitation.

He slid into her slowly, penetrating her to the root, and there was a squelch as his seed was pushed out of her.

Embla whined in mingled pleasure and pain.

The inner muscles of her pelvis strained to accommodate his girth, but the sensation of fullness and domination was worth the discomfort.

This was what she needed.

She felt a rough fist in her hair. It was Orwen's. He lifted her head and turned her face toward Leros. The younger alpha's

cock slipped between her parted lips, penetrating her mouth just as Ark was penetrating her other hole. The base of Leros's shaft was still swollen from before, and his bulbous knot pressed against her wet lips.

Embla moaned and slurped around that thick meat as Orwen bobbed her head.

Leros did not last long. Within a matter of seconds, his cock was spurting into her again, flooding her mouth with his salty cream.

Orwen jerked her head back, barely giving her time to catch her breath before claiming her mouth for his own use.

And all the while, Ark continued to fuck her, taking her with hard, jolting thrusts that left her weak. His bulging knot thumped and rubbed deliciously at her vulva. Embla was grateful that knot was on the outside of her. Even with the changes taking place inside her body, she would never be able to accommodate that massive bulb of hard flesh.

With a roar, Orwen spent himself into Embla's mouth. She swallowed it down, and the thick fluid settled warmly in her belly.

"Good," Ark growled above her. "Take it, omega. Take it all."

At last, Orwen let go of her hair and withdrew his cock from her mouth, stretching strings of saliva and seed in its wake. He fell back on his haunches, grunting like an animal.

Now Ark had her all to himself.

The massive pack leader fell on top of her, clutching her body in a snug embrace. His scent enveloped her. His hips swiveled deliciously, cock pistoning in and out, balls slapping against her slippery butt, knot grinding against her outer lips.

“Come for me, little omega,” Ark purred. “Come around your alpha’s cock.”

Come.

Embla knew that word, but she didn’t understand the meaning now. Why was Ark telling her to come? She was already right here underneath him. She could hardly get any closer, but she tried, curling her little arm’s around his thick, bullish neck and squeezing for dear life.

“Come.” Ark’s breath tickled at her ear. “Come...”

Suddenly Embla understood. It wasn’t *her* whom Ark was beckoning to come. The alpha was calling to the wet, hot, frightening sensation of pleasure welling up inside her again.

“Come...”

Embla let herself go. The tension exploded in her core, racing through her limbs in shivering waves of bliss. Her helpless cries echoed through the cave as the inner walls of her hole bore down hard on the alpha’s thrusting cock.

With a feral roar, Ark spilled inside her again. Hot sticky gushes that coated her interior and leaked from her stretched opening and trickled down her ass.

“*Ohhh,*” Embla moaned.

She fell back against her mat, sweaty and exhausted. A few final aftershocks of her orgasm rippled through her body. She felt as though she could just melt right through the stone floor of the cave and disappear.

Totally satisfied.

Totally relaxed.

But a low rumbling growl roused her out of her temporary state of post-coital serenity.

It was Ark. The massive alpha was hunched over her, lips curled back in a frightening snarl. The other alphas were shouting something at their leader, but Embla could not understand them. In fact, she barely heard them. She was far too worried about what Ark was going to do.

Before she had a chance to react, Ark's face dropped to her neck. She felt his rough beard against her smooth skin. His soft lips. His hard, sharp teeth.

Ark bit.

His fangs broke the skin right at the curve between Embla's neck and shoulder. There was a fiery, venomous pain. Embla screamed, and her voice mingled with the frantic shouting of the other alphas and the roar of the waterfall in the background.

Finally, Ark released his bite on her neck. The other alphas were dragging him off of her. His face looked confused, like someone waking up from a dream.

Suddenly and instinctually, Embla understood what had happened.

The alpha had marked her.

She was his now.

His plaything.

His pet.

CHAPTER 12: ARK

Ark reclined in the sticky aftermath. The grass mat was sodden and ruined. Its woven leaves were torn in places and drenched with a pungent mixture of bodily fluids. No point in even attempting to clean it—the mat would have to be thrown out. Good thing there were three more.

Ark's pack brother's lay nearby on the stone floor, their panting, sweat-sheened bodies limned by the orange glow of the fire.

The omega lay curled and messy in his arms.

From the outside, Ark looked totally relaxed. But within his chest, his heart was pounding a rapid tattoo, and his brain was churning with a multitude of conflicting thoughts that seemed every bit as loud as the roar of the waterfall that curtained the entrance of this hidden lair.

For the fifth time in as many minutes, Ark dipped his eyes to the naked and bespattered omega who lay shivering in his embrace. His gaze roamed all over her enchanting little body, but his eyes always returned to that place where her delicate neck curved into her soft shoulder. The skin there was marred by a small wound—a red dotted crescent where Ark's teeth had punctured her flesh.

She was marked.

And it was his doing.

The wound had already closed. It was mending quickly, and by the following morning, it would be completely healed, leaving behind a dark crescent of scar tissue that attested Ark's claim over this omega. The rapidity of the healing was due to certain enzymes in Ark's alpha saliva, which had a rejuvenative effect on omega flesh. Or so he had been told. But that was Outsider science, which had a rational explanation for everything. As far as Ark was concerned, however, it was magic, plain and simple. The magic of the Source.

Anyway, he was less concerned about *how* that bite mark was healing, and far more concerned about its *implications*.

He had marked the omega.

Ark had not meant for that to happen. His intention had merely been to quell the omega's heat. But her scent had been so intoxicating, her mewling whimpers so arousing, that he had lost control of his animal urges and gone too far.

The omega belonged to him now, and by extension his pack brothers. She was theirs—their possession, their responsibility.

Ark gazed at the omega a moment longer as the neverending crash of the waterfall reverberated through the warm, swirling air of the cave.

“What are we going to do about her?” Orwen asked.

Ark's second was sitting up now, arms resting on his knees. His usual disgruntled look had returned to his face. Ark paused for one beat before answering.

“Don’t know.”

Ark wondered how much the omega could understand. She seemed to have some rudimentary linguistic skills, but he wasn’t sure how much. Did she know they were discussing her?

“I say we get rid of her,” Orwen growled. “We’ve done our good deed and put out her heat. Now let’s take her back to the woods and tell her to get lost.”

Ark had expected that reaction from Orwen. In point of fact, it was not unheard of. Among the tribes of the Central Ruins, a pack of alphas might tend to the needs of an unmarked omega, and afterward they would go their separate ways, perhaps never even speaking again. It was certainly the cleanest, simplest solution. In other circumstances, Ark may have even agreed with Orwen’s proposal.

But this situation was anything but simple now.

Ark shook his head. “Orwen, she’s been marked.”

By me, Ark added mentally, *I’ve marked her.* Why exactly had he done that? Something had come over him in that moment of passion. It was like he had been bewitched by this strange little omega.

“Nobody needs to know that,” Orwen remarked. “Not if we don’t take her back to the ruins. That crazy omega doesn’t understand what that mark means.”

“You don’t know that,” Leros blurted.

“Shut up, kid,” Orwen growled.

Ark slowly raised his hand, signalling for silence. “*Both* of you shut up. I’m the pack leader, and I’ll be making the final decision in this matter. But I need time to think about it, and I’m not going to decide on an empty stomach.”

Both Orwen and Leros looked at him silently.

“We’re not going back to the ruins tonight, brothers. We’ll sleep here and strike out again at sunup.”

It was, after all, their usual routine. All three of them preferred the majesty of the wilderness to the tribal rules and strictures of life in the Central Ruins. Of course, from time to time it was necessary to return to the ruins in order to rejuvenate themselves in the presence of the Source. But whenever they would return from one of their long scouting excursions in the forests and the badlands beyond, they would always spend one final night here in this peaceful cave, savoring nature’s beauty.

This night, however, they would have company.

Orwen started to speak again. “Boss, listen—“

Ark waved his hand in annoyance and cut him off.

“Not now, I said. Look, I fully understand the consequences if we bring this omega back to the ruins with my mark upon her neck. That is why I will consider the matter carefully. Don’t you trust me, brother Orwen?”

The second dropped his head and glumly muttered, “yes.”

“Good. Now, this dirty little omega needs a thorough cleaning.”

“I’ll do it,” Leros offered, eagerly hopping to his feet.

“No,” Ark grunted. “I’ll do it. I need some time alone with this omega... to study her.”

Leros dropped his head with a disappointed nod.

Well done, Ark, the pack leader thought to himself bitterly. In the space of a minute you have succeeded in disappointing both of your pack brethren.

Oh well, such was the reality of being a leader.

“You have an even more important task,” Ark said. “I’m tired of eating this dried meat, and I’m sure the omega would appreciate something fresh as well. You and Orwen can go out and catch us some fish to roast for dinner.”

Leros’s face brightened at the thought of providing sustenance for the omega.

“I can gather some berries too. I know a place nearby where they grow, and they should be really ripe and sweet this time of year.”

Orwen was less enthusiastic, but he still seemed grateful to have something to do. He rose with a weary grunt, found his loincloth and refastened it. Leros did the same. The two alpha warriors retrieved a pair of long, thin fishing spears from a crude rack by the wall and headed toward the entrance of the cave. Their bodies were two silhouettes against the glow of the sunlit waterfall.

As Ark watched them go, he felt as if he were watching two warring halves of his mind. Young Leros, overeager to

welcome the strange omega into the fold. Bitter Orwen who would prefer to be shed of her.

Which path would Ark choose?

Either way, he would alienate one member of his pack, it seemed. But the alphas were not the only entities involved in the equation.

His eyes dropped once again to the curled-up omega.

What did *she* want in this matter? Did she even know? It was not like Ark could simply ask her.

But there was one thing he could do for her, and that was to wash away the caked mess that was drying on her breasts and belly and thighs.

Ark stood and hoisted the little omega in his arms.

“Come on,” he grunted. “It’s time to get you cleaned up, imp.”

“Embla.”

Ark looked down at the omega in surprise. She was staring up at him wide-eyed. Her pupils were still dilated, but not nearly as much as before.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Embla.”

“Is that your name, little one?”

The omega nodded slightly, and Ark smiled faintly in response.

“Very well, Embla. Let’s make you clean.”

CHAPTER 13: ARK

It was getting late in the day, and the sunlight sparkling through the liquid curtain of the waterfall was turning a pretty golden hue. Where the clear liquid splashed into the rippling pool, it raised gossamer plumes of mist. Ark carried the omega toward this pool with the intention of cleaning her there.

But as soon as he approached the stony bank at the water's edge, the omega yelped and started to struggle in his arms, her eyes bulging in fear.

"Calm down," Ark purred. "It's just water."

Before they got in, both he and the omega needed to remove their bandages. Keeping a tight hold on her leash, Ark set the omega down by the water's edge, knelt, and peeled away the strips of cloth bound around her upper leg. Thanks to the salve they had applied and their proximity to the Source, the burns were pretty much completely healed already. Embla gasped in wonder.

"It's the Source," Ark told her. "It heals alphas and omegas. See?"

He stood and unwound the bandage around his knuckles where Embla had bitten him, showing her that his own wound was healed too.

Embla's amazement shifted to a look of remorse. Did she feel bad for biting him last night?

“It’s all right,” Ark purred. “I don’t blame you.”

It was true. He did not blame her. The omega had only been acting out of an instinct for self preservation after all.

“Come on, let’s wash up.”

Ark gave Embla’s leash a soft tug, but the omega stood rooted in place, refusing to come any closer to the water.

“Embla. Come.”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head, swinging her tangled blond hair in the process.

“Oh Source damn it,” Ark muttered under his breath.

He scooped up the omega in his arms and carried her to the water. But as he stepped into the shallows, the omega went into full-blown panic mode. She clawed and scrambled at his shoulders until she was practically sitting on top of Ark’s head.

“Are you scared of water?”

“Scare,” came the single-word reply.

“Can’t you swim?”

“No,” Embla answered, quaking in fear. “No swim. No swim.”

Well, she was going to have to get over her fear of water because her skin was a mess from their earlier romp. In fact, she was smudging the raunchy stuff all over Ark’s head. In the heat of their mating it had not bothered him, but now he did not care for that one bit.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I will hold you, okay?”

He carefully started to lift Embla off his head and shoulders.

“No!” she screamed. “No okay!”

She kicked and flailed wildly as he lowered her toward the water. Her movements almost seemed to be a very ungraceful mimicry of swimming. When her swinging feet touched the surface, their kicking splashed water everywhere, and Embla howled in panic. Ark slowly lowered her further until she was submerged to her shoulders. Her arms flapped and beat the surface while her neck craned to keep her head as high as possible.

“Calm down,” Ark growled. “I’m not going to let you go.”

“No let go!” Embla choked. “No let go!”

“Do you want me to let you go?” Ark asked, teasing.

“NO!”

Embla flung her arms around the alpha, clinging tightly to his neck. Had he not clutched her tightly, she would have climbed him again.

“You really don’t like water, do you?”

“No like,” she answered in a quavering voice.

She was shivering, but it was not from the temperature of the water, which was nice and warm. The river that flowed over the top of the grotto was broad and shallow, and the sun heated its waters easily, which made the waterfall and pool ideal for bathing.

Ark just held the omega in the water for a few minutes, letting her get acclimated to the water.

“See, it’s not so bad,” he said. “It feels pretty good, right?”

“No.”

Well, at least they were communicating now. This was more than Ark had heard Embla speak all day. Clearly she had acquired some language, though her vocabulary seemed small, and her grammar almost nonexistent.

And then there was her accent, which was very strange indeed. Ark had heard different accents before. There was the way that he and the other alphas of the central tribe spoke. Then there were the various Farlander accents, which usually varied by tribe. And last there were the Outsiders, from beyond the great wall. A few of them lived in the Zone now. In fact, one of them, an omega named Lily, was the mate of Addom, the leader of the central council.

But Embla’s accent did not match any of those. Sure, there were hints of the central accent, as well as some notes of Farlander speech. But more than anything it sounded like a child—not the timbre, but the awkwardness and incoordination of her lips and tongue, like she did not have much practice speaking.

Ark decided to try some questions.

“Embla, where are you from?”

“Hm?”

“Where. Do. You. Come. From?”

“Frum.”

Okay, maybe that question was a little too difficult. Ark tried something different, and he simplified his grammar.

“Family?” he asked. “Embla have family?”

“No.”

“Have friend?”

“Mm. Have.”

“Who?” Ark asked. “Who Embla friend?”

“Dog,” she said, and yipped to make it clear. “Dog friend.”

Very strange. Was she talking about Ark’s dogs? Smoke, Shadow, and Ghost? Ark did not think so. Indeed, the little omega had an unusual rapport with his canines, and they were clearly very fond of her, which was unusual. But Ark sensed she was talking about a different dog.

“Where dog friend?” Ark tried.

Embla’s expression dropped into sadness and tears sprang to her eyes. It hurt Ark’s heart to look at her.

“Away,” she whispered. “Dog friend go ’way.”

Ark was curious, but he could see this was a painful topic for her. He chose not to press further in that direction.

More important, one thing was clear—the omega was alone in the world.

The fact that she had been able to fend for herself so effectively was a testament to her cleverness and

determination. The girl might not be much of a talker, but there was a crafty brain hiding behind that pretty face of hers, and Ark liked that.

There were many things that Ark wanted to ask her, but right now the most important thing was getting his new pet cleaned up.

Ark lowered Embla a little more, and she cried out in panic.

“Put your feet down,” Ark purred.

“No! No swim! No water swim!”

“Feet,” Ark said a little more firmly. “Down.”

Embla didn't understand. Or more likely, she just wasn't listening. Fine. Ark would just have to show her instead.

With a swift motion, he dunked the crazy little omega underwater and then let go.

For a few seconds, the water in front of him churned and splashed with Embla's frenzied flailing until she realized that the pool was not very deep. Her head broke through the surface, gasping and sputtering, blond hair stuck to her neck and shoulders in matted coils.

Ark looked at the wet omega for a moment, then burst into laughter.

Embla gave him a green glare.

“No funny,” she growled.

“Stay put,” Ark commanded.

Letting go of the leash, which was still attached to Embla's collar, Ark left the omega standing chest deep in the water. The alpha climbed out and walked dripping across the stone floor.

It was perhaps a little reckless. After all, the omega had made one attempt at escaping earlier today, and she had nearly succeeded in that. But Ark figured it was safe enough. Even though the omega was touching bottom, she couldn't move very quickly in the water, and Ark would have no trouble catching her should she try to flee.

He looked over his shoulder and caught Embla glancing at the narrow stone path that turned past the waterfall and led outside. But she stayed where she was.

Ark walked to the cave wall where a natural alcove held some bathing supplies—natural soap made from the pulp of a plant that grew in the region, and a large sponge that had been brought from the Central Ruins.

With these supplies in hand, Ark returned to the water.

“Good girl.”

He looped the end of the omega's leash around his wrist, led her nearer to the waterfall, and gently turned her around so that he could begin washing her back with the soapy sponge.

At first, the omega was apprehensive, but soon the tension drained from her shoulders, and she leaned back into the scrubbing. Once her back was clean, Ark wrapped his arms

around her and began to wash her front, enjoying the slippery sensation of her soaped-up breasts in the process.

“Does that feel good?” Ark asked.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Feel good.”

Her nipples were firm and springy beneath his fingers, and blood surged into Ark’s member, matching her arousal with his own. The omega gasped aloud as she felt that engorged member pressing against her soft backside.

Source, her scent...

Embla’s heat had not been totally quenched it seemed.

She reached beneath the surface of the water and gently took hold of his hardened shaft, stroking it slowly.

“What this?” Embla asked.

“Cock,” Ark chuckled.

“Cok.”

Her pronunciation was funny, biting off the vowel a little too quickly. Ark repeated the word for her, and Embla practiced a few more times until the word felt comfortable in her mouth.

She turned around. A faint smirk played at the corner of her lips, and a mischievous light twinkled in her eyes.

Suddenly, Embla dropped down, submerging herself beneath the rippling surface. Ark watched her curiously. Her hair drifted in the water. Just as suddenly as she had gone under, Embla popped back up, hair plastered to her neck and shoulders in blond tendrils. Her cheeks were puffed out wide,

lips pursed. Ark didn't realize what she was doing until it was too late.

Like a fountain, Embla spit a stream of water directly into the alpha's face.

"Source!" Ark closed his eyes against the unexpected playful attack and shook his head while the omega broke into a fit of wild laughter.

"I cock! Hee-hee! I cock!"

Ark rubbed the water from his eyes and glared at Embla. The omega looked up at him with a beaming smile, evidently quite proud of her little joke.

"Naughty little imp," Ark rumbled.

Tossing the sponge back to the stone shore, Ark lathered up his hands with the remainder of the soap and began to work it into the omega's wild mane of blond hair. His fingers caught on many tangles. They would deal with those once they got back to the ruins where there were combs. For now, Ark would just do the best he could to cleanse the dirt away.

He massaged her scalp deeply, and she moaned softly in satisfaction. She leaned back into him hard now, abandoning herself completely—for the time being at least.

While he rubbed, massaged, and lathered her hair, Ark's eyes fell again on the mark.

Source, what was he going to do about that?

He thought back to what Orwen had said. His second had said that the omega didn't even understand what the mark meant, but Ark was not so sure about that. That mark went deeper than words and rational thought. He and the omega were bound now on a primal level.

Then again, Orwen had a point. Embla would never fit in with the other omegas of the Central Ruins. She would be shunned by them for her wild, untamed ways.

And more than that, taking on an omega mate would change the entire dynamic of the pack. Being unmated meant they were free to roam the wilderness of the Zone freely. But that would not be the case if they completed the bonding process. They would be unable to travel too far away from their omega mate without experiencing physical and emotional torment. The omega would have to stay behind in the Central Ruins for protection. And at least one of the alphas would need to stay with her at all times, missing out on future excursions.

Ark was not sure that he was ready for that.

The wilderness was his first love, and he was not ready to give that up for a domestic life amid the bustle of the Central Ruins.

It was a dilemma.

Embla or the wilderness. He could not have them both.

But weirdly enough, Embla herself seemed like the very embodiment of the wild lands. Her untamed, unpredictable personality that could shift at a moment's notice, sunny and calm one second, then raging like a thunderstorm the next. Her

eyes, green as sunlight through new leaves in spring. And her scent—oh Source, her scent—rich and earthy and slightly tart like wild berries and raw honey.

Ark knew what he had to do.

He would not send her away like Orwen wanted. Nor would he drag her kicking and screaming to the Central Ruins on a leash.

No, he would let *Embla* choose.

Tonight, when they lay down for sleeping, he would take the leash off of her. If she was still there in the morning—of her own volition—then Ark would know that they were meant to be together.

Embla made an annoyed whimper in his arms.

“Why stop?” she asked.

Ark had been so deep in thought that he had stopped massaging her scalp. With a purr, he started again, working the lather deep into her roots. But his eyes never left the mark on her neck.

CHAPTER 14: EMBLA

It was getting late. The sunlight through the crystal curtain of the waterfall had shifted from gold to red to soft violet and finally darkness. The crackling fire was now the only source of light inside the grotto. Its dancing flames lit the cave with a soft orange glow and projected onto the rock walls shuddering, oversized shadows of the figures gathered around the flames. The air was redolent with the lovely smell of charred wood and roasting fish seasoned with wild herbs.

Embla crouched before the flames, letting the heat of the fire dry her after the nice bath Ark had given her.

It was a very strange sensation.

Embla couldn't even remember the last time she had been really and truly clean like this. It wasn't just that the water had washed away the sticky mess that the alphas had made. The strange bubbly soap had gotten right down into her pores, stripping away every speck of dirt and leaving her skin feeling softer and smoother than it had ever felt before.

It was a bit disconcerting, actually. It made her feel vulnerable. Naked.

Of course, Embla was always naked, but now she actually *felt* it. She was half-tempted to run outside and roll in the dirt just to feel normal again, but she knew the alphas would not be happy about that, and she didn't want another thrashing like the one Orwen had given her earlier that day.

Besides, her collar was still in place around her throat, and Ark was crouching beside her, holding the leash.

Embla wasn't going anywhere.

Well, that was fine—for now at least. The food that Orwen was preparing smelled delicious. He and Leros had returned a little while ago carrying several gleaming fish they had caught.

Embla's mouth had watered at the sight. She loved fish. She was quite skilled at catching them with her bare hands, and she would eat them raw. But apparently that's not how the alphas liked to eat them. She watched as they set to work preparing the meal.

Crouching on the other side of the flames, Leros and Orwen used stone knives to take out the fish's guts. They coated them in fragrant herbs and skewered them on pointy sticks to roast over the fire. It was a lot of extra work, but Embla had to admit, the smell was heavenly.

Within a few minutes she was drooling with hunger.

Once the first fish was ready, Leros handed it to her, skewer and all, and Embla tore into it immediately, making little growling sounds as she ate and pausing occasionally to spit out the hair-thin bones.

The fish was gone in a matter of seconds.

When Embla was done, she tossed the stick into the fire and looked up to find that the three alphas were looking at her. Leros was simply staring in amazement, Ark was shuddering with laughter, and Orwen was just shaking his head.

The alphas consumed their own meals a bit more slowly and carefully. Leros offered Embla another fish, which she gratefully accepted. She did her best to imitate the alpha's more refined way of eating. This seemed to please Ark.

“Good?” Ark asked.

Embla nodded. “Good, good.”

She turned her gaze to mean old Orwen, who had done most of the meal preparation, and she offered him a greasy smile.

“Good.”

Orwen said nothing, but Embla thought she saw a faint blush touch his chiseled face, and the shadow of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

After she finished her second helping of fish, Embla wanted to eat a third—that's how delicious it was—but she had no room in her belly. But she did drink a little. Ark used an old kettle to boil some water, which he then poured into a cup with some strange leaves to steep. The resulting brownish liquid was oddly refreshing, and Embla sipped it slowly, enjoying the flavor.

For the first time in a very long while, she felt full, satisfied, and relaxed. And weirdest of all, she felt safe. It was strange because she was a captive, but at the same time she knew her alpha captors would not let any harm befall her.

Embla decided simply to enjoy the nice sleepy post-meal feeling for the time being.

But the relaxed atmosphere did not last for long.

Ark moved closer to her, reached over, and unfastened the leash from her collar.

As soon as he did this, Leros leapt up and began talking rapidly—too rapidly for Embla to understand. A moment later, Orwen said something else that she missed, and one more moment after that, all three of the alphas were arguing heatedly about something Embla could not understand.

Even though she was no longer bound by the leash, she sat rooted in place by the fire and looked on at the arguing alphas. They growled and snarled, looking especially scary in the dramatic firelight. And every now and then they would gesture toward the omega.

That's when Embla understood.

They were arguing about *her*.

She still couldn't make out what they were saying. Oh, she could catch a few words here and there—"mark," and "wild," and "omega"—but beyond that she was lost. Her little conversation with Ark at bath time had shaken loose old memories of the language that she had known as a very little child when her parents were still alive. But this fast-paced three-way argument was too much for her to keep up with.

Still, Embla could guess. Orwen wanted to get rid of her. Leros wanted her to stay. Then there was Ark... what did he want? Embla wasn't sure.

But she was sure of one rather embarrassing fact.

Watching these gigantic muscle-bound alphas snarl and roar and pop their jaws was having an effect on her body. The second wave of her heat was sweeping over her, and it was fierce.

The sound of those deep and aggressive alpha voices rumbled straight into the core of her bones. The thick musky smell of masculinity filled the cave, sending wild shivers rippling through her inner thighs.

She was getting wet.

Very wet.

The alphas, however, did not notice. They were too busy shouting amongst themselves, and their argument seemed to be right on the verge of spilling over into violence. The knowledge that she, Embla, was the subject of that disagreement was strangely and shamefully exciting.

The omega fell back, her legs falling open of their own accord.

Her arousal grew more intense with every passing second. Sensations became heightened and amplified. The heat radiating from the fire was like a physical pressure against her skin. It felt as though she herself might burst into flames at any moment.

“No,” Embla murmured feverishly. “No fight...”

The alphas did not hear her over their own snarling voices. Her heat mounted. Her nipples swelled painfully, and her slit throbbed and oozed with excruciating need.

“Please,” she whispered. “No fight. Come me. Please, please...”

Her head lolled and her pulse pounded. Sweat broke out on her face and chest. She rolled back and forth on the floor, her legs swinging loosely, open and closed and open again. The hot reek of her omega slick filled the chamber, overpowering the charred scent of the fire, overpowering even the musk of arguing males.

One alpha nostril twitched. Then another.

They had finally caught her scent.

Loincloths jumped violently as the organs beneath went instantly rigid with animal arousal. Aggressive growls shifted into lustful purrs. Three pairs of predatory eyes turned toward the omega, their retinae reflecting the light like wolves’ eyes.

“Come me,” Embla begged. “Need come. Need please.”

Their argument forgotten, the alphas moved toward her, stripping away their loincloths to reveal their hardened cocks with steel piercings glinting in the firelight. They circled briefly before closing in on her, kissing, licking, groping. Embla’s slick gushed and pooled around her butt on the stony floor.

The omega was so far gone, she wasn’t even sure which one of them mounted her first. All she knew was that they shared her body long into the night, fucking her and filling her with seed again and again and again.

CHAPTER 15: EMBLA

When Embla woke up, it was the middle of the night, and the campfire had burnt down to cinders and coals. She was not chilly, however. Not in the least. She was surrounded on all sides by three sleeping alpha males, and their naked bodies radiated heat like hot stones on a summer's day. Their heavy, masculine scent covered her like a blanket, and the cave echoed with the sounds of their snoring and the incessant crash of the waterfall. It was a soothing white-noise that almost lulled the omega back to sleep, but she caught herself just before the darkness enfolded her again.

She was not leashed.

And if she was going to take advantage of that fact, now was the time.

Very carefully, so as not to disturb the alphas, Embla raised her head and peered over the dark wall of naked muscle that encircled her. She looked around the open space of the grotto. Even though the fire had all but gone out, the cavern was not completely dark. Outside, the moon had risen, and its silvery light now filtered through the waterfall like a rippled pane of glass.

It was an enchanting sight, and Embla felt a strong sense of safety. But this place was not her home. She had to escape now, while she had a chance.

Moving slowly and silently, Embla got up and stepped over a sleeping alpha—it was Orwen.

Her heart was pounding with anxiety. What if the alphas woke up and caught her sneaking away? They would surely punish her. But she would just tell them that she was going outside to relieve herself.

She stepped her other foot over Orwen's body, and now she was outside of the nest formed by the three alphas.

Embla hesitated a moment, looking down on the sleeping giants, their features barely discernible in the dim moonlight.

She hardly knew these men. Just last night, she had been caught sneaking into the campsite, and now here she was sneaking away. She had only been with them for one day, but so much had happened in that time.

They had fed her, but they had also tied her up like a prisoner. They had bathed her, but they had also punished her in the most humiliating of ways.

And then there were the other things they had done together.

The three alphas had quelled her heat, penetrating her above and below with their unyielding cocks. Even now, those impressive members were rigid with masculine arousal. The sight of those hard organs limned in the soft moonlight stirred shameful feelings down below Embla's belly, and she felt herself growing wet again.

She needed to get out of here before her scent roused the alphas.

Or before she changed her mind...

Embla padded down the length of the grotto, her footfalls masked beneath the rush of falling water. She was a small, silent shadow drifting through the subterranean space.

Embla paused at the bank of the pool, remembering the luscious sensations of her bath, and she briefly considered pilfering the soap that Ark had used but immediately thought better of it. The alphas had fed her, they had tended to her heat—she wasn't going to steal from them now.

At one side of the waterfall, there was a narrow ledge that skirted the edge of the pool and led outside. That was the way the alphas had brought her into this place, and she had also seen Orwen and Leros slip out that way when they went fishing.

That was her way out.

Embla crept along that narrow path. The mist from the waterfall was cool on her skin. A second later, she was outside. The sound shifted. The splash of the waterfall was still there, of course, but without the dreamy reverberating quality that it had inside the grotto. The air outside was cool, and the big round moon lit the landscape in a pale light.

This was it. She was free.

Embla felt a twinge of regret, but she ignored it. Leaving was the right thing to do. She would never see the alphas again, but would always remember them and what they had done. If she stayed, she would get attached to them, and that would only

lead to pain. Eventually she would lose them, just as she had lost her parents. Just as she had lost her best friend.

She took one step toward the beckoning fields and the dark forest beyond but immediately froze.

Someone was watching her.

With a pulse of adrenaline, Embla turned her eyes toward the rocky slope beside the entrance to the grotto. Three silent pairs of eyes glared at her, reflective in the moonlight.

The dogs. Of course.

A wave of relief washed over Embla. The three canines simply looked at her, but they made no noise except for a faint whine from Smoke, the gray one.

Embla felt guilty. She had nearly run off without saying goodbye.

She moved closer, crouched, and scratched her fingers in the thick warm fur around Smoke's neck. The dog wagged his bushy tail and lolled his big tongue.

Shadow and Ghost both got a thorough scratching behind the ears too, then Embla backed away.

It's time for me to go, friends.

Smoke's tail stopped wagging. He dropped his head and whined again. He looked up at her with hurt in his eyes, silently begging her not to go. If he had wanted to, he could have barked to alert the alphas, but he didn't do that.

Sorry, friend. But I must...

Embla gave Smoke one last scratch on the top of his skull.

“Good friend,” she whispered.

Still crouching, she took a step back. The dogs were silent, but they never took their eyes off her. She watched them for a moment in the moonlight.

They reminded her so much of her old friend, the one she lost, and tears stung her eyes so suddenly and unexpectedly that she gasped softly in surprise.

I must go. I must...

But her feet simply wouldn't move. She stayed rooted in place as if she had been carved right out of the rocky ground.

After a little while, Smoke got up, walked over, and gently laid his head on her knee.

“Source,” Embla said.

She didn't know exactly what the word meant, but she'd heard the alphas use it when they were exasperated—especially Orwen—and it seemed appropriate to use it now. She knew that she should go. The forest was her home. But the loneliness that waited for her back in her hidden burrow seemed too much to bear.

Fine, I will stay.

Smoke's ears perked up, and his bushy tail started to sweep the ground. He lifted his muzzle to her face and licked her. A moment later the other two dogs joined in, wagging their tails so strongly their furry behinds wiggled with happiness.

Embla scratched them all behind the ears again. Then she plopped down on her butt and just sat, looking at the moon and the waterfall.

She knew she would probably regret staying, but she couldn't help it.

A day's worth of companionship had been enough to remind her how much she needed friends in her life.

Embla sat for a while with the dogs, just breathing in the night. Then she said good night and crept back inside the darkness of the grotto.

CHAPTER 16: EMBLA

The next morning, they rose just before dawn. Embla stretched and yawned, feeling more rested and energized than she could remember feeling in a long time. Her belly was still full from the previous evening's dinner. Except for her brief wake-up, she had slept the whole night through in warmth and comfort. And most important of all, her heat had been extinguished, just like the campfire that had burnt out in the night.

Although much like that fire, Embla knew there were still some hot embers hidden beneath the surface.

As for the alphas, they seemed pleased to find that she was still with them. At least two of them did. Leros tried to cover up his youthful enthusiasm, but he kept darting furtive glances in her direction, and each time their eyes met he flashed a boyish grin.

Ark was more stoic. He sat meditating for a few minutes before cleaning up and getting dressed, but Embla could sense that he was glad she had not run off.

Then there was Orwen.

He did not seem to share his companions' enthusiasm. He set about his morning chores, grumbling in annoyance. He seemed angry, but Embla couldn't tell exactly where that anger was directed. Was he still angry at her for biting his thing

yesterday? That would be understandable. Or was he angry at his pack leader for allowing Embla to stay?

Maybe he was just angry at the world. Embla couldn't tell.

Leros added some wood to the fire and prepared a small but satisfying breakfast of roasted wild potatoes and bird's eggs cooked in their shells. Embla had never had eggs like that before; she had always taken them raw. Leros showed her how to carefully peel away the shell, leaving the cooked insides which had hardened to a white mass. It was meaty and a bit weird, but with a dusting of salt Embla found it quite enjoyable.

The breakfast was completed by a few cups of that brown water flavored by leaves. Embla sipped from her cup contemplatively, wondering what she was getting herself into.

At least today the alphas did not put the leash on her again.

By the time breakfast was finished, the morning sunshine was streaming in through the waterfall, signalling that it was time for them to go. The alphas extinguished the fire with water and gathered up their supplies. Ark even provided Embla with her own loincloth. It was much too big and wrapped around her hips like a skirt.

Then they went outside, fed and played with the dogs, and set off in the direction of the ruined city at the center of the Zone.

* * *

By the time they reached their destination, the sun was getting high in the sky.

The city was surrounded by overgrown fields of weeds and grass and wildflowers that nodded in the breeze. Dozens of roads radiated outward from the center, ancient roads of tar and stone from a time long ago. The towers of the city climbed toward the blue sky overhead, their walls wrapped in dense vines that branched like green arteries.

Embla tilted her head back and gaped in wonder at the sight. She had never ventured this close to the ruins before, and the sheer size of the place filled her with awe.

How had people ever built something like this?

They approached down one of the paved roads. At the edge of the city, a metal framework spanned the highway, supporting big green signs sporting white symbols that Embla could not understand.

There was a metal gantry, and an old alpha sat there with his legs dangling. A watchman. As Embla and her companions got close, the alpha let out a long, low howl. Ark howled back in greeting.

They passed under the sign and headed into the center of the city.

The fine hairs on the back of Embla's neck bristled with anxiety. The air here was thick with the scent of many alphas. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there. She could sense their eyes watching from the darkness of the windows set into the towers looming around them.

Embla felt a sudden impulse to flee.

But her alpha companions were untroubled. And even more important, the dogs were totally relaxed, their tails wagging slightly as they trotted along in the shade of the high buildings.

They were among friends.

Still, Embla couldn't help feeling nervous. She had never been in the presence of so many alphas before.

As their little entourage moved deeper into the city, the other alphas started to emerge from the buildings. They were all big, brutish men, heavily muscled, clad in loincloths, and bearing piercings on their faces and bodies. However, none of them seemed quite as big and dangerous as the three alphas that Embla had arrived with.

As the crowd grew, Embla saw that there were omegas too, and even some young children. They all gathered around, murmuring among themselves. Some of them knew Ark and his companions, and they passed greetings back and forth. But the crowd was most interested in Embla, and their attention was especially focused on the mark that Ark had left on her neck.

Even though the gawkers meant her no harm, Embla had never been the center of attention like that, and she felt even more nervous.

She shivered and pressed closer to her alphas, who surrounded her protectively. Even Orwen.

Now she understood why Ark had given her the loincloth to wear.

He was jealous and possessive. He didn't want anyone else looking at her naked sex. He wanted everyone to know that her hole was off limits. It was his.

Of course, Embla's breasts were still exposed, but she did not feel self-conscious about that—she had been naked all her life, after all—and besides, the other omegas in the surrounding crowd had their own breasts out too.

There was just one difference. Most of the city omegas had their nipples adorned with shiny piercings.

Would she, Embla, get rings like that too?

She shuddered at the thought of her sensitive nipples being pierced. Wouldn't that hurt?

Her eyes darted around the wall of faces closing in around her. The strange alphas and omegas were extremely curious about her. At the same time, many of them also seemed welcoming.

A few, however, seemed repulsed and angered by her presence.

In particular, Embla noticed a look of blatant disgust on the face of one young female at the front of the crowd. She was a tall omega with dark, straight, lustrous hair and long, graceful limbs. This haughty omega looked at Embla a moment longer, then turned toward Leros and spoke.

CHAPTER 17: LEROS

“**W**hat is *that*?”

Leros tensed up at the sound of that familiar female voice behind his shoulder. His attention had been so focused on Embla that he had not even noticed the omega named Jora creeping up behind him.

Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, Leros turned to face her.

Jora was tall, with long dark hair, long tanned limbs, and icy blue eyes. There was no doubt that she was pretty. In fact, most of the young alphas who were close to Leros in age considered Jora to be the most desirable omega in the Zone.

The arrogant upward tilt of her face made it clear that Jora was well aware of her status.

She was the last person Leros wanted to see right now.

“What did you say?” the young alpha growled.

Jora answered him with phony sweetness in her voice. “I asked, *what* is that?”

Looking down her nose, she flicked her gaze back to Embla. Instinctively, Leros moved his body to block his new mate from Jora’s supercilious glare.

“I think you mean ‘*who* is that?’” Leros hissed under his breath.

“Oh, really?” Jora replied, unfazed by Leros’s obvious anger.

“Yes, really,” Leros almost snarled. Normally he found Jora’s attitude easy to ignore, but now that it was directed at Embla, his protective instincts were coming to the surface. “She is an omega, just like you, and you will give her due respect.”

Jora scoffed. “Just like me? I don’t know about *that*...”

She tilted her head to look past Leros’s shoulder and peer at Embla. Her cold blue eyes wandered over the wild omega’s body as if she were appraising a piece of meat.

“She’s a skinny little thing, her hair is matted and tangled, and she has no piercings. She must be a Farlander.”

“She’s not a Farlander,” Leros snapped.

“Indeed? Where did you find her, then?”

Leros felt his anger rising like a flame behind his sternum. Truthfully, he was still unsure whether Embla was a Farlander or not. Yes, they had found her in the Farlands. And yes, she lacked the piercings and the speech of one of the city omegas. But at the same time, Embla was not hideous or twisted or cruel the way that the inbred Farlanders were. A little rough around the edges when it came to her manners perhaps, but that was all.

In truth, it did not matter to Leros what Embla was. All he knew—all he needed to know—was that she was an omega—*his* omega—and he was totally enamored with her.

But he couldn’t say that. Not here. Not yet...

“We found her in the forest,” Leros answered. “She was... hungry.”

He decided it was probably best to omit further details about Embla’s “hunger” and how he and his pack brothers had sated her needs.

Jora’s shapely mouth turned downward into a fake frown, and she spoke in a tone of mock sympathy.

“Oh, the poor little creature. Well, it certainly was kind of you to see to her, um... *needs*.”

Leros thought he detected a hint of jealousy in Jora’s voice, and he knew the reason why. Before young alphas and omegas became bonded with their mates through the rituals of binding, they were free to explore their desires with other young unbonded youths. And Jora had been an enthusiastic explorer. There was hardly a young alpha amid the tribes of the Central Ruins with whom she had not enjoyed a night of pleasure.

Except for Leros, that is.

And it was not for a lack of interest on Jora’s part. She had given the young alpha more than a few barely veiled invitations, but Leros had never taken her up on those offers.

There were a few reasons for that. For one thing, Leros was dedicated to his pack. They spent a huge amount of time away from the Central Ruins, scouting the forests and the wilds of the Zone. Leros liked that lifestyle, and he didn’t care to have any attachments that would distract him.

More important, however, Leros could sense that Jora's desire for him was not genuine. She just viewed him as another conquest, so to speak. But the fact that Leros spurned her advances only added fuel to Jora's desire. It was very unhealthy.

Right now, Leros wanted nothing more than to get away from her. He wished that the crowd of curious alphas and omegas would make way so that he and Embla and the rest of his pack could be on their way.

But the crowd was slowing down their progress, and Leros was stuck fending off Jora.

The dark-haired omega looked at Embla again, who was now shuddering with nerves.

“Well, it was kind of you and your pack-brethren to take care of this poor helpless woodland creature, but why in the world did you bring it back here? Surely it would be much happier back in its natural home in the forest? I mean, just look how frightened the poor little thing is.”

“She,” Leros said coldly.

He was struggling to keep his temper in check, but Jora's provocations really were too much.

“Excuse me?”

“She. You will refer to Embla as ‘she.’ She is not some woodland creature, as you put it. She is a person, and you will respect that.”

Jora rolled her eyes dramatically.

“And the reason she’s afraid,” Leros added, “is because she’s got half the Zone gawking at her right now. Come on, all of you get out of the way! We’re trying to get through!”

His companions were now getting irritated as well. Ark was growling and Orwen was tensing up like he was about to start throwing punches. But the crowd was just too damn curious, and they closed in tighter to get a look at the funny omega. They were shouting questions, many of the same questions that Jora had been asking.

“Who is that omega?”

“Where did you find her?”

“Why doesn’t she have any piercings?”

“Is she a Farlander?”

This was getting out of control.

As the crowd had closed in, Jora had squeezed closer to Leros. She placed one long-fingered hand flirtatiously on his arm and peered over his shoulder to look more closely at Embla.

“She has a mark, Leros. Don’t tell me you stole her from a pack of Farlander alphas.”

Suddenly Leros felt his frustration bubbling over.

“She’s *not* a Farlander,” he snarled. “Ark is the one who marked her.”

Jora drew her hand away from his arm like it was on fire, and her eyes circled with shock.

A collective gasp swept through the crowd.

Leros had meant to direct his statement toward Jora, but in his anger he had practically yelled the words for all to hear. He immediately regretted it. Leros didn't even have to turn around to know that Ark was casting a disapproving glare in his direction. He could feel the pack leader's eyes searing into the back of his head.

Leros had fucked up.

The mark on an omega's neck signaled to other alphas that an omega had been claimed. She was off-limits. But they would not recognize simply from the bite pattern which alpha had done the marking.

Of course, Ark was by no means ashamed of Embla. But considering the unusual circumstances, he probably would have preferred to divulge that information in a more orderly way, rather than having Leros blurt it out to half the tribe.

Oh well, the cat was out of the bag now.

For a beat, the crowd stood back in stunned silence. Then they closed in again, chattering even more excitedly.

“Do you plan to bind her?”

“Is she fit to perform the ritual?”

“Can she even speak?”

Embla cringed back, trembling and confused by the sudden surge in the crowd's curiosity. Leros doubted that she could understand much of what the others were saying. He just wanted to get her out of this situation, back to the quiet safety of their den on the other side of the city.

Suddenly, an exceptionally deep alpha voice roared like thunder.

“Stand *back!*”

At first Leros thought it was Ark who had made the sound, but it had come from the other side of the crowd. Immediately, the gathered alphas and omegas parted, making a path for a huge alpha with dark skin and long black hair.

Leros recognized him. His name was Taliesin, and he was the leader of one of the most respected packs in the whole tribe.

Taliesin strode through the corridor of bodies. When his eyes fell upon Embla, he froze.

“You!”

Embla was crouched in the center of the protective triangle of her alphas with the three dogs nestled close by. She looked up at Taliesin through the messy blond hair streaking across her face, and her green eyes flashed with recognition.

“Hi,” she mumbled with a quick furtive wave.

Leros and his pack brothers shot each other perplexed looks.

“Wait,” Ark said. “So you... you know each other?”

Taliesin nodded. “This omega saved my life. In fact, she saved the lives of my entire pack, including my omega. But I never expected to see her again. Ark, how did you come by this omega.”

“It is a long story,” Ark answered. “And one better suited to a more private setting.”

Taliesin glanced around at the gathered crowd, then back to Ark.

“Of course,” he said. “No doubt Chief Addom and the alphas of the Council will wish to speak to you about this matter...”

He gave Embla a friendly smile.

“But first, there is someone who would very much like to see your new friend.”

With another roar and a wave of his hand, Taliesin dispersed the crowd. Then he headed off toward the center of the city—toward the Source. Leros and his companions followed after him. But as they walked away, Leros cast a quick glance back over his shoulder and saw Jora glaring at Embla with a look of barely restrained jealousy and rage.

That was going to be a problem.

He put his arm protectively around Embla’s shoulders and led her forward. Hopefully Jora would see that and get the message.

But Leros feared she would not.

CHAPTER 18: HINES

“Shit!”

Shelley Hines stared at the flashing “*access denied*” message on the screen of the computer console with a look of frustration. With a sigh, she brushed back her short brown hair and started typing again.

She was in the Chamber of the Source. At least that’s what the alphas called this place. It was an enormous circular chamber with dark, metallic walls and a domed ceiling that curved high overhead, giving the cool air an echoing, almost cathedral-like atmosphere. Thick, insulated cables and conduits snaked across the floor, all converging on the massive spherical structure that dominated the center of the chamber.

The Source.

The machine that was responsible for the alpha, beta, and omega mutations of the Quarantine Zone.

As far as the primitive alphas were concerned, the Source was a holy shrine, the most sacred location in the entire Zone and the physical manifestation of their God. Or at least the closest thing they had to that concept.

Shelley, however, knew a bit more about the machine’s backstory.

She knew that the Source had been created over a century earlier by an unethical biotech company called SynerGen. The

machine was intended to be a sexual suppression field—a way to control the rampant overpopulation of the city at that time.

But that wasn't how things had worked out. Obviously.

The suppression field was supposed to be controlled by an incredibly advanced artificial intelligence called the Sentient Evolving Recursive Algorithmic Population Heuristic, or S.E.R.A.P.H. for short. Unfortunately for the SynerGen scientists, Seraph had been a little too advanced. He had gone rogue, using the suppression field in ways they never expected. Using the field of energy and nanotech viruses sent out by the suppression field, he created the alphas and omegas. Mindless beta zombies too, though all of them were pretty much dead at this point.

After that cataclysmic event, the outside world sealed off the Quarantine Zone, building a wall around the area influenced by Seraph and the Source and cutting off the alphas and omegas from the rest of the world.

As far as the denizens of the Zone were concerned, that was just fine.

They wanted nothing to do with the Outsiders.

There were problems, however. The Outsiders weren't just content to keep the alphas contained. They wanted to control the Quarantine Zone. They wanted to capture live alphas to study them and use them as weapons. So it was up to Hines and her friends to figure out some kind of defense.

But the only “person” who could help them—Seraph—had pretty much gone into hiding.

Hines had only seen the A.I. a couple of times shortly after arriving in the Zone. His massive holographic face was like a high-tech version of the Wizard of Oz. But following a battle that had nearly destroyed the entire Zone, Seraph had disappeared.

Hines knew Seraph was still in there somewhere. She knew he was hiding within the intricate computer circuitry inside the Source. He had to be.

She just couldn’t coax him into talking.

But Hines was not one to give up easily.

She typed a few more lines of computer code into the terminal set into the mechanical pedestal supporting the Source, trying different methods of getting through Seraph’s digital defenses. But every time, the reply was the same.

“Access denied.”

“God damn it!” Hines shouted in frustration.

The sharp sound of her voice reverberated through the vast chamber, disturbing the reverential silence. Hines was not alone here. There were other groups of alphas and omegas scattered around the Chamber of the Source, and now they turned their heads toward Hines, startled by her sudden angry outburst.

When they weren’t hunting for food, mating with their omegas, or dealing with some other alpha business, the big

brutes loved basking in the energy of the Source. The closer the better. Hence the reason there were many alphas and a few omegas dispersed through this big chamber, some snoozing, others meditating, and many just chatting quietly.

Hines flushed red. Her anger and frustration were replaced by an intense embarrassment at her outburst.

“Hey, Hines,” a woman’s voice said from behind her. “Why don’t you take a break for a little while?”

Turning around, Hines saw her friend Sloane. A former marine, Sloane was pretty but tough-looking at the same time. She had shoulder-length blonde hair, and she wore the standard outfit of an omega—a loose animal hide skirt to cover her loins and nothing else. It was the same thing Hines was wearing, in fact. And just like Hines, Sloane’s ears, nose, lips and nipples bore the glinting steel piercings she had received as part of her binding ritual, when she had been joined body and soul with her three alpha mates. She carried a tiny little omega baby in her arms, and the child was quietly suckling at her breast.

Sloane was a good friend, and she was one of the few women in the Zone with whom Hines could easily relate. They had both been Outsiders once, living in an overcrowded and polluted hive city like the rest of humanity. Through a series of unexpected events, they had both ended up in the Quarantine Zone, where they had been mutated into omegas.

Hines definitely preferred her new life here in the Zone, but it still had its challenges, and it was nice having a good friend

with whom she could commiserate with sometimes.

But right now, the biggest challenge that Hines was facing was getting into contact with Seraph.

“I just don’t understand it,” Hines said, leaning back against the computer console. “It’s like Seraph has gone into hibernation or something. I know he must be in there somewhere, but he refuses to come out. I wish he would speak to us though. We still have so much to learn about the Zone, the Source, the mutations, all of it.”

Sloane nodded. “Believe me, Hines, I totally get it. Nobody is more frustrated with Seraph’s antics than I am. But I mean, what do you expect from a rogue A.I.?”

The former marine had a point. Seraph was totally unpredictable. The very existence of the Quarantine Zone was a testament to that fact. And that’s what worried Hines.

Sloane sidled up next to Hines and placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

“Come on,” Sloane said. “Seriously, you need to relax a bit. All this stress isn’t healthy for you, especially considering your condition.”

The condition she was referring to was Hines’s tummy.

She was nine months pregnant.

Coincidentally, that was the exact amount of time that she had been here in the Zone. Despite her previously shy demeanor, Hines had wasted no time in getting knocked up by not one but three savage alpha mates. And those guys obviously had

some super sperm. Based on the enormous size of Hines's distended belly, it was clear that she had more than one baby in there. It was an entire litter. At least three, maybe even four. With no ultrasound equipment here in the Zone, it was impossible to know for sure.

Hines smiled weakly. "Yeah, you're right. I guess I've just been hoping to make some headway before the babies come. After that happens, I won't have any time to work on this."

"Hines, that's the point. You're trying to carry the whole weight of the Zone on your shoulders. You need to focus on *you*." Sloane grinned. "I mean, just look at you—you're about ready to pop!"

At that, Hines giggled. She had to admit, even she was surprised by how big she had gotten.

Then again, she wasn't the only one who was pregnant.

"Well, you're one talk," Hines joked.

Sloane was more than a little pregnant herself. Plus, she already had several tiny babies to take care of. Besides the one cradled in her arms nursing, three more were being watched over by Sloane's Alpha mates who were relaxing nearby on the floor of the chamber.

One thing about Alphas, they were good at making babies.

They were also good at protecting their mates and their offspring at any cost.

"Come on," Sloane said, leading Hines away from the console.

"Let's go chill for a bit."

“Okay.”

Two of Hines’s alpha mates were there too, Baen and Canaris. They were hanging out with Sloane’s guys.

“Hey, where is Taliesin?” Sloane asked, referring to Hines’s third alpha mate.

Right at that very moment, Hines sensed Taliesin’s presence drawing near. After being bound to her mates through an elaborate and very public mating ritual, Hines had developed a kind of sixth sense that allowed her to know where her guys were at all times. And right now, she could feel Tal arriving in the Chamber of the Source.

Hines turned around, and sure enough, there was her handsome mate striding toward them across the room, his dark hair blowing back sexily as he approached.

But who was that with him?

There were three other alphas following along with her mate, and they were a tough looking group. Of course, all alphas seemed primitive and a bit cavemanish by Outsider standards, but these guys looked even more rough-hewn than the average alpha.

And there was one other person with them. A small omega hidden protectively in their midst. Hines saw a flash of messy blonde hair.

Wait, was that who she thought it was?

No... it couldn’t be.

As the group got closer, however, the little omega nervously poked her head out to peek around the pack leader's meaty arm, and Hines saw a face that she instantly recognized. And that face clearly recognized her too. The omega's green eyes went wide and a huge grin spread across her face.

"Friend!" the omega shouted excitedly. "Friend! Friend!"

Before the alphas had a chance to restrain her, the little blond omega dodged between their legs, broke free of the group, and rushed toward Hines. She threw her arms around the pregnant woman in a strong hug.

"Hello friend," the omega said in her strange accent.

Hines suddenly felt a lump in her throat, and tears sprang to her eyes.

"Hello," she replied, her voice cracking as she returned the omega's hug.

Sloane just looked on in surprise and disbelief.

"Do you know her?" Sloan asked.

Hines just nodded. She was too choked up to speak.

She had met this strange little omega twice before. The first time had been shortly after she had arrived in the Quarantine Zone. Two of her alpha mates—Taliesin and Baen—had rescued the omega from a violent pack of Farlander alphas who had been about to rape her. The frightened omega had fled, but she had returned the favor a little while later by rescuing Hines and her mates, who had been captured and imprisoned. Once more, the mysterious omega had

disappeared, and Hines had wondered if she would ever see her again.

Now here she was!

Hines could scarcely believe it. As she gradually got her voice under control, she explained this story to her friend Sloane while Taliesin stood by nodding and the other rough-looking alphas listened intently.

Meanwhile, the little blonde omega was preoccupied with Hines's big baby bump. She gently patted Hines's rotund belly and smiled.

"Little friends?" she asked.

Hines laughed and smudged away her tears.

"That's right. Little friends. Babies." Then to Taliesin she asked, "Where did you find her?"

"It wasn't *me* who found her," her mate answered and gestured toward the three rough-looking alphas. "These alphas did. This is Ark, and these are his companions, Orwen and Leros."

The pack leader Ark looked stern but thoughtful. Leros, obviously the youngest of the group, had an appearance of youthful honesty. Orwen just looked grumpy.

"Thank you," she said. "I have often wondered whatever happened to her. Where did you find her?"

"A long ways to the south, in the deep forests of the Farlands. The little imp sneaked into our camp at night looking for food. We have taken care of her since then."

Hines couldn't help but wonder exactly what "take care of" entailed. She knew first hand about the instinctual attractions between alphas and omegas.

"She has spoken some, but not much. We didn't realize that she knew anyone here in the ruins."

Hines shook her head. "Honestly, I hardly know her myself. We only met briefly those two times. I owe her my life, but I don't even know her name."

"Embla," Ark said with a smile. "Her name is Embla. We did manage to figure out that much, at least."

"Embla," Hines said thoughtfully.

She looked down at the wild omega, who flashed her another big smile.

"Embla, it's nice to meet you," Hines said slowly and clearly. She gestured toward herself. "My name is Hines. Shelley Hines."

"Hines," Embla repeated. "Friend."

"That's right. I'm your friend." Hines rubbed Embla's bare shoulder reassuringly. That was when she noticed the marked skin between her neck and shoulder. That had not been there the last time she saw the young omega. It was a dark scar in the shape of an alpha's teeth. Hines had a mark like that. Three of them, in fact. They had been put there by her three alpha mates as part of their binding process.

But who had marked Embla? Hines had an idea that it was probably this alpha named Ark.

Her eyes drifted over to Embla's throat, which was wrapped in a snug-fitting collar of soft leather. That was a new addition as well. And there was a metal hoop on the front where a leash could be attached.

Hines felt a sudden scorch of anger in her chest.

"What is this?" she asked, pointing to the collar. "Did you put this on her?"

"She can be quite... unruly," Ark answered. "We needed a way to restrain her."

The fire of Hines's anger grew. She stepped to Ark and glared at him, looking surprisingly intimidating considering that she was half his size and pregnant. Hines stuck a scolding finger in his face.

"Now listen to me," Hines growled. "You had better take good care of Embla. If I find out you or your buddies have done anything to hurt her, you're gonna be sorry."

Unsurprisingly, the alphas were not fazed by her aggression. But Ark did seem to take her seriously. When he answered, his tone was quiet and respectful.

"Look at her, Hines." He said. "We have been taking good care of her."

Hines looked at Embla again. The little omega seemed a bit perplexed about what was going on. But Hines had to admit, Embla did look much better than when she had seen her last time. She appeared to be well fed, the dirt and grime had been

washed from her skin, and even her hair looked cleaner, though it was still quite matted and tangled.

Hines placed her hands on Embla's shoulders and asked in a quiet voice, "Are these alphas being good to you?"

Embla had to think for a minute. Was she unsure how to answer? Or maybe she didn't even understand the question. Hines couldn't tell exactly how much language Embla understood.

After another moment, the blonde omega nodded. "Yes. Good alphas."

"Good."

Hines turned to Ark again.

"Has she told you anything else? Like where she came from or how she came to be living so far out in the woods?"

Ark shook his head.

"Very little. At first we thought she could be a Farlander omega, but I don't think that's the case. She doesn't have the Farlander look or scent to her."

The brutal looking alpha scratched his bearded chin and gazed up at the huge sphere of the Source.

"Actually, I was hoping *you* might be able to help us find out."

"You mean by talking with Seraph?" Hines asked. "I'm sure he could give us some answers about her. I think he knows pretty much everything that goes on in the Zone."

Unfortunately, Seraph is not talking these days. He seems to have gone into some kind of hibernative state.”

“Huh,” Ark grunted, still scratching his chin. “A pity.”

Hines wondered if Embla was unwilling to answer or simply didn't have the linguistic skill to do so. Either way, it was a moot point. If Embla didn't *want* to talk about her past, they would all have to respect that. And if the wild omega simply wasn't *able* to talk about it well... Hines didn't know what they would do about that.

She guessed they would just have to be patient and wait until Embla had learned a little more of the language. Maybe then she could tell them about her origins.

As Hines was contemplating these thoughts, another alpha came running up to them in a great hurry.

“Ark! There you are,” the runner said, pausing briefly to catch his breath. “Addom and the alphas of the Council sent me to find you...” His eyes turned toward Embla. “They wish to talk with you about your, uh... omega guest.”

The alpha named Ark looked at his companions, then he turned back to the messenger and nodded.

“I expected they would require an introduction. Very well then, lead the way.”

The pack of alphas began to move away, taking Embla with them. The young omega cast a glance over her shoulder at Hines, and suddenly Hines found herself automatically striding after them.

“Wait for me. I’m coming too.”

Embla grinned when she saw that Hines was coming too, and Ark and his pack brothers seemed to have no problem with her tagging along. The messenger, however, turned toward her with an annoyed look.

“The Council does not require your presence, omega.”

Not so long ago, Hines would have immediately backed down from that kind of dickishness. Before arriving here in the Quarantine Zone, she had often been described as meek and mousy. Even now, she still felt that old impulse to shy away from confrontation. But she had changed a lot over the past months. She had been to hell and back, and with the help of her alpha mates, she had grown stronger and more confident.

Yeah. She definitely wasn’t backing down on this one.

“I *said*, I’m coming too.”

Even though it was a bit of a struggle for her, Hines made sure to keep her eyes fixed on the arrogant messenger alpha. She didn’t blink or look away. But in her peripheral vision, she could sense Embla looking back and forth between the two of them.

The messenger alpha sneered at Hines. It was an expression she knew all too well. She’d seen it all the time as an Outsider. It was the look of an underling who relished any opportunity to flaunt his small amount of power.

“Listen to me, omega. Your impertinence will not—“

The messenger's words broke off mid sentences, and his eyes expanded into white circles of nervousness. He was staring over Hines's left shoulder where a massive presence had appeared. It was her alpha mate, Tal. Hines didn't even have to turn to look at him; she knew him by scent. He was standing right behind her, backing her up, and no doubt intimidating the hell out of the messenger with a terrifying grimace. Tal was quite good at that.

Hines's mate didn't even have to say a single word to change the messenger's mind. All it took was a low warning growl.

The messenger shuddered visibly.

“O-on s-second th-thought,” the messenger stammered. “I’m s-sure the Council would b-be delighted by your p-presence.”

“Lead the way,” Hines said with a smirk and a nod.

CHAPTER 19: EMBLA

The place where the Council met was another vast space. It was not nearly as large as the Chamber of the Source that they had just left, but it was every bit as impressive. It was a big rectangular room with stone walls carved all over with curling, twisting designs that caught Embla's wondering gaze and refused to let it go. The walls were inset with tall windows of colored glass that glowed in the sunlight. It reminded Embla of sun through young leaves and flower petals. These windows showed pictures of men and women in strange colored robes—a story of some sort—but Embla did not understand the meaning. Overhead, the slanted roof was falling apart, and columns of light shone through, illuminating swirling motes of dust like stars. The floor underfoot was carpeted with lush green moss, and the whole space had a rich, earthy smell of humus and decay.

The Council leaders were arranged in a semi-circle along the front end of the room. Huge, intimidating alphas, most of them with streaks of gray in their beards and manes. Some stood with arms folded while others sat and yet others crouched like predators ready to pounce.

In the center stood a particularly impressive alpha who appeared to be the leader. Embla understood that his name was Addom, and from the way he and Ark spoke to each other, she could tell they were friends.

Now Embla found herself standing in front of this semi-circle of scary alphas.

Leros was not present. He had taken the dogs back to the pack's dwelling place in the city. But at least Ark and Orwen were there beside her, as well as her friend Hines.

Embla was glad she was not alone because she felt very nervous. The alphas of the Council were asking all kinds of questions about her. Some of the questions she could understand—the same questions everyone had been asking—Who was she? How old was she? Where did she come from? But other questions were more complicated. Embla didn't understand all the big words the gray alphas used, and they spoke so quickly that she struggled to keep up. Luckily, Ark and Hines did most of the answering for her.

Nevertheless, Embla did not like being the center of attention. It made her uneasy.

And to make matters worse, her bladder was full. She had drunk too much of that tasty brown water earlier, and now she really needed to relieve herself.

Embla wasn't sure what to do. The alphas probably would not take kindly to her urinating right here. They might think she was marking it as her territory, and that could lead to a big fight. She had seen it happen all the time out in the woods.

She needed to go someplace else where she could make water without causing trouble.

Ark and Hines were both busy talking to Addom, and Leros had gone somewhere with the dogs, so Embla turned to the only other person she knew to ask.

“Orwen,” she whispered.

He ignored her.

“Orwen,” Embla hissed a little louder.

This time she got the grumpy alpha’s attention, but it didn’t help matters much. He pressed his index finger to his lips and shushed her. “Shhh.”

The tension in Embla’s belly was getting worse. She was reminded of a day prior when her intense heat had gradually overtaken her body until she couldn’t resist her urges any longer. This feeling was not as strong as that one, but it was similar. Embla just hoped she could hold on until this meeting was over.

But it was not going to be easy. There was something in that brown drink that made her need to pee more than ordinary water. Her bladder felt like it was filled to the bursting. A muscle spasm shivered its way up her spine.

Didn’t the alphas feel the need too? They had drunk as much as her, if not more.

Then she remembered that all of them had stopped on their way into the city. One by one, each of them had paused by the roadside to quickly relieve themselves while the rest of the pack went on, running to catch up after.

It was easier for alphas to do. With their penises, they could aim wherever they chose, and they didn't need to squat to do it.

Embla felt a tingle of envy. It would be kind of nice to have a cock like an alpha.

Then again, those big dongles of flesh were quite vulnerable, Embla mused to herself with a wicked little grin, remembering how she had bitten Orwen's meaty thing the previous day.

She was tempted to give him another bite on the willy right now. That would be sure to get his attention, and the grumpy alpha certainly deserved it. But Embla knew that would just result in another spanking, and she didn't want that—at least not with all of these strangers looking on.

No, she had better stick to less dramatic methods.

She tugged urgently at the strip of Orwen's loincloth and whimpered, dancing uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Orwen, please, I—“

“*Shhh!*“ He shushed her even more angrily. “Be quiet!”

Embla whined.

This was so unfair. What was she supposed to do? She was trying to avoid an embarrassing scene, but Orwen was totally ignoring her. She could only hold her pee in for so long.

Another shiver ran up Embla's spine.

A trickle of wetness slithered down her inner thigh.

No, no, no...

She had to hold it in, but the tension was mounting by the moment. She clenched her teeth and squeezed down with the inner muscles of her pelvis, struggling with all of her might to hold her water in. Her entire body was trembling with the effort. Her legs felt like they might give out at any moment.

How did no one else notice that she needed to pee? Orwen was ignoring her because he didn't like her, obviously. Meanwhile, Ark and Hines were both distracted by the Council's questions.

Embla's bladder ached inside her from the strain. It felt like it was about as big and round as Hines's pregnant belly.

She couldn't hold it any longer.

It was coming... right now!

With a little grunt, Embla popped a squat right there in the middle of the chamber. She lifted her makeshift skirt to avoid making a mess and let loose right onto the floor.

“Ahhhhh...”

As Embla started to pee, a wave of relief washed over her body. The release of tension felt incredibly good—almost as good as those intense climaxes the alphas had given her with the fingers and tongues and pierced cocks.

Almost.

At first, nobody noticed that she was peeing. The thick carpet of moss absorbed Embla's piss and muffled the noise, but it quickly became saturated, and soon a puddle formed, making a loud pattering as her stream of urine splashed into it. Soon the

whole chamber was practically echoing with the sound of Embla's peeing. Part of her wanted to stop, but the relief was just too good. And her bladder was so full that it was almost impossible to stop the flow now that the floodgates had been opened.

Suddenly, several dozen pairs of eyes had turned in her direction.

Beside her, Orwen snarled with displeasure.

“No!” He roared. “Embla! Bad omega!”

But there was no point in stopping now. The damage had already been done. She sighed with relief and shivered as the last of the pee left her body.

Suddenly, she felt herself being lifted under the arms and she gasped.

It was Orwen. The big, mean alpha had caught her. Embla growled and squirmed in his grasp, but it was no use. There was no escaping Orwen's wrath, and she knew all too well what was coming next.

Orwen took a knee on the mossy floor and bent Embla's hips over his thigh. Her skirt became bunched up around her midsection, leaving her tush exposed to the cool air.

And even worse, it was exposed to every eye in the room.

“Bad!” Orwen rumbled. “Bad, bad omega!”

Embla heard that familiar *whoosh* as the alpha's hand sliced through the air, followed abruptly by the smack and sting of

his flat, hard palm connecting with her vulnerable bottom. A helpless cry broke from Embla's lips.

He was spanking her.

Right here in front of everyone.

The first spanking had been bad enough, but at least that had taken place in the seclusion of the forest. The only other people around to bear witness to her punishment had been Ark and Leros. That had not been so bad.

In fact, it had been a bit of a turn on.

But this? Well, this was just too much...

Embla had never been so ashamed and humiliated in all her life. She could feel the multitude of stern alpha eyes on her exposed rump as it jiggled and reddened under the subsequent swats of Orwen's firm hand.

And the most shameful part of all was the wetness between her legs. Some of that was from peeing, but most of it wasn't. That sticky, slippery lubrication was leaking from her slit, indicating that on some level her body wanted this, wanted to be physically and publicly dominated by an ugly and insensitive alpha like Orwen.

"Bad omega! Bad!" Orwen continued to grunt with each smack. His voice had taken on a hoarse and throaty quality that hinted he was struggling to hold back his own strange arousal.

Much more of this, and Embla was in danger of climaxing right here for all to see with her naked behind bent over

Orwen's knee.

She squealed and struggled to free herself from her punisher's grip, but Orwen was far too strong for her. He managed to land a good half-dozen swats, equally distributed between Embla's two rosy cheeks, before anyone had a chance to stop him.

It was Hines who intervened first.

"Hey, stop that!" the Outsider woman shouted at Orwen. "You are hurting her!"

Embla was able to understand what Hines was saying, and she was glad that the woman had mistaken the sounds coming from her mouth as cries of pain instead of what they really were.

But Orwen was undeterred. His open hand continued to rise and fall, setting Embla's rump ablaze with more loud, stinging smacks.

"She must be punished!" Orwen insisted. "She has desecrated this chamber and insulted the Council with her actions."

Embla did not understand the word "desecrate," but she assumed it must mean to pee.

"Have to des'crate!" Embla shouted. "Try tell. No listen! Orwen no listen!"

Hines stepped forward and grabbed Orwen's wrist.

"You need to stop *now!* Embla didn't know any better, and this is no way to teach her."

Orwen snorted, wrenched his hand free, and spanked Embla again. The loud smack of skin on wet skin rang through the Council Chamber.

A moment later, another voice shouted. A deep, loud alpha roar that shook the very walls of the chamber.

“Stop! As your pack leader, I command you to stop!”

It was Ark.

The massive alpha was now towering over Orwen and Embla, his eyes blazing with fury. The spanking stopped immediately.

“But boss,” Orwen complained. “You saw what she did. She pissed right on the floor of the Council Chamber.”

“I know,” Ark rumbled. “If she had done so knowingly, such disobedience would certainly warrant a hard spanking. But Hines is right. Our little omega doesn’t know any better. And it is our responsibility as her alphas to train her properly.”

Orwen grumbled bitterly. “Speak for yourself, boss. I’m not *her* alpha.”

Ark snarled aggressively at Orwen’s defiance.

“Then you have no right to punish her! Listen to me, Orwen, and listen well. So long as you are a member of my pack, you will do as I say. And I say this omega is ours.” He spun and faced the Council. “I have marked her, and I mean to claim her in the Ritual of Binding as soon as she is ready.”

A murmur went through the room.

Ritual of Binding? Embla had no idea what that meant, but it sounded very important.

Ark turn once more to face Orwen. “Do I make myself clear, alpha?”

Orwen dropped his head and grumbled.

“Aye, boss.”

The grip on Embla’s body loosened and she was let go. The omega stood up, pulling her leather skirt back down to hide the pink weals left by Orwen’s hand on her backside. She had spent the better part of her life running around naked, but now she was grateful for the protection her skimpy clothing provided.

A sense of calm returned to the chamber, like the passing of a storm. Ark’s mood lightened, and he placed his hand on Orwen’s shoulder in a display of friendship. Ark whispered something that Embla could not hear, and Orwen reluctantly nodded his head.

“Very well,” Ark said, then to the Council he added, “If there is nothing more, then we will be on our way.”

“You may go,” the leader Addom said.

Ark and his companions bowed in respect, and Embla mimicked the gesture. Then they all headed toward the door. Hines followed close behind with a troubled look on her face.

As they departed the chamber, Orwen grumbled and glared at Embla. She tilted her chin and gave him a defiant little

“Hmph!” It was probably unwise to taunt an angry alpha that

way, and Embla suspected she would end up paying for it later, but she just couldn't help herself.

Still, she had an uneasy feeling in her belly.

She couldn't help wondering if she had made a mistake letting the alphas bring her to this place.

It was painfully obvious that she did not fit in here. She belonged in the wilderness.

But she would do her best to learn this new way of life.

CHAPTER 20: EMBLA

Over the following days and weeks, Embla gradually settled into her new life in the Zone. She stayed with her three alphas in their den, which was a rundown two-story building near the very edge of the city. Most nights if it wasn't raining they would camp out on the roof, building a fire for warmth and for cooking and sleeping underneath the stars. The other rooms were used mostly for storage as well as a shelter for the dogs.

And Embla was excited to discover that there were not just three dogs, as she had previously thought. In addition to Smoke, Shadow, and Ghost, there was also a reddish male dog named Fang and a female with a blonde coat named Luna. The reason they had stayed behind on the last excursion was that Luna was very pregnant, and Fang had stayed behind to protect her.

Luna looked as if she was ready to have her puppies any day now. Just like the other dogs, she had taken an immediate liking to Embla, who spent a lot of time looking after her, making sure she had plenty of food and water as well as comfortable bedding to sleep on.

Embla probably would have spent all of her time with the dogs if she could, but there were many other things to attend to.

Ark wanted to prepare Embla for her new life here in the city. On that first evening, following the incident with the Council,

he took her to a bathing house with hot springs and cleaned her even more thoroughly than before.

Afterward, Lero's went through her hair with a metal comb, working free all the knots and tangles. Whenever the teeth of the comb snagged on a clump of matted hair, it tugged painfully at Embla's scalp, and she yelped in pain, but Leros purred to soothe her, and he did his best not to hurt her. In the end, the ordeal of combing was worth it. Embla enjoyed how smooth her hair felt and the way it hung loose and bouncy around her shoulders. The alphas enjoyed it too, frequently petting it and running their fingers through the golden strands.

Well, at least Ark and Leros did. Orwen... he was another story.

He was aloof and grumpy as ever. However, when he discovered that Embla had some interest in crafting, he did take advantage of her curiosity to teach her how to make simple items, such as knapping stones to make knife blades and speartips, or using rawhide cord to stitch up pieces of leather for carrying sacks. Mostly he just criticized Embla's little mistakes, but that only served to make her try harder to improve her skills.

And most important, there were her language lessons. These were conducted in a rather haphazard way by her alphas. But every day, Hines would visit as well, and she provided more structured lessons. Embla struggled a lot with the finer points of grammar, but she picked up new vocabulary very quickly,

and she remembered many words that she had known before but had forgotten.

Soon, she was speaking all the time.

But her heart was still filled with an uneasy sensation that this place was not her home, and she would never truly belong here.

* * *

One night, about two weeks after her arrival, Embla startled awake in the middle of the night. As usual, she had been dreaming about dogs, and one of the dogs had spoken to her in the voice of Leros.

“Wake up... Embla, wake up...”

And when she had woken up, she discovered that Leros really had been speaking to her, and his voice had penetrated her dream. He was whispering to her gently. His warm, soft lips and hard piercing brushed deliciously against the shell of her ear. All the fear instantly left her.

Embla blinked her sleepy eyes. They were out on the roof where they usually slept in dry weather. The moon was sliver-thin, a silver eyelash in the dark, and the Milky Way arced across the sky like a river of twinkling jewels.

“Leros?” Embla whispered back. Ark and Orwen were still snoring, and she didn’t want to wake them.

Her eyes gradually adjusted, and she saw the dog Smoke standing nearby in the dark.

“It’s Luna,” Leros told her. “Come on!”

Was something wrong with the female dog? Embla hoped not.

The omega quickly crawled out from beneath her layers of warm coverings and followed Leros. The young alpha had prepared a torch, which he lit on the coals of the campfire nearby on the roof. Then he led the way down the stairs into the buildings lower floors.

The dogs were kept on the ground floor. The other three males were gathered protectively around Luna's bedding, and Smoke trotted across the floor to join them. Luna, meanwhile, was lying in her bedding, which she had scraped and arranged into a nest. She was whining faintly.

"Luna hurt?" Embla asked worriedly.

Leros shook his head. "She's okay. But she's whelping."

"Helping?"

"*Whelping.*" Leros made a gesture with his hand, and Embla understood—the little dogs inside Luna's belly were going to come out between her legs. Embla had seen it happen once before, back when she was a captive of the Farlanders, but she had not learned the word.

"Whelping," she repeated, committing the word to memory.

Leros set the torch into a holder on the wall, and then he and Embla knelt by Luna's whelping nest. At their approach, Luna raised her head to look at them and wagged her tail weakly. Embla gently petted her head.

"Good girl," she whispered, mimicking the phrase she'd often heard the alphas use. The female dog gave her hand a friendly

lick.

Embla gave Leros another worried look.

“We help?” she asked. “What do?”

Leros gave her a reassuring smile and rubbed her bare shoulder with his big hand.

“Don’t worry. Luna knows what to do. We’ll just stay close by and watch, in case there is a problem. Then we’ll help.”

Embla nodded.

She understood everything Leros had said. She could not have spoken something that complex, but her listening skills were far ahead of her speaking. Sometimes, Embla even surprised herself with how rapidly her linguistic abilities were coming back. She remembered a great deal from when she was very little. It had just faded through disuse.

Embla drew herself close to Leros, the young alpha put his arm around her, and together they watched Luna give birth.

After a little while, a grayish sac began to drop from Luna’s vulva. Not long after that, a tiny wriggling creature came out of her, followed by a greenish-black afterbirth on the end of a thin cord. Luna took care of everything. She gently nipped the membrane and licked it away so the newborn could breathe.

“Little dog,” Embla said with wonder in her voice.

“Puppy,” Leros whispered.

“Puppy?”

Leros nodded. “A little dog is called a puppy.”

Goodness, there were so many words to learn. It seemed like there was a word for every single thing in the world. But Embla especially liked this new word “puppy,” and she practiced it a few times, enjoying the way the sounds bubbled from her mouth.

Luna licked her first little puppy, and it started to cry in the tiniest squeakiest voice Embla had ever heard. Her eyes filled with tears of joy and love at the sight of that small, helpless, and adorable new life.

“Puppy.”

Next, Luna carefully chewed away the umbilical cord and licked the little pup. It was a blind, pink, trembling thing that nestled into the warmth of its mother’s body. Three more puppies followed, making four in total. All of them were healthy and happy.

As Embla looked at the puppies crying and snuggling against Luna’s belly, and the four male dogs surrounding them protectively, her heart welled with so much love it hurt.

“We keep?” she asked Leros.

The young alpha hugged her close.

“We’ll keep one, probably. The others will go to other alpha hunting packs.”

Embla frowned.

“Don’t worry,” Leros chuckled. “They will be cared for very well. They will be fed and loved, and they will grow up to be strong and happy hunting dogs.”

“Okay,” Embla said, accepting this. After a moment, she added thoughtfully, “How Luna make puppies?”

Leros looked surprised. “You don’t know?”

Embla worried her lip and shook her head.

“Well, she didn’t make the puppies all by herself. The male dogs are her mates, just like me and Ark and Orwen are your mates now. The males filled her with their seed, and it made Luna pregnant.”

“Pregnant?”

Leros moved his hand in a gesture meant to illustrate a big round tummy.

“Ohhh,” Embla said. She grinned. “I want pregnant.”

The flap of the alpha’s loincloth lifted instantly, and in the torchlight, Embla saw the glint of his piercing peeking out from beneath the hem of the leather. She giggled and reached down, stroking him. The flesh of his shaft was hard and feverishly hot.

“What this?” she asked mischievously.

“Don’t you know?” Leros teased.

“I know,” Embla said and giggled. “Is cock.” She got down on all fours and pulled the loincloth back to expose it fully. “*Big* cock.”

Leros unfastened the loincloth and removed it completely, more than happy to give the omega access to his throbbing erection, which was now vertical with arousal. His twisting

veins stood out starkly in the glow of the torch, and a bead of dew leaked from his pierced tip.

“Does my little omega like big cocks?”

“Mm-hm,” Embla hummed.

She flicked her tongue over his piercing, tasting the tang of steel and the salt of his leaking precum. Next she wrapped her lips around his cock, swirling her tongue around his tip inside her mouth. She bobbed her head, sucking the length of his shaft with long, slurping strokes. His cock was warm and smooth and heavy in her mouth.

Leros grunted in satisfaction as Embla sucked his cock, and the little omega took great enjoyment from pleasing her alpha.

At last, she pulled back to catch her breath.

“Good cock,” Embla whispered. She touched her pussy, which was now quite slippery with her own flowing arousal. “Put cock here, okay?”

Leros grinned in the torchlight and jerked his stiff shaft, which was well lubricated with Embla’s saliva.

“You are one bossy little omega, aren’t you?”

Embla pouted and whined.

“Don’t worry,” Leros whispered. “I’ll give you what you need.”

He laid Embla back on the ground and slid his cock home between her open legs, filling her up completely. He placed a

warm, sensual kiss against her lips, and then he began to move inside her with long, slippery strokes.

Neither one of them was aware of the jealous eyes watching them from the darkness.

CHAPTER 21: JORA

Jora watched the two young lovers with a rising sense of disgust.

She was outside of the building where Leros and his pack brothers lived, her bare feet perched atop a pile of rubble that was just high enough to let her peer in through the window. The moon was barely a sliver in the sky, so the streets were dark tonight. Besides, Leros's den was located on the outskirts of the city, and there was little risk that the snooping omega might be spotted by a passerby.

There was light inside the den, however. A flickering torch that illuminated a pair of intertwined bodies—sweating, grunting, undulating...

Fucking.

Jora could scarcely believe it. How could Leros do this to her? How could he turn down her advances in favor of this... this animal?

That's what this Embla was, after all. An animal.

Jora refused to call her an omega.

Perhaps they had managed to clean her up. They had bathed her, scrubbed away the dirt, combed the tangles out of her wild hair. They had even managed to teach her some of the language. But even a dog could learn simple commands.

Yes, that was what Embla was.

A dog.

A bitch.

And she certainly made love like a dog, didn't she? As repulsed as she was, Jora couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene inside the room. Embla had turned over, and she was now on all fours, her butt raised in submission as Leros slammed his cock into her over and over again. The horrible little dog-girl whimpered and mewled like the canine that she was while raunchy squelching sounds issued from her fucked hole.

And the worst part of all? Leros was clearly into it.

The animalistic sounds that Embla was making—which were totally unbecoming of an omega, by the way—those sounds seemed to be driving Leros into a frenzy of lust. He was growling like a wild beast as he gripped his mate's hips and drove his hard cock deep into her pussy from behind.

Unbelievable.

Jora had thought Leros was better than this. She had blamed everything on that stupid pack leader of his. Ark. She had assumed that taking the dog-girl as a mate had been purely that asshole's idea.

But now, seeing just how fervently Leros was humping away at her from behind, Jora realized she was wrong.

She should leave. She shouldn't watch any more of this. But for some reason she couldn't tear her eyes away.

“Source, Embla, you feel so good,” Leros grunted between thrusts. “Your sweet little omega pussy is so fucking tight.”

The flames of Jora’s jealousy rose higher.

What did Leros know about good pussy? He had never fucked another female besides the dog-girl. Jora knew every morsel of gossip in the Zone. She knew exactly who was sleeping with whom, and she knew for a fact that Leros had been a virgin before this awful little woodland creature had seduced him.

Jora, on the other hand, was the farthest thing from a virgin one could imagine. Except for Leros, she’d had every thirsty young alpha in the Central Ruins. Hers was the best pussy around. She did her inner muscle exercises every night to keep in shape.

“Take it,” Leros purred to Embla in the room below. “Take that alpha cock like a good little omega.”

“Yes,” Embla moaned. “Big cock. So deep...”

In her hiding place, Jora frowned. It wasn’t fair. That should be her down there getting pounded by that gorgeous alpha cock—and it *was* gorgeous. One of the best she’d ever seen, and she’d seen plenty. It should be her down there getting fucked, getting dominated, getting lavished with the alpha stud’s sexy praise.

Her eyes brimmed with bitter tears.

It just wasn’t fair.

Jora needed to get this stupid bitch Embla out of the picture. Then Leros would surely see the error of his ways and put that

big hard dick of his in the right pussy for a change. But how the hell was Jora going to make that happen? Obviously she couldn't *kill* Embla. Oh, she would like to do that, but she almost certainly get caught, and then she would be exiled or worse.

No, there had to be some other way...

A roar from inside the room startled Jora out of the thoughts.

It was Leros. By the orange glow of the sputtering torch, Jora could see that the young alpha's knot had formed, and it was a sizeable one. The appearance of that bulb at the base of his dick could only mean one thing. He was spilling his hot load inside that animal.

Embla's raucous screams confirmed it.

"Yes!" the dog-girl cried. "Leros, I feel! Come me, come meeee!"

Jora snickered and rolled her eyes.

Source, Embla sounded so fucking dumb. She could barely even speak. Of all the females in the Zone, how could Leros have chosen that one to fall for?

Jora looked on a moment longer. Down below, Embla's hips were bucking with pleasure as Leros filled her cunt with his load. She grinded her penetrated vulva against his swollen knot as if milking every last drop of seed from his dangling balls.

At last, Jora could stand it no more.

She turned away and crouched on the pile of rubble with her back against the wall.

How would she get rid of this interloper?

How, how, how?

As she slumped there beneath the window, sounds drifted out from the room. Love sounds of wet kisses and horny moans that gradually transitioned into disgusting, lovey-dovey pillow-talk that was made all the more embarrassing by Embla's stupid broken language.

"Leros," Jora heard Embla whisper sleepily. "I want you make puppies in me."

Puppies?

Source, that dumb bitch really thought she was a dog, didn't she?

But apparently Leros was not appalled by Embla's stupidity. In fact, it sounded as if he found it endearing. Jora heard him laugh.

"You mean babies," he purred between smacking kisses.

"Dogs have puppies, omegas have *babies*. Understand?"

"Mm. I want you make babies in me," said Embla.

Jora rolled her eyes again in the darkness. But she also felt a tingle of concern. If Leros and his pack brothers actually knocked the dumb little bitch up, then there would be no way to get rid of her. And what Leros said next confirmed Jora's worries.

“We will make babies together, Embla,” he whispered. “You and me and Orwen. All of us. We will be a family. But first we must complete the Ritual of Binding.”

So, they actually planned to go through with it.

Jora had heard rumors that there would be a Ritual of Binding for Embla, but she had not believed it.

Her heart sank.

Silence gathered, and Jora was just about to slip away into the chilly night, when she heard Leros speaking again inside the room.

“Embla, what’s wrong?” the alpha asked. “You look worried.”

“Am worried.”

“What are you worried about?” Leros sounded out each word carefully so the dumb dog-girl could understand.

“Worried about Orwen,” Embla answered him after a moment.

“Orwen no like me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes. True. He no like.”

“It’s *not* true, Embla. Orwen can be mean, sure. But I know Orwen, I can tell that he likes you, Embla. Really, he does. It will just take him some time to admit it.”

Source, did Leros think the dog-girl could understand *that*?

Even Jora herself wasn’t sure what he meant. But she was sure of one thing.

It was total shit.

The omega was right. Orwen did not like her. Jora had seen the way he had glowered at the dog-girl upon their first arrival in the Central Ruins. And of course she'd heard the stories about what happened in the Council Chamber. The way Orwen had spanked her for pissing on the floor like an unbroken dog. No, Orwen didn't like her one bit.

And Jora knew one more thing.

She knew the reason why.

Plans started turning inside the omega's head. Orwen was the key. He was the way to get rid of Embla once and for all.

In the darkness, a cruel smile spread across Jora's face.

Without a sound, she leapt down from her perch and scurried away into the city, sticking close to the walls like a cat.

CHAPTER 22: ARK

Finally, the day of the Binding Ritual arrived. It was a sunny day, and the blue sky overhead was completely devoid of clouds as Ark and his companions made their way down the main avenue of the Central Ruins. The ancient streets were still littered with the rusted-out husks of vehicles from before the time of the Great Change, and the pavement was cracked and tufted with sprouting weeds. On both sides, the ancient towers rose like the walls of a man-made canyon. Stone and steel wrapped in twisting vines. Ark couldn't help wondering what this place must have looked like a hundred years ago, when the walls had still been pristine and the streets had been rumbling with traffic.

Ark doubted he could have survived one day in a world like that.

Even now, he was starting to get a restless feeling. This time, he and his pack brothers had stayed in the Central Ruins for far, far longer than their usual visit. Nearly a full cycle of the moon. Ark was ready to embark on another scouting expedition into the wilderness of the Zone, the only place he really felt at home.

The reason for this extended stay in the Central Ruins was obvious. They had to oversee Embla's training, to make her feel comfortable in her new home, and to prepare her for the coming ritual.

Ark turned his glance toward the little omega trotting along beside him.

She had certainly changed a great deal over the past weeks. Her posture was more upright, her chin held high in a display of confidence. It was a far cry from the wild and skittish girl who had arrived with them.

Embla noticed Ark looking at her, and the corner of her mouth quirked up in a sexy smile.

She was beautiful.

But she had always been beautiful from the first moment Ark had seen her with her tangled hair and blazing green eyes.

The alpha pack leader couldn't help feeling some misgivings, however.

Was he doing the right thing? Would Embla ever truly be able to fit in here with the other omegas? And what about his pack brothers? One of them would have to stay behind in the Central Ruins at all times, of course. Protecting their omega would be an honor, but it would also mean less time out in the wild where they belonged, and that would have an effect on them, no doubt.

As they made their way down the street, Ark cast his eyes at his pack brothers. Leros was still young and enthusiastic about taking an omega mate. It was Orwen that Ark was worried about. His second had always been surly and bad tempered, but those traits had increased in the past weeks.

It was because of the omega.

To an outside observer, it might have seemed that Orwen did not like the omega. But Ark knew his old friend too well. He could follow his thoughts just as easily as he could follow the tracks of a deer in the forest.

Orwen did not despise Embla. On the contrary, he despised himself for his attraction to her. Orwen was still convinced that Embla was a Farlander, and he had a bad history with the Farlanders.

Very bad.

But Ark had faith everything would be okay in the end. Sooner or later, they would learn the truth about Embla—when she was ready to tell them, of course—and then Orwen would see that he was wrong.

That would come later. For now, they had the Ritual of Binding to attend to, and the first step was the omega's cleansing and preparation.

Ahead of them a tall building loomed at the end of the street, its lavishly decorated architecture half-hidden beneath a green net of vines and leaves.

“What this?” Embla asked.

“This is the bathing house,” Ark told her.

Ark knew something about the history of this place, at least what had been passed down orally through the generations. In the old days, before the Great Change, this building had been something called a *hotel*—a place for travelers from afar to live and sleep. It no longer served that purpose, of course. No

one visited the Zone, or if they did, they didn't leave. These days, the building was prized for its steaming hot baths, which were fueled by natural springs and geothermal heat from deep beneath the city.

This was the traditional place of preparation for an omega who was about to partake in the Ritual of Binding. Her body must be cleaned and purified by the steaming waters before her mates dominated her in front of the entire tribe.

“Bathing house,” Embla repeated.

Ark had been through all the stages of the ritual with her, making sure she understood. He did not want her to be blindsided by anything unexpected. The Ritual of Binding could be very frightening for a young omega. To be penetrated and knotted while a crowd looked on was a daunting experience. But the hours spent in the warm baths would help her to relax.

Embla nodded, and together they all stepped inside.

The interior of the ancient hotel was a wide-open space with an elegantly curving staircase and granite pilasters along the walls. The floor was carpeted with moss and tufts of ferns. Overhead there hung a crystal chandelier preserved from the old days, its glittering facets twined with spiraling green tendrils and leaves.

Ark smiled as Embla looked around in wonder.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Like,” she murmured. “Very like. Such pretty.”

Ark resisted the urge to correct Embla's grammar. Now was not the time for criticism and learning. Besides, he found her funny way of speaking endearing. Alluring, even.

At the far end of the overgrown lobby, a series of broad marble archways exuded a humid breath laden with steam and the scent of soap and perfume. It was the entrance to the hot baths. A lone young omega stood there waiting, dressed in a loose white robe. As they approached, the omega lifted her hand in greeting and smiled.

"Hello," she said. "My name is Gabrielle."

Following the traditions of the tribe, alphas would not participate in the bathing of their omega before the ritual. Instead, she would be accompanied by another omega who would serve as her guide during the preparations.

Ark had hoped that Embla's guide would be Hines. The Outsider woman knew Embla well—as well as anyone knew the mysterious little omega, at least—and Embla trusted Hines completely.

However, Hines had just gone into labor earlier that day, so a last minute replacement had volunteered for the role. Ark was not familiar with the young omega named Gabrielle, but Leros knew her somewhat, and there was no reason to doubt her ability to guide Embla through the necessary preparations.

Gabrielle reached out and beckoned for Embla to join her.

Embla gave Ark a wary glance. Though her confidence had grown enormously over the past weeks, she was still quite

nervous about being separated from the alphas she knew.

Ark petted her hair and shoulders gently.

“Don’t be afraid,” he reassured her. “I will be right out here with Leros and Orwen. If you need anything, you can just call and we will hear you, okay?”

Embla hesitated for a moment, but finally nodded.

“Okay,” she whispered.

Ark caressed her cheek. “We will see you at the ritual.”

Bravely, Embla walked forward and joined Gabrielle, who took her hand with a smile and led her into the steam-shrouded depths of the bathing area.

Once the two omegas had disappeared, Ark took a seat on the moss-covered floor, crossing his legs and breathing deeply. It was standard for alphas to spend the time before the ritual meditating upon the significance of the bond they would soon form with their omega. That is what Ark intended to do now. Leros sat down beside him.

But Orwen remained standing. He wore a troubled expression on his scarred face.

“Brother,” Ark said to his second. “Will you not join us in meditating?”

Orwen shook his head.

“I need to take a walk,” he said sullenly.

Ark didn’t need to ask him what was wrong. It was about the omega, of course.

As pack leader, Ark had the right to command Orwen to sit down and remain here until the time of the ritual. But no amount of authority would give him the power to change his pack brother's thoughts.

If Orwen needed some alone time, Ark thought it best to grant it.

"Very well," the pack leader said. "Just be sure to return in time for the beginning of the ritual."

"Aye."

And with that, the cantankerous alpha turned and trudged away toward the entrance of the hotel and the sunlit street beyond.

CHAPTER 23: EMBLA

The bathing chamber was much more impressive than anything Embla had ever imagined. It was a wide open space with tile floors and marble columns like smooth white tree trunks. The warm air was hazy with steam, and the sunlight slanted in through big vertical windows along the far wall. A thousand lovely aromas filled Embla's nose—the scent of creamy soap and incense and lotion. She paused for a moment, just letting her pores soak up all the wonderful sensations.

The omega named Gabrielle sighed impatiently.

“Come on,” she said, tugging Embla's hand. “We need to get you ready.”

The omega lead Embla to the edge of one of the rectangular bathing pools, which was as big as a pond. There were stone steps leading down into the water, and Gabrielle gestured to get in.

Removing her leather skirt, Embla stepped into the water, which was deliciously warm. Steam rose from its tranquil surface in gossamer coils. Embla took another step, and another. She hesitated.

Gabrielle was just standing at the edge of the pool, still fully clothed in her virginal white gown. Embla didn't understand what was going on, and she felt a twinge of foolishness, wondering if she had made some mistake.

“No get in?” Embla asked.

It was not Gabrielle who answered. A different voice called out from the far end of the pool. An elegant and self-assured contralto.

“Gabrielle will not be joining us today. Actually, I will be the one who will help you prepare for the ritual.”

Embla turned toward the sound of the voice, and saw another omega in the water, her elegant, tanned arms outstretched on the side of the pool where she was reclining. Her long hair hung down one shoulder, straight and lustrous and black as a raven’s plumage. Her face was sculptural and lovely, with a hint of arrogance.

Embla had seen this omega once before. When she had first arrived in the city. The omega had been talking to Leros, and they seemed to have been having some kind of quarrel.

Who was she? And what was she doing here?

“My name is Jora.”

She lifted one hand and waved the Gabrielle away. With a submissive bow, Gabrielle scampered away and disappeared through a side door. Jora watched her go, then flicked her stunning eyes back toward Embla, making her shiver.

Something strange was going on here.

Embla didn’t know what to do. Should she call out for her alpha mates? After all, they were right outside.

But she really didn’t seem to be in danger.

A friendly smile touched Jora's lips, and her features softened. She beckoned for Embla to come all the way into the water.

"Come on in," she giggled. "I'm not going to hurt you, Embla."

The way she said it made the idea sound totally absurd. Of course there was nothing to be afraid of.

Except for the water.

Embarrassed, Embla dropped her eyes and wrung her hands.

"No can swim."

Jora let out a gentle and sympathetic sigh. "Oh sweetheart, you can't swim? Well that's okay, the water is not very deep, see?"

The dark-haired omega pushed off from the wall and walked across the pool, showing that the water was only about chest deep.

"Come on," she said with a friendly wink.

Embla took a deep breath. She had an innate fear of the water, but this omega seemed very friendly, and there was something about her that made Embla want to prove herself. She wanted to show that she could fit in like an ordinary omega.

Carefully, Embla took the remaining steps until her feet were resting on the tiled floor of the pool and the water was up to her shoulders.

Jora grinned and clapped her hands. Her smile was so kind and genuine that Embla found herself smiling back automatically.

“It feels really good, right?”

Embla nodded.

“Mm. Really good.”

“Wow, you already speak so well. I’m impressed how quickly you have learned the language.” Jora beckoned again. “Come over here. There’s something I want to show you.”

Embla hesitated another moment. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was strange about all of this. Then again, her alphas were close by. There was no reason for her to be afraid. And this new omega was so elegant and cool. Embla really wanted to impress her.

Making up her mind, Embla crossed the water and let Jora lead her to the side of the pool where baskets were arranged with different kinds of soaps and glass bottles filled with shampoo, and natural sponges for scrubbing.

“Nice, right?” Jora said with a gleam in her eyes.

“Nice.”

Embla snuffled all the different soaps, not sure which one to choose. Some of them smelled delicate and floral, while others were bold and citrusy, and still others had a rich creamy aroma. At last she picked one that reminded her of wild honey and beeswax. Then, following Jora’s lead, she grabbed a sponge and started to bathe herself. The combination of the silky soap and warm water felt amazing on her skin.

They talked while they bathed. Actually, Jora was the one who did most of the talking, but she was careful to speak slowly

and clearly so that Embla could understand. She talked about all kinds of random things—food, daily life in the city, and of course alphas. She even shared some tips for mating that made Embla squeal with laughter.

At one point, Ark poked his head in the door to check on her, and Embla shooed him away with her hand as if to tell him that he was intruding on omega time.

Embla was having a great deal of fun chatting with her new friend. So much fun, in fact, that she all but forgot about the swiftly approaching ritual.

When they were so wrinkled they couldn't stand it anymore, they both got out and rinsed in a man-made waterfall of clean water spilling from an opening on the wall. Then they dried off and Jora steered Embla toward a bench in front of a mirror.

“My, you have such lovely hair,” Jora complimented her.

Embla blushed and said thank you, just as her alphas had taught her to do.

Jora fetched a fine comb and carefully pulled it through Embla's hair.

“So,” Jora asked at last. “Are you nervous about the ritual?”

“Nervous?”

“You know, like... a little scared?”

“No,” Embla said, then added, “Well... maybe little.”

She watched in the mirror as Jora nodded solemnly and set down the comb. Embla's hair was almost completely dried

now, and Jora separated it into three strands and began weaving them into an attractive plait.

“Well, I know I would be scared if I were in your situation,” Jora said. “You must be really brave, Embla.”

“What mean?”

Jora faltered for a moment, as if she had said too much.

“Oh... um, nothing.”

“Jora, please. What mean?”

The dark haired omega sighed. Her eyes met Embla’s in the mirror for a moment, then she turned her attention back to her braiding.

“Oh, I just mean everything between you and Orwen. It’s just... well, it must be so difficult to be mated to an alpha who doesn’t like you.”

Embla’s heart skipped.

How did Jora know that?

“Yes,” Jora went on without looking up. “I heard all about the way that he *beat* you in front of the Council. You didn’t deserve that, Embla.”

So, Jora had heard about that incident too. Was there anything the omega didn’t know?

“If you ask me,” Jora continued, “Ark is asking too much of you. It’s unfair to expect you to fit in here in the Central Ruins. Your home is in the Farlands after all, right? And of course

Leros, well... he looks up to Ark so much that he'll just go along with anything his pack leader says, you know?"

Embla didn't answer, but she felt an uncomfortable weight in her belly.

Jora was right, Embla felt so out of place here.

"Why Orwen no like me?" she asked.

Jora's fingers stopped working at the braid.

"You really don't know?"

"No," Embla shook her head lightly. Her eyes suddenly felt achy with tears.

"Oh, in that case I really should not have said anything."

"Please," Embla begged. "Need know."

Jora let out a sympathetic sigh. "Well, I suppose you do have a *right* to know. I mean, you're going to be permanently bound to Orwen in a few hours. Well, as you probably know, there are many alphas here in the Central Ruins who dislike Farlanders like you. Of course, *I* don't feel that way, but..."

Embla wasn't even sure that she was a Farlander. Of course, her earliest memories were of the wilderness, and she had spent much of her childhood as a prisoner of the Farlanders. But she felt that she was different from them.

She did not say anything, however. She did not want to interrupt Jora's story.

The dark-haired omega continued.

“Anyway, Orwen has some very personal reasons for hating Farlanders. You see, he was born to a pack consisting of four alphas and one omega. When he was very little, three of his alpha fathers went on an expedition into the wilderness. They were ambushed by a tribe of Farlanders. Two were killed, and one got away, but he had very bad injuries. He made it back to the Central Ruins in time to tell what happened. But he died shortly after that from his wounds.”

“Oh no,” Embla said. Her heart ached for Orwen and his loss. She knew what it was like to lose loved ones.

“Yes, I’m afraid it’s true,” Jora said sadly. “And it gets worse. You see, Orwen’s fourth father was a very hot-tempered young alpha. He had not gone on that expedition because one alpha needed to stay behind to guard the omega. But after learning what happened to his pack brothers, he flew into a rage. He ran off into the wilderness to get vengeance against the Farlanders who killed his companions, but he ended up getting murdered too.”

A tear rolled down Embla’s cheek. She was beginning to understand why Orwen seemed unhappy all the time. He must have had such a difficult childhood without his fathers.

Jora shook her head.

“I can understand the fourth alpha’s desire for revenge, but it was an irresponsible thing to do, leaving the omega alone like that. And then, with all of her alphas dead, Orwen’s mother fell into a deep depression. Even the love of her children could

not lift her spirits. You see, when the mating bond is broken by death, it can cause the surviving mate to lose her mind...”

“What happen?” Embla sniffed. “What happen Orwen mother?”

Jora’s perfect black eyebrows scrunched together in a pained expression.

“She killed herself.”

Embla gasped.

“So now I guess you can see why Orwen hates the Farlanders so much.”

Yes, Embla could see. All this time she thought Orwen only disliked her because of her disobedience. Because she had bitten him. Because she had peed on the floor in the Council Chamber. Now she understood that it ran so much deeper than that. Orwen didn’t just dislike her. He hated her for what she was. In his mind, she was no better than the brutes who had killed his parents and ruined his life.

“Source,” Embla muttered.

Jora shook her head again. “If you ask me, it’s very irresponsible what Ark is doing. And dangerous too. If an alpha and omega go through the Ritual of Binding and one of them does not truly love the other one, it can actually kill them both. They will be cursed and their bodies will wither away.”

Was that really true? If so, Embla could not go through with the ritual. It was not just her life at stake, but Orwen’s too.

A sense of panic rose up in her chest. Her heart seemed to pummel at the base of her throat, and she struggled to choke back a cry of desperation.

Suddenly, the clouds of steam seemed to close in around her.

She had to get out of here.

She had to run away.

Embla turned toward Jora with tears in her eyes. She clasped desperately at the dark-haired omega's hands and begged for help.

“Jora, please help. I need go. You help go. Please...”

“But Embla, your alphas...”

“No tell, Jora. Please help.”

The dark-haired omega glanced around the empty bathing room and sighed again.

“Very well, Embla. If you really want, I will help you escape...”

CHAPTER 24: ARK

Ark sat cross-legged on the mossy floor outside the bathing chamber and relaxed his mind. He kept his breathing slow, steady, and circular, allowing his thoughts to drift by like clouds blowing across an immovable mountain peak.

One of those thoughts was of Embla. Part of him wished to check on her again, but he resisted the impulse. She was fine, and she seemed to be enjoying the time with her new omega friend. That was good. It was important for her to have friends here in the city.

Still, Ark couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that he was making a mistake.

Embla was not of this place, and she would never feel wholly comfortable here in the Central Ruins, even though she would be safe and protected.

Ark drove those thoughts out of his mind, focused on his breathing, and allowed himself to detach, sinking deeper and deeper into his meditation.

But his mental relaxation was short-lived.

A sharp cry pierced the serenity of his meditation. It was the cry of an omega in distress, and it had come from inside the bathing room.

A surge of adrenaline brought Ark to his feet. He rushed toward the entrance of the bathing area. He sensed Leros right

behind him.

No sooner had he stepped through the archway than an omega came stumbling toward him out of the clouds of steam. It was not Embla, nor was it the omega Gabrielle who had led Embla inside. This omega had tears in her eyes and a ruddy mark on her cheek as if she'd been slapped hard.

“Jora?” Leros asked.

So, Ark's young pack brother knew this omega. Yes, he could remember seeing her before. It had seemed to him that the omega was interested in Leros, but the young alpha did not reciprocate her feelings.

But what was she doing here?

No time to worry about that. His primary concern—his *only* concern—was his mate's safety.

“Embla,” Ark growled. “Where is she?”

The omega named Jora sobbed, tears streaming down her face.

“She's crazy!” Jora stammered. “I don't know what happened. I was braiding her hair and then she just freaked out. She attacked me like a wild animal! Oh Source, I thought she was going to kill me...”

That didn't sound like Embla. Yes, the wild little omega had an impulsive streak, but Ark had never seen her engage in unprovoked violence.

“Where. Is. She?” he repeated sternly.

The shaken omega lifted a trembling hand toward one of the tall windows along the far wall. The glass panes had been opened, and steam was pouring out into the cooler air outside.

“After she hit me, she ran away. I’m telling you she’s crazy. Oh, Leros. Please...”

She tried to hug the young alpha, but he kept her at arm’s length.

“We have to find her,” Ark said.

Leros nodded in agreement. “I’ll go find Orwen.”

“No time,” Ark snarled.

The pack leader charged across the tiled floor and leapt through the open window into the alley beyond. Without hesitation, young Leros followed right on his heels. The dark-haired omega was left on her own. She called after Leros, but her cries fell on deaf ears.

CHAPTER 25: ORWEN

Orwen stalked down the streets of the ruined city, grim-faced and silent. Overhead, a flock of white birds swooped through the cool green shade of the vine-tangled towers, but the alpha did not notice them. He did not notice any of his surroundings. All he could see was the face of the omega, innocent, beautiful, and infuriating.

Did Ark really expect him to go through with this?

To be bound to a Farlander?

Of course, Ark still stubbornly refused to accept what the girl was. But what else could she be? They had found her in the Farlands, and no one here in the Central Ruins knew who she was.

Orwen grumbled to himself as he automatically turned a corner and ducked down an alleyway overgrown with dense weeds and ferns.

He had been through all of these thoughts a million times.

It was pointless.

In a way, Orwen understood his pack leader's infatuation with the girl. There was no other omega like her anywhere in the Zone. Her smooth, fair skin and forest green eyes. Hell, even covered in dirt with leaves and twigs in her hair, she had still looked gorgeous, like an angel that had lost her wings and crash-landed out of the sky.

But the girl was no angel, that was for damn sure.

Okay, so she had cleaned up nicely. She was acquiring the language with astonishing rapidity. She was even learning to mimic the posture and manners of a proper omega of the Central Tribe.

That's all it was, though: mimicry. Orwen knew damn well that the girl was tameless at heart. He could see it in the flicker of green fire dancing behind her eyes.

And the thing that pissed him off so much was that he liked it.

He liked her defiance.

The other omegas were all meek, submissive creatures. Oh sure, they might bicker and squabble amongst themselves, but as soon as an alpha would stroll by, they would shut up like frightened rabbits.

Not Embla though. She was defiant to the end, and that lit a fire inside Orwen's heart that made him feel more alive than he'd felt since...

The alpha growled to himself and snipped off that train of thought.

It was too painful to think about all he had lost.

Without even realizing where he was going, Orwen crossed an empty street, weaving between the rusted bones of ancient automobiles left behind from the old times. He slipped into another alley, its shadows as dark and enveloping as his thoughts.

No matter how he tried, he could not steer his mind away from Embla.

He was wrong about one thing, however, Orwen told himself. It was not in his heart where the omega's attitude lit a fire.

It was in his balls.

It was in his stupid cock, which grew as rigid as a steel girder at the mere mention of the omega's name.

What he felt for her was not love. It was lust.

But even that was unforgiveable. She was, after all, his mortal enemy.

Orwen came to a halt. He blinked and looked around at his surroundings like a sleepwalker waking up from a dream. He was no longer outside in the empty streets of the city. He was indoors, within a dim, cavernous space with dark walls, a high domed ceiling, and a faintly humming spherical device dominating the center of the room.

The Chamber of the Source.

It was as if his feet had automatically led him to this place. But why?

Orwen glanced around the room again. As usual, the chamber was occupied by small groups of alphas and omegas who had come to pray or meditate or simply relax in the presence of the Source. Orwen could feel its power vibrating in his very cells.

Across the chamber, there was a woman's cry. It was the omega Hines. The one who was friendly with Embla. She was

in labor. Her alpha mates were encircling her protectively, helping to bring the children into the world.

Silently, Orwen wished their children good health. Then he turned his eyes back to the big sphere of the Source.

Why had he come here?

Suddenly it struck him. His subconscious mind had drawn him to this place for a good reason.

There were two people in the Zone who knew about Embla's origins. One of them, of course, was Embla herself, but she was unwilling or unable to share her story. The other was Seraph, the strange being who dwelt within the Source itself. Supposedly that enigmatic ghost knew everything that transpired in the Zone. Everything.

Unfortunately, Seraph had not shown his face in many months.

But Orwen was about to change that.

The alpha strode across the floor of the chamber until he was only a few paces away from the massive mechanical pedestal upon which the Source rested.

“SERAPH!” Orwen roared.

All around, heads turned in Orwen's direction, stunned by the alpha's shocking outburst. He was known among the alphas for his short temper, but he had never done anything like this before.

“Seraph!” he repeated. “I *demand* to speak with you!”

This time, a collective gasp rippled through the nearby alphas and omegas. Some of them even shushed him. This went beyond merely disrupting the silence of the Chamber of the Source.

This was blasphemy.

But Orwen did not care. He had to know the truth.

“Seraaaph! Speak to me now, Source damn you! Speak to me or else—“

Orwen’s shouts were cut off as the muscles of his throat seized up. His vision of the chamber seemed to shatter, like an image painted on glass, and all that was left was a yawning black abyss without end. There was no smell, no sense of hot or cold. No sound save for the thumping of Orwen’s angry heart.

Then a voice spoke out of the darkness, cold and precise and inhuman.

“Who disturbs me?”

“Orwen.” The alpha didn’t say the answer, he only thought it.

“Orwen. Yes. What is it you want?”

The alpha was not sure what was going on. Was he dead? He was beginning to regret losing his temper like that, but it seemed to have worked. Seraph was speaking with him. He decided to state his wish.

“Embla. The omega. Who is she? Where does she come from?”

Silence gathered as Seraph considered Orwen's demand. The alpha was certain that the being would refuse, but at last Seraph answered.

“Very well. I will show you.”

A painful jolt ran through Orwen's nerves.

His brain flashed like lightning...

* * *

Orwen found himself reliving a nearly forgotten memory from his childhood.

He was a boy again, no more than eight years old. His family was with him, his mother and his four alpha fathers. They were standing amid a crowd at the edge of the Central Ruins on a bright, cloudless summer day. The crowd seemed restless and angry. They were jeering and shouting at another group of three alphas who were covered in blood and dirt.

Criminals.

The rogue pack of alphas had been caught thieving, Orwen's father told him. As punishment for their crimes, they were being exiled from the Central Ruins. Orwen and his family looked on as the criminal alphas were chased and shouted out of the city.

Suddenly a female appeared. An omega. She was crying, and she followed after the fleeing alphas. The others tried to call her back, telling her she did not have to go, but she refused to listen.

Even though he was very young, Orwen understood. The omega was in love with the three criminals and she wanted to be with them, even if it meant joining them in exile.

Orwen was strangely touched by the omega's self sacrifice.

She is pregnant, Orwen thought to himself. She is carrying their babies.

Lightning flared...

Darkness. Pain. Orwen was no longer himself. He was the pregnant omega. He was inside her mind now, looking out through her eyes.

It was night in the forest and he was going into labor, an experience that was nearly incomprehensible for his male brain. Hot daggers of agony stabbed at his insides as the muscles of his pelvic floor contracted painfully. It went on for hours. He experienced the weight of the children dropping one by one through the birth canal—through *his birth canal*. omega-Orwen groaned with exhaustion and relief when the last one was out.

It was a little baby girl. An omega. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her tiny features twisted in rage as she screamed and screamed.

More lightning...

Now Orwen was the omega child. He was little. A little girl. Three years old maybe. Four at the most. Orwen wasn't sure. In the vision, it was a beautiful spring day. A clearing in the

forest. His mother was cradling him in her arms while his alpha fathers played with his brothers nearby.

“I love you, Embla,” his mother said, tenderly stroking his soft golden hair.

“Love you,” a tiny voice answered back.

This was Embla! Orwen was seeing the little omega’s life and memories. He was experiencing them through her own eyes.

There was a sudden commotion from the depths of the forest. The trampling of feet and a crash of bodies charging through the underbrush. A savage roar that made his blood run cold. He began to cry.

A group of Farlanders burst from the trees with weapons in their hands—spears and clubs and stone axes. With violent growls and snarls, they attacked, massacring everyone in a matter of minutes.

Everyone except for Orwen-Embla.

Another flash, and Orwen was again looking out through Embla’s eyes. She had been taken back to the Farlander camp where they tossed her into a big crude wooden cage with a dozen or so hungry dogs. The canines growled, rumpling their snouts to expose nasty looking fangs dripping with saliva.

They started to close in, preparing to attack and eat the child.

But at the last moment, one of the dogs leapt forward. A brown-furred female. She positioned herself protectively in front of Embla’s helpless body and stood the other dogs down.

She was only one dog against many, but she was the biggest and meanest of the bunch.

When the other dogs finally backed down, the brown female sat down and dropped her head into Embla's lap, tail wagging happily, dark eyes full of intelligence, patience, and love.

Embla sniffed back her tears. She buried her fingers in the dog's thick, soft coat and gratefully scratched behind her ears.

Friend. Best friend.

Flash...

CHAPTER 26: EMBLA

Sunlight through the trees strobed and flickered across Embla's vision as she race through the forest. Her heart pounded against her ribs like a fist. Her thighs burned and her lungs felt bloody and raw.

She had to get far, far away from the city.

After Jora had opened the window and helped her escape, Embla had scurried through the streets and alleys of the ruined city until she reached its perimeter. There had been a watch-alpha stationed at the gate who shouted at her as she fled, but he had not tried to stop her. His job was to keep intruders out, not to keep omegas in. Sooner or later, Ark and the others would find out Embla had run away, and no doubt that watchman would tell them which direction she had gone, but by then it would be too late.

Fast as she was, Embla's feet had made short work of the open meadows, and soon she had reached the edge of the forest. Now she was deep in the woods, amid the cool shadows and dappled sunlight.

This was where she belonged.

This was her home.

The alphas would never be able to catch up to her here. They were fast, but little Embla was faster. Plus, she had a major head start.

There was just one problem that she had failed to consider.

Her scent.

Embla's legs stopped churning, and she skidded to a stop on the slippery carpet of dead leaves. She stood there catching her breath, sucking in great gulps of air freighted with forest smells—damp moss, bitter pine needles, earthy mushrooms.

And of course, her own feminine omega aroma. Normally Embla did not even notice her own scent, but now she was sweating profusely, and the smell was especially strong.

The alphas would have no problem following her trail.

So what were her options? A river would mask her scent, but that was out of the question. Embla was still too scared of water to try that. She had overcome her fear at the hot baths, but the idea of drifting alone down a flowing natural river made her guts churn with anxiety.

What option did that leave her?

Just keep running forever?

Impossible.

As Embla stood there catching her breath, the panic-induced adrenaline drained out of her system, and she began to see the utter absurdity of her situation.

What was she doing?

Had she made a mistake?

Embla had panicked. After everything that Jora had told her about Orwen, her flight instinct had kicked in. It wasn't her

conscious mind that had sent her fleeing from the city. It was a reflex. She had spent most of her short life running and hiding, after all.

Source, she really was just a wild animal.

She would never be able to learn how to fit in with the other omegas.

But the alphas would be searching for her now. At least Ark and Leros would be. And what's more, Embla missed them. She wanted to see them again. She wanted that warm, safe feeling she had when she was around them. Even her secluded burrow couldn't provide a feeling of safety such as that.

Source, she *had* made a mistake.

Embla tugged remorsefully at her partially plaited hair. Her new friend Jora had meant well, helping her to escape. But Embla should not have abandoned her alphas without so much as a word of farewell. And then there were the dog friends, Smoke and Luna and the others. She knew they would miss her too.

Embla drew in a deep breath and swiped the tears out of her eyes. She must not let herself get overwhelmed by emotion. She needed to *think*. She needed to be *rational*, the way Ark had been trying to teach her.

She had to make a decision. Perhaps the most important decision of her entire life.

On one side lay the forest. It offered a simple life. A life of solitude, of running, of hiding. It would be a dangerous and

lonely existence, and probably a short one. But it was an existence that Embla understood.

On the other side lay the Central Ruins. The big tribe of civilized alphas and omegas. It was a world where Embla would never truly fit in. But she would have the love and protection of her dominant alpha mates. Two of them, at least.

Her heart ached with longing to be near them again.

Embla knew what she had to do.

She had to return.

It would not be easy. Her alphas would no doubt be very upset with her for running away like this—especially right before the Ritual of Claiming. They would undoubtedly punish her thoroughly, taking out all of their discipline on her poor little backside. Especially Orwen. That alpha never passed up an opportunity to spank her long and hard.

That thought scared Embla, but it also sent a sexy tremble running up her inner thighs.

She would go back and face her punishment like a good little omega.

Embla set her feet in the direction of the Central Ruins—it was not difficult for her to locate that place; she could feel the throb of the source tugging at her soul—and she started to walk, her bare soles crunching on the dead leaves underfoot.

But Embla had only gone a few paces before she froze.

Her nose twitched.

She was not alone here. Someone—or *something*—was nearby.

Embla sniffed the breeze again. The scent was difficult to place at first because she had only smelled it on rare occasions.

It was a beta.

The omega calmed slightly. Betas did not pose a threat. The braindead creatures were essentially harmless. They were also quite uncommon. Lacking the power of thought or will, the zombie-like beings could not survive in the wilderness for long. If a predator didn't get them, then they would soon wander off the edge of a cliff or into the swirling waters of a river and drown. In fact, the only betas Embla had ever seen were the ones that the Farlander alphas kept in pens and butchered for food.

That thought sent a shudder of repulsion wriggling through Embla's veins. She had experienced intense hunger in her life, but she couldn't imagine eating a beta, even if she were starving to death.

But what could a beta be doing out here in the woods?

Embla tested the air again.

It was not a lone beta. There was more than one. A lot more. The fine hairs on Embla's arms and neck stood erect. Her danger sense was tingling. Something was not right with this situation. She needed to get out of here now.

Before she could start to run, however, there came a whistle of air and a sharp hornet sting at the base of her neck.

Instinctively, Embla's fingers touched the place where she had been stung.

A dart.

But it was not the type of primitive dart the Farlanders sometimes used for hunting. This one was hard and cold, fashioned from metal and glass.

Embla felt the poison surging through her body, leaving only numbness in its wake. Her head felt simultaneously heavy and empty. Her legs faltered. She stumbled and fell on the dirty leaves. She should be frightened, angry, *something*. But nothing seemed to matter very much. The forest seemed very far away.

There was a shuffling of feet on the leaf-strewn ground. Many sets of feet closing in on all sides. The beta scent grew stronger.

"Excellent," someone said. It was an ugly, inhuman voice.

"Look, this omega has been marked. Her alphas will certainly come searching for her. She will be perfect bait."

Bait?

Embla did not know this word.

She did not have much time to wonder about its meaning.

Within moments, the poison robbed Embla of her senses, and she passed into a dark, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 27: ARK

Embla's scent had not been difficult to follow. For the first several miles, she had left a trail smelling of soap and perfume. Somewhere in the meadows, halfway between the ruins and the forest, that smell had started to shift to her natural body odor, which Ark found to be far more arousing. That was where she had started to sweat.

Now Ark and Leros were charging through the depths of the forest, dark trees rushing past on either side, spears of light poking through the leafy canopy overhead. Every now and then they would pause, nostrils flaring as they tested the air to make sure they were on her trail. Then they would sprint onward, their faces set with determination.

They had to get Embla back.

They had to make her safe.

Ark still wasn't sure why Embla had bolted. He definitely did not trust the story that other young omega, Jora, had told them. He did not trust her one bit.

But there would be time enough later for figuring out that mystery. Right now, the only thing that mattered to Ark was finding his mate.

And based on the intensity of her scent, they were getting close.

When they finally caught up with her, Ark intended to gather the little omega in his arms and tell her how sorry he was. All of this was *his* fault. He had tried to push her too hard. Tried to make her fit into a place where she didn't belong. Source, he had been so blind and foolish. He had tried to tame the omega, never realizing that her tameless spirit is what drew him to her in the first place.

All of this was his fault.

If anything had happened to his omega, he would never forgive himself.

But Ark forced all of these dark thoughts out of his mind and barreled forward through the underbrush. He would find her. He had to. He just *had* to.

And a moment later, he did.

Ahead of him, the trees opened up onto a small, roughly circular clearing. After the shade of the deep forest, the sunlight filling that clearing was dazzling. Ark halted right at the edge of the treeline, giving his eyes a chance to adjust. Half a heartbeat later, Leros came skidding to a stop beside him.

“There she is!” the young alpha shouted.

Ark's heart throbbed with combination of overwhelming joy and paralyzing fear. Joy because he was glad to have found his omega. Fear because something was wrong.

Embla was lying on the grass in the center of the clearing, her delicate little body curled into the fetal position, and she was

not moving.

Was she dead? Unconscious?

Panic surged through Ark's body, and he was just about to rush forward to check on his omega mate when his nose detected a faint whiff of a peculiar scent.

There were betas nearby.

More than one.

Of course, Ark was not frightened of the betas. The poor, brainless bastards could do him no harm. But it was very odd that they would be out here in the forest. Very odd indeed.

Something was not right about this.

Ark experienced a sudden flash of intuition. He remembered the traps that he and his pack brothers had sometimes set in the woods to catch wolves. They would always bait the trap with a piece of raw meat to draw their quarry in.

That's what was going on here.

Embla was bait.

All of these thoughts and emotions raced through Ark's mind in a fraction of a second.

But Leros was too young. He was courageous and loyal, but he lacked caution and experience. He did not recognize the trap for what it was.

"Embla!" the young alpha cried.

"Leros, wait!"

Ark tried to grab the youth to hold him back, but Leros was too quick. The youngster had already stepped into the clearing, and he was sprinting toward Embla's motionless body.

“Source damn it, kid! It's a trap!”

Too late.

A dart whizzed out of the shadows at the edge of the clearing and embedded itself in the young alpha's muscular thigh. With a roar, Leros whirled in the direction of the attack, but another dart flew from the other side of the clearing and stuck in the meat of his shoulder.

Source. The bastards had them surrounded.

Ark had no choice. It was no longer just a matter of saving his omega; his pack brother was in danger too. Despite Leros's incredible strength and stamina, the poison from the darts was already starting to buckle his legs.

With a fearsome roar, Ark barged ahead into the clearing.

His senses were on full alert now. His nerve endings practically reached out and touched the forest around him.

There was a motion to his left. He ducked and rolled. A metallic dart skewered the empty space where he had been standing a moment before.

Metal darts.

Outsider weapons.

Ark regained his feet and rushed toward his companions. A third dart had nailed Leros in the chest, and now the young

alpha was starting to go down. Ark caught him before he collapsed and lowered him to the ground.

More darts whistled by. They were coming from every direction.

This was no good. They were surrounded, outnumbered, and outgunned.

In a fraction of a second, Ark weighed his options. His instinct was to take up a defensive position, to shield his loved ones from more attacks. But if those poison darts caught him, he would be useless to his friends.

So instead he chose to go on the offensive.

With a violent bellow, Ark attacked. He charged back into the woods, relying less on sight and more on sound, smell, and pure animal instinct. Despite his size, he was deceptively agile. His body twisted and spun, dodging flying darts that came within a hair's breadth of his skin.

A movement in the shadows to his right.

The snap of a twig beneath a foot.

Ark threw his full weight into the assailant, feeling the satisfying crunch of his enemy's rib bones being pulverized by the impact. The person on the receiving end was dead before they even hit the ground.

In a fraction of a second, Ark scanned the naked body sprawled on the ground before him.

Scrawny, ropey limbs. Sickly gray skin webbed with black, diseased looking veins. Dead, milky eyes. A mouth full of rotten teeth.

It was a beta, all right, but not like any beta Ark had ever seen before.

This one had some kind of machinery sprouting from its skull. metal boxes and tangles of cables and electrodes. Its dead hand gripped tightly around a dart rifle.

What the hell was going on here? Betas weren't capable of using tools, and they never showed any signs of aggression. And what was all of that mechanical shit poking out of the ugly bastard's head?

Before Ark had a chance to consider these questions further, he sensed more movement behind him.

Ark ducked just in time, and another dart twanged as it missed him and struck a nearby tree.

More of the weird mechanized betas were closing in on him. A half dozen or more. Ark leapt at the nearest one, and with a swipe of his powerful alpha hand he tore the creature's head from its shoulders.

"Bastards!" he roared.

Ark tore into the remaining betas with pummeling fists and gnashing teeth. He felt the familiar thrill of battle as his foes fell under his violent onslaught.

Then something stung him on his hip.

Ark was so lost in his berserker fury, and the sting was so small and mild, he almost did not notice it. It was a glint of metal at the edge of his vision that finally got his attention.

He had been shot by one of those blasted darts.

With renewed rage, the alpha tried to throw himself at the beta who had shot him. But the leg that had been shot was now insensate as stone.

Another dart pierced his shoulder.

A third thunked into his abdomen.

“Source...”

Already his voice sounded drunken and slurred. His strong heart, pumping madly from the heat of battle, sent the poison rushing through his system, and in a matter of seconds Ark’s whole body felt like it was carved from ice.

He tried to curse, but all that came out was a wet grunt. Strings of drool dangled from his lips. He toppled over and landed with a thud that shook the ground like a falling tree.

Before the darkness of unconsciousness swallowed him up, Ark had one final vision of the weird mechanized betas closing in.

“Yes, he is a nice big specimen,” one of them gurgled. “He will do nicely. Very nicely indeed.”

CHAPTER 28: ORWEN

*F*lash...

In the same way that a single night's dream can seem to last for an entire lifetime, Orwen felt he had experienced years of Embla's life. In the vision that Seraph was bestowing on him, Orwen had watched Embla grow through her own eyes.

The Farlanders kept Embla in the primitive wooden cage, locked up with the dogs. They never communicated with her directly, but she often overheard them talking, and in this way she picked up some bits of the language, along with what she remembered from her mother and the rest of her family. But she never spoke anymore, and her only real companions were the other dogs.

The first months had been the most difficult. The only reason that she survived was her best friend, the brown-furred female who protected her. Embla never knew exactly why that dog had taken so kindly to her, but she was grateful, and she did everything she could to return the favor.

At feeding time, the Farlanders would toss scrapes of raw meat into the cage, and there would always be a frenzy. But Embla's best friend always made sure that Embla got something to eat. In exchange, Embla would scratch the big brown dog thoroughly, getting behind her ears and on her belly, and especially around the base of her tail where the dog's claws couldn't reach.

At night they slept together like sisters, huddled together for warmth.

Through the vision, Orwen watched as Embla got older. Her arms and legs stretched, gangly and awkward but also swift and strong. Her mane grew long and her sex became tufted with blond hair.

She behaved like one of the dogs, running about on all fours. She struggled sometimes to communicate. Her ears did not move, and she had no tail to wag. But she learned to converse with the dogs on a purely empathetic level. Gradually, the other dogs grew to accept the weird, furless creature in their midst.

But through it all, the brown dog remained her best friend. Her one true companion.

Then one day, something terrible happened.

Embla awoke at the crack of dawn to a terrible churning hunger deep in her core. A quivering, needful lust so intense that it verged on pain. Goosebumps pebbled her skin and sweat oozed from her pores. She whined and twisted in agony on the dirty floor of the cage, while her best friend looked on, ears back and tail tucked in concern.

Embla was going into heat for the first time.

It wasn't long before her Farlander captors awoke and came stumbling out of their crude shelters to see what all the commotion was about. In the dim morning light, they approached the cage with clumsy, sleep-sodden steps.

Then they caught her scent—her heat scent—and their ugly cocks went rigid with lust. Nasty, crooked erections covered in warts and drooling stringy precum.

The Farlander alphas crooned and slobbered, banging at the bars of the cage.

Embla was afraid. She wished she could make the terrible feeling go away. And she knew that it was the raw, humid scent coming from her heat-ridden body that was driving the monstrous alphas into a mating frenzy.

Her best friend crouched and bared her teeth at the alphas, protecting Embla.

But the Farlander alphas were undeterred. Embla's scent had driven them so mad with lust that the threat of bites and scratches did little to scare them away.

Whooping and howling, the Farlander alphas marched around the front of the cage. Many of them were jerking their gnarled dicks in anticipation of claiming the omega in heat. Some of them had already prematurely spilled their seed into the dirt outside the cage.

They unfastened the primitive lock and flung open the gate.

Embla was tingling with fear.

They were going to rape her. They were going to put those awful members inside her against her will. She was in heat, but she did not want *this*. Embla hated these alphas who had murdered her family and held her captive for years. She did not want them to touch her. But there was nothing she could

do. Hot tears flooded down her cheeks as the alphas lurched closer and closer.

Then Embla felt a cold nose nudging at her shoulder. It was her best friend.

Time to go.

Time to flee.

Only chance.

As the lust-drunk alpha captors stumbled forward, Embla's best friend snarled and pounced. She attacked the nearest alpha, chomping down hard on his cock. Scarlet blood spurted. The alpha howled in agony and collapsed in the dirt, clutching his mangled genitals.

The other alphas' lust-frenzy transitioned into fury. One of them struck out at Embla's best friend with a kick.

A surge of rage brought Embla to her feet. She charged forward, clawing viciously at the attacker's eyes. She felt something pop like a grape, bathing her hand in warm blood.

The blinded alpha swatted her aside, and she tumbled across the dirt, smashing hard into the wooden poles of the cage.

Now the other dogs were attacking the alphas.

The interior of the cage was engulfed in chaos.

Embla felt something dragging at her hair. At first she thought it was one of the brutal Farlander alphas, but then she realized it was her best friend, pulling her to safety the way a mother dog would carry a little one by the scruff.

Time to flee.

Only chance.

Go now.

Now Embla saw the wide-open gate of the cage. Together she and her best friend ran for it, and soon the other dogs were running out too, barking and yelping and scattering away in all directions.

Embla and her best friend stuck together.

The little omega ran as fast as her legs would carry her. The big brown-furred female could have run much faster, but she hung back, making sure that Embla kept up.

They ran all that day and into the night until the moonless darkness made it all but impossible to see. Together they hid inside a small cavern.

The best friend stood watch at the mouth of the cave while Embla writhed in the throes of her heat and tried to stifle her agonized cries.

Flash...

Orwen witnessed months going by.

Embla and her best friend lived together in the wilderness.

Their life was difficult, but they made do.

And they had each other. That was all that mattered.

They helped each other, and they shared everything. The dog was good at running down rabbits and squirrels and other little critters to eat. Meanwhile, crafty Embla learned how to snatch

fish right out of the water or knock birds from the sky with a well-aimed rock. She even figured out a way of extracting honeycombs from beehives. It required a lot of patience, and she suffered her share of stings, but it was worth the sweet, sticky honey that she and her best friend would happily share together.

They wandered all over the Zone, taking care to avoid the horrible Farlander alphas. Sometimes they ran across different alphas, the ones from the place of high towers, and they avoided them too, just to be safe.

Occasionally, they saw Outsider flying machines streaking across the sky in the distance. One time they even saw the Quarantine Wall, but they kept well away from that.

It was a hard life, but it was good.

Unfortunately, as Embla learned, good things never last.

Flash...

Orwen saw another vision.

Running legs. Pounding heart. The strobe of sunlight through trees. The awful goatish smell of Farlander alphas.

Embla and her best friend were being chased.

Were they the same alphas who had kept them captive for so long? Embla didn't know, and she didn't care. She only knew that she and her best friend had to get away.

Ahead was a river.

Embla's already rapid pulse spiked. This river was wide and deep. Swift and swollen with the previous day's rain. She would often wade in the shallows of a stream or pond to catch fish, but this raging river looked far too dangerous for a little omega like her.

But what choice did Embla and her best friend have?

The Farlanders were closing in fast, snorting and whooping and crashing through the forest behind them.

Crude projectiles were whizzing past Embla's shoulders. Stones and primitive arrows.

The alphas were trying to kill them.

Embla and her furry companion were now almost at the water's edge. The young omega hesitated, unsure what to do.

Her best friend growled and pounced on her.

There was a loud *thunk* sound, like a single beat on a taut drum. Then Embla and her best friend tumbled into the river, and the rushing water swept them away.

The dog had known they could not survive against the alphas, so she had pushed Embla into the water. Embla was both grateful and angry for that.

But most of all, she was afraid.

The little omega did not know how to swim, and the current of the water pulled her under. She bobbed up briefly. Just long enough to see the alphas halting at the riverbank far behind. They were giving up the chase.

The current sucked her beneath the surface again.

A strong jaw clamped on Embla's arm and dragged her back toward the air. Her best friend. The omega's fingers searched blindly, found wet fur, and held on for dear life. She choked and sputtered, but the dog was keeping her alive.

After what seemed like an eternity, the two friends came to ground on the silty beach at a bend in the river. The dog dragged Embla onto shore.

She would never care for water again after that.

Once the omega was safely on dry ground, the dog collapsed, and that's when Embla saw the crooked wooden shaft protruding from the creature's side.

Her best friend had been shot by a Farlander arrow.

That *thunk* sound Embla had heard before...

Her best friend had taken an arrow to save her life.

Though she was exhausted and shivering with fear, a jolt of adrenaline surged through Embla's body, and she was at her best friend's side in a flash. The air was filled with the musky odor of wet fur and the iron smell of blood, which was now spreading on the sand around them.

Embla whimpered, not knowing what to do. Should she pull the arrow out? If she did so, she might just hurt her friend even more.

The dog whined softly. Her dark eyes looked up at Embla with pure love and devotion. Her tail thumped weakly on the shore.

Embla just worked her fingers into the creature's wet fur and gave her one final scratch behind the ears.

Thank you... friend...

The eyes closed.

The tail stopped.

Her best friend was gone.

For a long, long time, Embla did not feel anything at all. She felt dead, like a stone. She kneeled over her dead friend, silent and still. The river rushed on beside her, cold and indifferent.

Finally, the tears came. Hot tears that burned her eyes and choked her throat until she could hardly breathe. The pain inside her chest was too much to bear. Embla couldn't handle the sadness, so she used it as fuel for her rage. The flames of anger rose in her chest.

Embla sprang to her feet and screamed. She screamed until her lungs ached and her throat felt bloody and raw. She screamed at the sky and the trees and river. She screamed in the hopes that the Farlander alphas would hear her. They would track her down and kill her, and then she wouldn't be alone anymore. Maybe she could even hurt one or two of the bastards in the process.

But the Farlanders never came.

No one did.

Embla screamed and screamed, all through the evening, through darkfall, and long into the night until finally her weary

body gave out and she collapsed.

In the morning Embla woke curled up next to her best friend. Her throat was sore from screaming, but the rage was all gone. All that was left was a hollow, lonely feeling.

Embla dragged the dog's body farther up onto dry land and buried her in the dirt. She covered over the grave with a pile of stones.

Then she set about her new life.

Friendless. Alone.

Flash...

Embla crouched silently in the shadows of the forest. Her eyes were fixed on the soft orange glow of a low campfire through the trees and the three big alphas who lay sleeping nearby. A soft breeze licked her bare skin.

Flash...

A different vision presented itself to Orwen's senses now.

This time, he was not looking out through Embla's eyes. He actually wasn't sure whose eyes he was looking out through. But he knew they couldn't be Embla's, because he saw Embla in front of him. She was lying on a metal floor, unconscious, arms bound. Ark and Leros were lying beside her in a similar state. Their bodies were rocking slightly, and there was a slow, steady thrum of a motor. They were inside an Outsider vehicle of some kind.

One final flash, and Orwen found himself back in his body again.

He was sprawled on the ground, looking up at the dark, domed ceiling of the Chamber of the Source. Alphas were crowded around him. His face was wet with tears.

“Oh, Embla,” he groaned. “Embla, Embla, I’m so sorry...”

“What’s that?” the alphas around him murmured. “What’s he saying?”

Orwen sat up and swiped the tears away from his face. He had not cried in a very long time. Not since the day that he had found his mother dead by her own hand.

He had been so wrong about Embla all this time.

He thought she was his enemy. Now he saw just how alike they were.

But what was that last vision he had seen? The one of his pack brothers and Embla bound and unconscious in an Outsider vehicle.

Your final vision was of the present, Seraph’s voice echoed inside Orwen’s head. Your friends have been captured. They are being taken to the Outsider city of Galadon-1

“Captured?” Orwen muttered. “Outsiders?”

The other alphas were chattering now, saying that poor Orwen had lost his mind. He ignored them. He didn’t care what people thought about him. He only cared about saving his friends.

But how would he ever find them on the Outside? How would he get to Galadon-1?

Orwen's eyes focused on one of the alphas nearby. Tanned skin and long, dark hair. It was Taliesin. The mate of the omega Hines who had just given birth. Before returning to the Quarantine Zone, Taliesin had lived on the Outside as a spy.

Hope glimmered in Orwen's heart.

He would save Embla and his friends.

He would make everything right again.

CHAPTER 29: ARK

Ark's eyes flared open, but he saw nothing, only darkness. Around him, the cool air was filled with a deep, steady hum at the lowest level of his hearing.

Outsider machinery.

He tried to move, but his arms and legs were held in place by what felt like strong metal clamps. He was bound to an upright metal plank.

Memories of the battle in the forest flashed through his head. Embla lying unconscious in the middle of the clearing. Leros getting shot full of poison darts and collapsing. Those strange betas with mechanical boxes and cables protruding out of their skulls.

They had been captured and taken someplace.

But where?

Ark resisted the urge to bellow with rage. Anger would not help him now. He needed to remain calm and focus.

The alpha steadied his nerves and reached out with his senses, gathering as much information as he could about his surroundings.

One detail was immediately clear to him. Wherever he was now, it was someplace very far away from the Source. Even on his furthest excursions into the depths of the Farlands, Ark was always able to detect the location of the Source. It exerted a

kind of magnetic pull on his alpha heart. No matter where he was within the Zone, he would always be able to find his way back to the Central Ruins.

But now he felt nothing.

That could only mean one thing. Ark had left the Zone. Beyond the Quarantine Wall. He was on the Outside.

That revelation sent a shiver of horror and revulsion wriggling up his spine.

After a moment, Ark managed to get himself back under control. He probed further with his heightened alpha senses, searching for any further clues about this prison.

Based on the airflow in the room and the reverberations of the mechanical sounds, Ark discerned that the room was triangular in shape, with a high ceiling, and two other vertical planks similar to the one to which he was bound.

A quiet sound of crying came to his ears. A soft, feminine whimper. He sniffed the air, which was mostly sterile and arid, but he detected a familiar scent.

“Embla?”

There was a sharp intake of breath followed by a joyful sobbing cry.

“Ark!”

The alpha’s heart swelled with joy and relief at the sound of Embla’s voice. His omega mate was alive and—aside from being understandably scared—she sounded all right.

“I’m here, Embla,” Ark reassured her, adding a soothing purr to his words. He sniffed again, picking up another well-known scent. “Leros. You with us, kid?”

“Here, boss,” the young alpha’s voice slurred out of the darkness. Of the three of them, he sounded the worst for wear. “Where the hell are we?”

“Don’t know,” Ark grumbled. “Not in the Zone, that’s for sure. If I had to guess, I’d say we’re somewhere inside one of the Outsider’s city hives.”

“Source,” Leros moaned.

But the Source was too far away to hear them now. They were on their own. Ark turned his thoughts back to his omega.

“Embla, are you hurt?”

“No hurt,” the omega answered. “Just scare. And... sorry.”

Ark’s heart throbbed with pain and guilt. The little imp was apologizing for running away. But Ark knew that he was the one who owed *her* an apology. It was his rush to tame her that had driven her away.

But the time for apologies would come later. For now, the only thing that mattered was getting free.

“Don’t worry. We’re going to get out of this,” Ark told her, hoping his words sounded more confident than he actually felt.

“Leros, how about you? How do you feel?”

There was a pause as the young alpha scanned his body.

“I think I’m good. No injuries, boss. Just kinda groggy, like I’ve had too much wine. But I can’t move. Some kind of metal restraints holding me in place.”

“Yeah, same here.”

Leros growled fiercely.

“Calm down,” Ark commanded. “Conserve your energy. There’s no point in going into a rage. We need to keep our minds clear if we’re going to figure out how to escape.”

But deep in his heart, Ark knew it was going to take a hell of a lot more than a clear head to get them out of this situation. It was going to take a Source-damned miracle. They were well and truly trapped. Whoever their captors were, they had taken great care to make sure they could not escape.

As these thoughts were running through Ark’s mind, there was a loud snap, and the room was bathed in blinding light that stung the alpha’s eyes. He winced and squinted until his vision had a chance to adjust to the sudden brightness.

Gradually, Ark’s surroundings came into focus.

Just as he had sensed, the room’s layout was a perfect equilateral triangle. The floor was formed of polished metal, but the walls were formed of thick, tinted glass behind which lay some kind of shadowy control room with blinking lights and computer terminals. Ark had no knowledge of how such equipment operated, but he had seen similar machinery in the Chamber of the Source.

Now Ark could see his companions too, Embla and Leros. All three of them were naked, and their bodies were clamped to vertical metal slabs arranged in a triangular configuration in the center of the room.

A pneumatic door hissed open at one side of the room, and a man stepped through.

“Greetings, my esteemed guests. I do hope the accommodations have not proven too uncomfortable for you.”

The man was young and thin, with smooth, unblemished skin and perfectly groomed black hair combed back over his head. He was dressed in a simple, white uniform with long sleeves and a high collar. The man made his way around the room with slow, precise movements, carefully appraising the three captives.

Ark remained calm, conserving his energy. But young hot-headed Leros struggled uselessly against his restraints. Veins branched across his neck and arms.

“Who are you?” Leros snarled.

The thin man smiled pleasantly.

“My name is Dr. Toth, and I work for the government of the city hive Galadon-1 in the Department of Defense Research. And with whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

Leros curled back his lips and snarled.

Toth was undaunted. He looked at Ark and then at Embla, but none of them answered.

“Very well. Names are not a necessity. For the purposes of my research I will refer to you by the names Alpha One, Alpha Two, and Omega.”

“What do you want from us?” Ark asked.

“Your offspring,” Toth answered matter-of-factly. “I intend to breed you. With your alpha genes, I’ll be able to create an unstoppable army of super soldiers.”

Ark smirked.

“It won’t work, Toth. We alphas are strong, but we have our limitations. We cannot survive for long outside of the Zone. Without the power of the Source to replenish our energy, we will begin to wither and die.”

Ark was not certain if this was actually true, but he had heard rumors.

Dr. Toth gave a smirk of his own.

“Oh yes, I’m well aware of this problem. You see, before I worked for the government, my previous employer was a little company called SynerGen. Perhaps you’ve heard of them. No? Well, it doesn’t matter.”

Toth strolled as he talked, leisurely weaving in and out of the metal planks to which Ark and his companions were restrained.

“You see, SynerGen attempted a similar alpha-omega breeding project. However, as you might have guessed, it met with failure. There were a number of reasons for this, including the problem you just mentioned—the inability of alphas to survive

away from the so-called “Source.” Fortunately, we have come up with a solution.”

Smiling, Toth dipped a delicate, finely manicured hand into the pocket of his white jacket and pulled out a small glass vial filled with a metallic fluid.

“Actually, I can’t take the credit. We merely stumbled across this substance by accident, but it seems to have been synthesized by someone inside the Quarantine Zone.”

Ark wondered what the vial contained, but he made sure not to let his curiosity show on his face.

“You see,” Toth went on. “A little over nine-months ago there was a bit of excitement involving a former employee of SynerGen. A woman by the name of Shelley Hines. The government wanted to bring her in for questioning, but she managed to escape with the help of an alpha who had apparently been keeping watch on her for some time. Naturally, we were curious as to how the alpha had managed to survive for months on end outside of the Zone. When we searched the alpha’s abandoned dwelling, we found this substance. It contains a variation of the same nanotech virus that is emitted by the Source.”

The doctor held the vial up and turned it in the light, admiring its liquid-chrome contents.

“You’re probably wondering,” Toth continued, “why we did not simply inject this substance into ordinary humans to create alphas, right?”

Actually, Ark had not been wondering that. In fact, he hadn't understood half of what the doctor had said. He was just a simple alpha, and to him science and technology was nothing more than black magic. But Toth clearly enjoyed hearing himself speak, and the longer the arrogant bastard went on blabbering, the more time Ark had to come up with some kind of plan.

The alpha did not interrupt.

“Yes, well, whoever designed this nano-fluid did a clever job. While the stuff can be used to sustain an alpha away from the Source, it apparently cannot be used to induce the alpha mutation in an ordinary human. All of our attempts to do so have resulted in betas.”

Toth grinned.

“So, that's where you come in, my friends. That's why we need you to breed and provide us with an army of little alphas to do our bidding.” The doctor flashed a creepy wink in Embla's direction. “Oh, and few little omegas too. That way we can keep our breeding program going for many generations to come.”

Ark felt a fiery rage welling up in his chest. It took a great effort of will to keep himself in check.

“And what if we refuse to breed?” Ark asked through gritted teeth.

“Oh, you won't refuse.”

Dr. Toth snapped his fingers, and another figure entered the room. It was a naked shambling beta, a male, just like the ones they had encountered in the forest. Mechanical circuit boxes and wires protruded from the back of the thing's pale, bald head. It was carrying a plain plastic tray with a rectangular metal box.

Toth noticed Ark eyeing the beta with disgust.

“Ah yes, you've already met some of our pet betas. As a matter of fact, you put a few of them out of commission from what I hear. No matter. They are expendable.”

Toth reached for the tray the beta was carrying and opened the rectangular box. He drew out a syringe and another vial, this one containing a perfectly clear fluid. It looked just like water, but Ark suspected it was something else. Toth inserted the needle through the vial's rubber stopper and began to fill the syringe, all without stopping his lecture.

“Yes, the betas have served us well. In the past, SynerGen attempted sending ordinary humans into the Zone with protective suits to shield them from the contamination. Well, I'm sure you know how that worked out. Disastrously. The shielding was unreliable, and more often than not, the poor humans were mutated. Most of the time, they became brain-dead betas like this fellow here.”

Toth flicked the syringe to settle the air bubbles, then squirted a bit of fluid from the needle.

“We figured, why not bypass all of that rigamarole and just send betas into the Zone in the first place? We've replaced

their useless zombie brains with circuit boards so that we can control them remotely from the safety of the city hive. Everything they see and hear is transmitted back to a computer in our labs. They are the perfect agents for infiltrating the Zone.”

Ark could hardly believe what he was hearing. The Outsiders were putting machines in betas’ heads and making them do their bidding inside the Zone?

The idea was unbelievably repulsive.

This Dr. Toth clearly had no morals at all.

“Anyway, to return to your question: what if you should refuse to breed? Well, allow me to show you why you won’t refuse...”

Toth moved toward Embla. The omega’s eyes widened at the sight of the gleaming needle dripping with fluid, and she trembled in her restraints.

“Stay away from her, you bastard!” Leros roared.

But there was nothing either of the alphas could do. Their restraints were far too strong. They had no choice but to watch helplessly as Toth injected the clear serum into a vein in the omega’s arm. Embla winced as the needle penetrated her flesh and the fluid went in.

When the syringe was empty, Toth withdrew the needle.

“See, that wasn’t so bad, now was it?”

He reached up and stroked Embla's cheek. The omega snarled and gnashed her teeth. Were it not for the metal band clamping her head in place, Toth would have lost those fingers, and Ark wished he could see that happen.

Then, without another word, Toth motioned to the beta, and the two figures exited the room. The door whispered shut behind them.

Ark, Embla, and Leros were alone again.

“Embla, are you okay?” Leros asked, his voice breaking with concern.

The omega did not answer. She moaned, and her eyes rolled back white.

“Embla!” Leros screamed. Then to Ark he cried, “What did they do to her? What was that stuff he put in her body?”

Ark thought he knew the answer.

A second later, the raw feminine scent that filled the room confirmed what he was thinking.

Embla was going into heat.

CHAPTER 30: EMBLA

The bands holding Embla's body released, and she collapsed onto the cold, hard floor of the observation room. Her muscles shivered and spasmed as the estrus overtook her body.

The last time she had gone into heat had been after Orwen had spanked her in the forest. That had been the most intense heat she had ever experienced up to that point. But it paled in comparison to what Embla was going through now.

She flopped onto her back, moaning in agony as her excruciating need set her nerve endings on fire.

Somewhere far away a voice was calling her name.

"Embla!" the voice cried. "Embla, are you okay? Say something! Embla please!"

No, actually the voice was not far away. That was just an illusion of her fevered brain. It was Leros who was calling to her. He was only a few feet away, still bound to his own metal slab. The young alpha was naked, and his cock was fully erect, no doubt as a result of the omega heat-scent that was spilling from Embla's pores.

"Need," she groaned weakly. "Need..."

She rolled her eyes to the side and there was Ark too. His bulky muscles were flexing so hard that she could see every striation and vein. He was trying to break his bonds, but the steel bands were too strong even for the powerful alpha.

Ark's cock was even stiffer than Leros's, so stiff that it was bouncing with every pulse of his heart.

“Need...”

Embla needed those hard cocks so badly that it hurt. The inner muscles of her pelvis clenched. Her lower abdomen felt painfully empty, like a stomach that had not been fed in days.

Ark roared above her.

“Damn it, let us go!”

The alpha pack leader had been calm and cool before, but now all of his emotions were bursting out. He was yelling at the strange man in the white clothing who had pricked Embla's arm with the stinger. She did not know who that man was, and she had barely understood anything he had said. She had caught one word, however...

Breed.

Leros had taught her that word before. It meant when the alphas used their cocks to put babies into an omega's belly. Embla had wanted that before, but she did not want it here in this terrible place. This was even worse than being trapped in that cage by the Farlanders when she was a child.

And why did the bad man in the white clothing want them to breed anyway? Was he going to take Embla's babies away when they came out of her?

She would not allow that to happen.

She would not breed.

But she needed it so badly. Her heat was so intense, her urges so painful. If she didn't get some kind of release soon, she felt that she might actually die.

Whimpering and moaning uncontrollably, Embla moved one hand between her legs to rub her sensitive places, but it was no good. Her fingers were awkward and uncoordinated. Her muscles wouldn't work right.

She needed the alphas to help her, but they were still bound in place by those metal bands.

“Source, that scent” Leros groaned. “I can't take it anymore. My cock is so hard it fucking hurts.”

“How do you think the omega feels?” Ark grunted.

A hard convulsion of need arched Embla's back. Goosebumps prickled over her skin. Her nipples and clitoris were painfully erect. Her blood ran hot and cold with feverish lust.

“Need!” she screamed. “Need!”

Why was the bad man in the white clothing keeping her alpha mates locked up? Was he just doing it to be mean? Was he doing it to torture Embla with her excruciating heat?

Another burst of pheromones poured out of Embla's glands until the air was chokingly thick with her need-scent.

Leros grunted.

His erect cock pulsed, spilling rope after sticky rope of pearly semen onto the floor.

“Need...”

With a great effort, Embla rolled onto her belly and began dragging herself across the floor, inching her way toward the puddle of seed that Leros had made. As she drew herself close, the raunchy aroma filled her nose. It smelled of salt and grass.

That thick fluid was what she needed. She was thirsty for it.

Weak and trembling, Embla lapped at the alpha cum, savoring the intense salty flavor. She raked her fingers through the viscous stuff and smeared it between her legs, struggling to push some of it into her hole.

“Need... please...”

Ark’s voice roared through the chamber again, shouting at the bad man, who was now hiding behind the windows.

“Damn you, Toth. She’s had enough. She’s going to die if you don’t let us help her. Then all your plans will be ruined.”

Apparently that got through to the bad man, because an instant later, the clamps holding Ark and Leros in place snapped open, and all three of the metal columns went down until they were flush with the floor.

Freed from their bonds, the two alphas rushed to Embla’s aid. Ark gathered her limp body in his powerful arms. Her bones felt like jelly inside her.

Leros petted the damp hair away from her face.

“Embla, are you okay?” the young alpha asked.

“Need you,” Embla murmured. Her fingers pointed awkwardly between her legs. “Need you here...”

“Well, you heard the omega,” Ark growled. “She needs us, kid. She needs us to make her come.”

Ark effortlessly hoisted her off the ground like a doll.

“We’ll use our tongues first. You take the front and I’ll get the back.”

Together the alphas held Embla aloft and buried their faces between her legs, snarling and growling as they lapped her with their coarse, wet tongues. Leros sucked her clit so hard it felt like he was trying to suck it right off her body, and at the same time he strummed and flicked that swollen nub with the tip of his tongue. Meanwhile, on the other side, Ark laved her crack and her tight rear hole with deep, sloppy strokes, snorting and grunting like a feasting animal.

Embla squealed with pleasure. She could feel her strength returning little by little. Placing her hands on the alphas’ shoulders for support, she swiveled her hips, grinding her pussy and ass against the two hungry alphas’ faces. The scruff of Ark’s beard and Leros’s rough stubble abraded her soft, tender flesh. Slippery arousal fluid gushed from her hole and spilled down Leros’s chin.

“Yes,” Embla cried in desperation. “Feel good! Make come! Please make come...”

She was sweating profusely. Already, her hair was soaked, and her skin was greasy with hot perspiration. It trickled down her spine and into the cleft of her ass where Ark tongued it away thirstily. The taste of her salt-sweat sent the alpha into a predatory frenzy. Gripping the mounds of her bottom tightly,

he spread her rump apart and feasted on her forbidden places, swirling his tongue in rough circles around the puckered rim of her anus.

Meanwhile, Leros was making an equally dominating assault on her front side. He had two fingers buried deep inside her dripping hole, stroking that special place that he had discovered the first time they had made love in the grotto. At the same time, his supple lips and flexible tongue were working her aching nub toward an intense release. His piercing tickled her deliciously.

The sensations of that double tonguing worked their way deep into Embla's throbbing center, coiling together into an explosion of raw bliss.

"Yes!" Embla shrieked so loud her throat felt sore and shredded. "Yes! Yes!"

The brutal climax rocked Embla's helpless body. Her hips convulsed and gyrated, smearing her slippery secretions over both alpha faces. The pleasure was so intense that it left her nerve endings raw and buzzing.

But it wasn't enough...

"More," Embla moaned when she finally regained control of her lips. "Need more... Need cock..."

CHAPTER 31: ORWEN

The vehicle was an old military personnel transport from before the time of the Great Change. With the use of old tools and schematics, as well as a lot of help from the Outsider omegas, the machine had been restored to working order again. It did not look pretty, but its powerful and silent electric motor ran perfectly. Now it bumped and jostled over the uneven pavement of one of the many roads that led from the Quarantine Zone toward the city hive of Galadon-1. Its headlights pierced into the darkness of the night.

The interior of the vehicle had been designed for normal humans, not for alphas. Orwen barely fit into the passenger seat, and his scrunched up knees were starting to ache. Plus, he was dressed in Outsider clothing for a disguise—a pair of denim pants and an itchy sweater. It was uncomfortable as hell.

He glanced across the cab to the driver's seat.

The alpha named Taliesin was behind the wheel. His omega mate Hines had just given birth that day. He should have been back in the Central Ruins, celebrating his first day as a new father. But he was one of only a handful of alphas who knew how to operate the Outsider machines, so he had volunteered to drive Orwen to the city hive.

And between the two alphas, seated in the middle of the bench seat, was Smoke. The gray-furred dog sat panting in the stuffy

heat of the cab, ears alert, dark eyes aimed straight ahead. Despite Orwen's protests, Smoke had insisted on tagging along for this rescue. He had barked and whined incessantly until the alpha had finally given in and allowed him to come. They had exited the Zone about an hour ago, using an old secret mine shaft that tunneled under the Quarantine Wall. Now they were racing full speed down a disused road that led to the Outsider city.

Orwen had to admit, even though it was uncomfortable, the Outsider vehicle was incredibly fast.

But not fast enough.

Right now, time was of the essence, and with every second that passed, there was no telling what tortures the Outsiders were inflicting on Orwen's pack brothers and the poor little omega.

Embla.

Orwen's heart panged with guilt.

How could he have been so wrong about her? All this time, he had assumed that she was a Farlander. An enemy. But after Seraph had revealed to him the visions of the omega's life, Orwen understood just how much he and Embla had in common.

He had been so blind, so narrow-minded. He had driven her away, and he had not been there for her when she needed his protection the most.

He was a fool.

But now he had one last chance to set everything right again.

They drove on in silence. Up ahead on the horizon, a glow of light appeared. Orwen's first thought was sunrise, but the time was wrong, and so was the direction. Soon, he saw beams of searchlights sweeping back and forth across a sky clouded with noxious fumes of pollution. As they got closer still, the city hive began to emerge out of the murk, and Orwen's chest tightened at the sight of it.

Source, it was huge.

Taliesin had spent a great deal of time in the city hive, and he had described its size and scale to Orwen. But now, actually witnessing it firsthand, Orwen could hardly believe his eyes. His emotions bounced back and forth between awe and repulsion.

The city hive was aptly named. A towering, multi-layered termite mound of humanity. It rose above the surrounding wasteland like a glittering pyramid formed from tens of thousands of piled up buildings. Neon signs pulsed. Refinery stacks belched flames hundreds of meters into the night sky. The upper reaches of the man-made mountain were wreathed in a thick layer of smog.

How could people ever live in a place like this?

And more important, how the hell was Orwen ever going to find his friends in all that mess?

"What do you think?" Taliesin asked.

"Big."

“Yeah, I told you...”

From his perch in the middle of the cab, Smoke just whined nervously. It seemed like an appropriate reaction.

As they approached the city, Orwen saw that there were other roads to the left and right. Many dozens of them, all converging on the hive. But Taliesin was not driving them toward any of the main entrances into the city.

“By Outsider standards, this transport is an antique,” Taliesin explained. “We’d stick out like a sore thumb if we tried to go through the main gates. But I know another way. We’ll go in through the underhive. Nobody’s going to look at us twice down there.”

The perimeter of the city was encircled by a huge wall of steel and rockcrete that looked as though it had been built up haphazardly over many decades. The disused road they were on led to a darkened archway.

Taliesin piloted the vehicle inside.

Now that he could see the interior of the city, all of Orwen’s sense of awe disappeared, and all that was left was disgust.

All around were crumbling buildings in a far worse state of decay than anything inside the Central Ruins of the Quarantine Zone. Besides their vehicle’s headlights, the only illumination came from the flickering orange glow of random barrel fires. Scrawny, sickly humans dressed in tattered rags huddled around for warmth and eyed them suspiciously as they drove

past. The air was thick with the combined stench of petroleum and rotting sewage.

Orwen wrinkled his nose.

“Source, is the whole place like this?”

Taliesin shook his head as he steered the vehicle in and out of random piles of rubble and burnt-out old cars.

“No, this is the underhive. It’s the poorest and most dangerous part of the city. The Outsiders never tear anything down, they just keep building new layers on top of the old. The upper tiers of the city are wealthier and cleaner. But still terrible in my opinion.”

Orwen had no doubt that his opinion would be the same as Taliesin’s.

At last, they pulled off the road and parked in the shadows of a dark alcove.

“We’ll have to leave the vehicle here,” said Taliesin. “We’d be too conspicuous on the upper tiers.”

“So we go on foot?” Orwen asked.

“No other choice.”

Orwen felt a sudden surge of panic rising up in his chest. He had not expected this rescue mission to be easy, and he was more than ready to do battle to save his friends. But simply locating them within this towering maze of rockcrete and steel seemed like an insurmountable task.

“Where the fuck do we even start?” he muttered.

Suddenly Smoke perked up. The dog's hackles bristled, and he started to bark urgently.

"What's the matter, boy?" Orwen asked.

The dog whined and bounced on his paws impatiently. He yelped again, as if begging to be let out. When Orwen opened the passenger door, Smoke raced across his lap and jumped out of the cab.

"Hey!"

Smoke started to run toward a big ramp that led toward the upper tiers of the city. For a moment, Orwen feared the dog was going to run away. But after a few paces, Smoke stopped and turned, barking again as if calling out for the alphas to follow.

"What's he doing?" Taliesin asked.

"I'm not sure. But it seems like he knows where to go."

"That's impossible," Taliesin grunted. "There's no way he could pick up their scent in this giant city."

Smoke barked again, this time sounding a bit annoyed.

Orwen rubbed his chin, thinking.

"You're right, but..."

"But what?"

"Taliesin, I've spent my whole life out in the wilds of the Zone hunting with dogs, and I'll tell you, I swear by the Source those animals are equipped with extra senses we alphas don't

have. And that little omega, well... she's got some kind of special bond with the dogs that I don't understand."

"You're telling me that dog can actually sense where she is?"

Orwen looked at Smoke. The dog flattened his ears and whined. It almost seemed to Orwen that the dog was trying to express the urgency of the situation.

"Right now, I think it's all we've got."

Taliesin shrugged and sighed.

"I guess you're right. Hell, I don't have a better plan. Well, let's go..."

Orwen caught Taliesin by the shoulder.

"Wait."

"What's the matter?" Taliesin asked.

"Tal, you've brought us this far, and for that I'm grateful. But I can't let you come with us."

"The hell you can't," Taliesin growled. "Orwen, you're gonna need all the help you can get up there. And no other alpha knows this city like I do. Hell, I—"

"I know," Orwen cut him off, "I know. But this is something I have to do on my own. I'm the one who created this mess, and now I'm the one who's going to solve it."

"You're a fool."

"And you're a *father*, Taliesin. Don't forget that. You've got a brand new litter of babies and an omega mate waiting for you

back in the Zone, so there's no way I'm letting you put yourself in any more trouble than necessary, understand?"

Taliesin grunted.

"You're sure about this?"

Orwen clapped him on the shoulder.

"I'm sure."

Taliesin nodded. "Fine. I'll wait here with the vehicle until you and Smoke come back. And the others too." He punched Orwen's shoulder. "May the Source watch over you up there. Now go find your omega."

That was exactly what Orwen intended to do. And once he found her, he wasn't going to ever let her go. Not for the rest of his days.

He turned and raced toward Smoke, following the dog into the upper reaches of the city hive.

CHAPTER 32: EMBLA

“More,” Embla moaned, her body shivering with her estrus. “Need more... Need cock...”

Ark did not hesitate to give his omega what she required. He lowered Embla until her feet touched the floor again. He clutched her hips, holding her steady, but her upper body flopped forward, weak from her orgasm, and her arms dangled to the floor.

“Source,” Ark growled behind her. “Your poor little omega pussy is practically weeping. You really do need this, don’t you imp?”

“Yes,” Embla whined plaintively. “Need cock. Need come.”

Ark purred with satisfaction. He gently nudged Embla’s feet apart until she was in a tripod position, with her slathered ass held high in offering to her alpha dominator.

“Gorgeous,” Ark grunted. “So fucking gorgeous.”

Embla could feel his shaft pressing against her, hard as a club made of polished wood. The alpha moved his pelvis in slow, sexy thrusts, dragging his erection across her spread crack and slippery vulva. The touch of that girthy member sent tingles down her spine and her inner walls clenched in anticipation.

“Please,” Embla begged. “Put inside. Make seed in me.”

Ark gave a low, masculine chuckle.

“Oh, I’ll make seed in you, imp. I’m going to fill your tight little omega pussy to the brim.”

The alpha spit a long stream of saliva that landed dead center on Embla’s perineum and spilled over her labia and her opening, adding to the already abundant wetness there. Then he gripped his huge dick and worked his pierced tip up and down her parting before wedging inside her.”

Embla yelped as that big round cockhead widened her little opening.

“Source,” Ark grunted. “So fucking tight.”

He pushed deeper, stretching her out and filling her up. Hot juices squelched from her fucked hole and dribbled down her weak and trembling thighs. The alpha didn’t stop pushing until he was all the way inside with his taut pelvis pressed to her supple ass and the blunt head of his cock was brushing against her cervix.

“Does that feel good, imp? Is that what you need?”

“Yes!” Embla sobbed.

Ark started to move inside her, fucking her with long slippery strokes of his hard, pulsating cock. The room filled with the sound of skin smacking skin, and Embla’s weakened body jolted wildly under each forceful thrust.

She knew that the bad man was watching her from the other side of the windows, and when she glanced around, she noticed other shadowy forms moving about behind that glass too. There was an entire audience of Outsider humans

watching the whole thing. They could see the way the alpha was using her defenseless body, and they could hear the shameful way that she had begged for it all.

Leros had also turned his attention toward those windows. No longer bound by metal clamps, the young alpha roared and flung his massive body at the glass, pounding it with his hard fists.

Nothing happened.

Not even so much as a crack.

Clearly those windows were not fashioned from any ordinary glass. The Outsiders had taken every precaution to keep the dangerous and powerful alphas contained.

Leros was undeterred. He threw himself into the window again and again, battering and snarling, but it was to no avail. At last he fell back onto the floor, panting and sweating.

“Save your energy, kid,” Ark said. “Right now, our focus is the omega. Now get the fuck over here and give her what she needs.”

Leros looked at Embla and Ark blankly for a moment, as if he did not know what to do.

“Her mouth, kid! Put it in her mouth! The omega needs seed, and it’s our duty to put it inside of her any way we can.”

“Aye, boss.”

With a look of determination, Leros crawled over to where Embla was bent over. He lay down on the floor, positioning

his hips beneath her dangling head. His hard cock rose proudly, pointing straight up toward the omega's sweating face. She whimpered and licked her lips at the sight.

"Good omega," Leros soothed. "We'll give you what you need."

Steadying Embla's head in his massive palms, Leros arched his back and thrust his dick upward toward her face. The omega parted her lips, and his cock slipped easily into her watering mouth. His bulbous knot, which had not yet abated from his previous ejaculation, now pressed against Embla's soft lips. The salty taste of sweat and precum saturated her thirsty tongue.

"Is this what you need?" Leros asked.

"Mm-hm," Embla mumbled around his girthy meat.

She was getting penetrated and fucked from both ends now. Two hard, hot alpha cocks plunging deep into her pussy and her mouth. The room echoed with wet slurping sounds and the steady rhythm of clapping skin. Arousal oozed from her hole and trickled along her upside-down belly.

This was the dirtiest thing she had ever done, and the Outsiders were watching every moment of it. Every thrust and grunt and twitch of her quivering muscles.

But Source, it felt so good.

She *needed* this. She needed her alpha mates to fuck her and pump her full of their seed until she couldn't hold any more.

And she was about to get her wish.

On the floor beneath her, Leros grunted, and his face twisted as if in agony. His muscles tensed up, and his already knotted dick pulsed, unloading spurt after spurt of hot semen into Embla's mouth. She swallowed as much as she could, but some of it escaped her lips and trickled down the young alpha's smooth shaft and heavy balls.

At the same instant, Ark roared behind her. His cock was only halfway inside her hole, and when his knot swelled at the base of his shaft, Embla could feel it pressing against her vulva from the outside. More hot sticky fluid surged inside her, painting her walls and cervix with virile alpha seed.

Embla's body exploded with a climax of such intensity that she nearly passed out from the pleasure.

But when the waves of her orgasm finally subsided, she found that the twisting hungry need inside her belly was still there.

Her heat was too great.

She still needed more.

With a loud slurp, Embla drew her lips off of Leros's glazed shaft. Strings of cum and saliva stretched and dangled from her chin.

"More," she gasped wildly. "Need more..."

Her little hands moved to the young alpha's still-hard cock. She touched the big swollen bulb at the base of his shaft.

"What this? What call?"

"Knot," Leros answered.

Embla tilted her head and looked upward at the place where Ark's massive dick was penetrating her from behind. She could see his own big knot pressing against the outside of her entrance.

“Need knot...”

“Embla, are you sure?” Ark panted. “You're still so tight.”

“Need knot!”

“Very well then.”

The alpha pack leader tightened his grip on Embla's hips and began to push. Slowly, her opening began to stretch even wider as the hard bulge of his knot was forced inside her, and Embla groaned with exertion.

“Ugh...”

“Take it, imp,” Ark growled through gritted teeth. “Take. My. Knot.”

With one final shove, the fist-sized knot popped inside of Embla.”

“Ah!”

Embla's third climax swept over her like a storm. Her muscles clenched and relaxed in violent spasms. Her lips drooled, her eyes rolled back in her head, and lightning bolts of terrifying pleasure exploded outward from her deep core, curling her fingers and toes.

The world disappeared, and all that was left was pure, unadulterated ecstasy.

When Embla finally came to, she was still bent over with Ark's cock buried deep between her legs. He was coming inside of her again, and this time every drop of his thick creamy seed was held inside by the massive alpha knot that plugged her hole.

It was done.

She now belonged to the alpha fully.

He had fucked her. He had marked her. And now he had knotted her.

Finally, finally, her heat had been quenched.

CHAPTER 33: ORWEN

Orwen and Smoke crouched in the shadows of an alleyway across the street from a massive skyscraper. It had taken them several hours to reach the upper tiers of the city hive. Smoke had led the way, never once losing confidence in the fact that he knew the right way to go, and Orwen trusted the dog's instincts.

Just as Taliesin had said, the tiers of the Outsider city became cleaner and nicer the higher they climbed, although the air was still freighted with the scent of pollution, and the thin rain that had begun to drizzle out of the sky was black with ashes.

The city hive was an ugly place, and Orwen would be happy to leave it far behind.

But he wasn't going anywhere until he had rescued Embla and his pack brothers. And based on the signals that Smoke was giving him, they were somewhere inside the building that towered in front of them.

The question now was how to get inside.

They had already scoped out the front entrance of the building, and it was a definite no-go. The spacious glassed-in lobby was swarming with armed guards. It would be impossible to make it through the entrance without being seen, and a direct assault seemed unwise. Even a full-grown alpha in his prime couldn't take on a small army like that.

So instead, Orwen and Smoke had circled around to the rear of the building, and that's where they were now.

Ahead of them lay a loading dock. There was a wide concrete pad with stacks of metal crates and a large gantry crane for loading and unloading the cargo trucks that drove in and out of the facility. Beyond that lay the back side of the skyscraper and a big mechanical door leading inside.

The whole area was surrounded by a high chain-link fence topped with concertina wire. It was enough to deter any normal human intruders, but an alpha like Orwen would have no trouble jumping straight over.

There were just a couple of problems.

For one thing, Orwen wasn't sure how to get the big metal door open. It seemed to work based on a retinal scanner set into the wall nearby. What's more, there were two guards stationed by the door. They were clad in heavy body armor and equipped with large assault rifles. Even if Orwen did manage to take them out before they gunned him down, they would probably set off an alarm, alerting the rest of the facility to his presence.

"Shit," the alpha grunted.

Well, he couldn't just wait out here forever. Sooner or later he would have to make a move. And the longer he delayed, the longer his friends would be subjected to Source-knows what kind of torture inside that facility.

He decided to go for it.

“Come on,” Orwen whispered to Smoke. “We’re going in.”

The dog seemed to understand what his master had in mind and jumped into Orwen’s arms.

Carrying the dog, Orwen sprinted across the street, jumped over the fence, and crouched behind a big pile of crates.

“Be very quiet,” he whispered to Smoke.

The dog flattened his ears.

Moving very slowly and cautiously, Orwen peeked his head around the edge of the crates. The guards were still in position by the door, but it looked like they had not spotted him.

That was good, but he would still have to figure out some way to get past those bastards.

But how?

Just at that moment, the crane spontaneously moved. A malfunction of some kind? Orwen wasn’t sure. Whatever the cause, it worked to his advantage by creating a distraction. The crane hook slammed into a pile of large metal containers, toppling them with a great crashing sound.

Smoke whined softly, his ears still flat with anxiety.

Orwen peered out from the hiding place again.

The guards by the door were moving. With heavy, trudging steps, the two armored figures crossed the loading pad to inspect the accident with the containers.

This was Orwen’s chance. But there was still the problem of getting through the door.

That problem was instantly solved when the door suddenly opened. There was no apparent reason. Nobody was standing inside. It was just an empty corridor.

It just... opened.

Between the crane and the door, Orwen sensed that something very strange was afoot. He felt a chill tingle up his spine, and the hairs on the back of his neck bristled. Smoke's much bushier fur was doing the same thing.

Was this some kind of trap? It certainly felt like it.

Orwen hesitated for a moment, unsure what to do.

Smoke made the decision for him. Moving on silent paws befitting his namesake, the gray dog bolted across the loading pad toward the open door. The guards and other workers were on the other side of the area, and they were focused on the knocked-over crates, so they didn't see.

"Source damn it," the alpha muttered under his breath, and he sprinted after the dog.

CHAPTER 34: LEROS

The triangular room was quiet now. The only sound was the steady thrum of machinery and the buzzing of the electric lights overhead. The once pristine metal floor was now spattered with all manner of bodily secretions—sweat and seed and the omega’s slick. The air was warm and humid and reeked of mating.

Leros sat naked and panting, his back against the observation window that lined the walls. Behind those windows, the audience of Outsider scientists had dispersed, including that bastard Toth. Now the control room was empty. The exhausted little omega lay curled up and shaking in the young alpha’s lap. Ark, equally spent, lay sprawled on his back staring at the ceiling.

Leros felt a pang of sadness in his chest.

His omega mate had been knotted for the first time. That should be a joyous occasion. Another step in the binding process. Another turn in the braid of fate by which their souls would be woven together.

But this day was not joyous.

They were far from home, imprisoned in this Source-forsaken place and forced to breed for the cruel Outsiders’ benefit.

Leros had no doubt that Ark’s seed had found purchase within Embla’s fertile womb. In the coming weeks and months, the beautiful little omega’s belly would swell with pregnancy. But

that sight would bring Leros no joy, for he knew that Toth and the Outsiders would steal the babies away as soon as they were born.

Leros could not allow that to happen. He and Ark had to find a way out of this place. The omega was depending on them. Their unborn children were depending on them.

But Leros did not know what to do.

Embla shifted in his lap and started to speak.

“I sorry,” the little omega murmured.

Leros gently petted her soft hair back from her face.

“Shhh,”

Embla sat up with a pained look on her face.

“No,” she said. “No shhh. I sorry I run away. Feel bad...”

Leros could see fat tears trembling at the edges of the omega’s eyes as she glanced back and forth between him and Ark.

The alpha pack leader sat up. He leaned over and rubbed his big hand up and down Embla’s back, purring softly to soothe her. Leros joined in this purring, hoping to calm the poor omega’s rattled nerves.

“It’s okay,” Ark reassured her. “We are not angry at you, imp. Isn’t that right, kid?”

“Of course,” Leros replied.

The young alpha’s heart panged with sadness at the sight of his omega in emotional pain and distress. Her pretty little bottom lip was quivering now, and the tears were overflowing and

rolling down her cheeks. Leros thumbed them away and continued purring to her.

“Embla, listen to me,” Ark said. “If anyone should apologize, it’s me. I have wronged you.”

“No,” Embla sobbed. “You no wrong me.”

“Oh yes I have,” Ark insisted. “I was too eager, and I did not take the time to consider your needs. I pushed too hard, forcing you into the Ritual of Binding before you were ready.”

Embla sniffed and shook her head, swinging her lovely honey-colored hair in the process.

“No, I ready! I want binding. I want you.” She looked from Ark to Leros and repeated, “I want you. Both you.”

It made Leros happy to hear those words from the little omega. His heart seemed to swell and burn inside his chest. He caught a strand of hair that had fallen across her face and tucked it gently behind her delicate ear.

“So why did you run away?” Leros asked.

Embla dropped her face and furrowed her little brow. She hesitated for a moment, as if choosing her words carefully.

“It Orwen,” she said at last. “He no like me.”

“Embla, that’s not true.”

“It true. He think I Farlander. He no like. Farlander kill him families. I know, I know. She tell me every.”

Leros felt a tickle of curiosity at the back of his mind.

He glanced at Ark, and he could tell that his pack leader had noticed too.

“*She* told you?”

Embla nodded, smudging away the tears from her reddened cheeks.

“*Who* told you, imp? Who is she?”

When Embla answered, her voice was raspy and cracked from crying.

“Jora.”

Jora! Leros felt his heart clench like a fist inside his chest. Blazing anger coursed through his veins, and his purring unconsciously transitioned into a deep growl. Embla noticed the change, and she pulled away from him in fear.

“You angry me?” she whimpered.

Leros forced himself to calm down and smile, pulling the little omega close again.

“No,” he purred. “I’m not angry at you, Embla. I’m angry at Jora.”

Outwardly, Leros was calm, but inside his mind and his heart were churning with furious anger. Of course he should have realized it before. In all the excitement—the chase, the capture, the forced breeding—Leros had forgotten all about Jora. But now it all made perfect sense.

Jora had been jealous ever since the day Embla had arrived in the Central Ruins, and she had deliberately tried to get rid of

her perceived rival. She had wheedled her way into being Embla's guide for the ritual preparations.

"Embla," Ark said softly. "What did Jora tell you?"

The little omega recounted the story. Despite her crude and broken language, it was clear what had happened. Jora had won Embla over by pretending to be nice to her. Then she had convinced the poor, unsuspecting omega that Orwen despised her and she had persuaded her to escape."

"Embla, did you attack Jora?" Ark asked.

Leros remembered that Jora had accused Embla of assaulting her like a wild animal. Jora's cheek had been reddened as if slapped, but that could easily have been self-inflicted. Besides, Leros suspected that if Embla had really gone after Jora, the dark-haired trickster would have taken a lot more damage than a weal on her cheek.

At Ark's question, Embla's green eyes flared with surprise, and she shook her head insistently.

"No! No attack! Why attack Jora?"

Leros rubbed her back to calm her down.

"Easy, Embla. We believe you, okay? But listen to me, Embla. Jora tricked you."

"She trick me?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. She only wanted you to run away because she is jealous. She pretended to be nice, but she only wanted to hurt you."

“She bad omega?”

Leros nodded. “Yes, that’s right. She’s a very bad omega.”

“You spank her?”

Despite the terrible situation they were in, Leros blurted with laughter.

“What funny?” Embla asked, slightly annoyed.

“Jora’s a bad omega,” Leros said. “But I’m not going to spank her. I’m not going to touch her at all. Not ever. I don’t want anything to do with her, understand?”

Embla nodded.

“Understand.”

He could tell that the poor little omega was a bit confused by it all. And perhaps saddened as well. She was simple and innocent, and she had thought that Jora’d had her best interests at heart. The betrayal understandably stung her.

What Jora had done was a serious breach of honor.

In fact, it was a crime.

Jora had knowingly and deliberately separated another omega from her alpha mates. She had endangered many lives.

Leros would see to it that Jora was punished for her wrongdoings when they returned to the Zone.

If they returned.

“Still think Orwen no like me,” Embla muttered.

“He likes you,” Leros reassured her. “You’ll see.”

Embla wiggled and squirmed in Leros's lap. He saw her skin pebble all over with goosebumps again, and he noticed that her nipples suddenly stiffened to hard, pink peaks. A moment later, the triangular observation room filled once again with the raw animal scent of Embla's needy body.

The Outsider heat-medicine was still in her system.

Embla's heat was returning.

In response, the young alpha's cock hardened painfully. In his peripheral vision, he saw Ark's cock hoist as well.

Embla's little hand slid down between her legs and touched her center, which was dripping wet again.

"Need here," she whimpered. "Need you..."

With a rumble of alpha lust, Leros lifted the little omega and lowered her onto his vertical erection. Her hole was tight, but it was well greased, and her flesh sheathed around his pole easily. She gasped with pleasure as his pierced tip brushed her deepest epicenter.

"Ohhh..."

She was too weak to ride him properly, so Leros took control, supporting her hips and thrusting up into her quivering pussy.

Beside them, Ark rose and stroked his own hard erection. He gently turned Embla's head and fed his pierced cock into her trembling mouth, and she let out muffled moans of enjoyment as she sucked him.

Together they shared the omega and satisfied her primal needs.

CHAPTER 35: ORWEN

In the upper levels of the headquarters for the Department of Defense Research, there was an empty corridor. Overhead, fluorescent lights buzzed quietly, filling the space with an almost painful brilliance, illuminating the pristine linoleum-tiled floor and the walls lined with panels made of brushed stainless steel. Every dozen yards or so the walls were inset with deep alcoves and electronically locked metal doors. There were no decorations, no plants, and most importantly, no people anywhere to be seen.

If anyone *had* been around, however, they would have been witness to a most unusual sight.

From a smaller transverse passage that intersected the main corridor, a furry shape protruded, peeking around the corner with cautious, intelligent eyes. It was an enormous, wolfish canine with gray fur and pointed ears standing at attention atop its head.

The creature looked both ways, tested the air with its twitching black nose, then proceeded into the corridor on silent paws, head held low like a predator stalking its prey.

A most unusual sight indeed.

After the dog had padded several meters down the corridor, a second figure appeared. An alpha. He looked like a man, more or less. But his frame was enormous, and his jeans and sweater barely fit over the muscles that bulged underneath. His ears

and flared nostrils were decorated with steel rings that only added to his frightening appearance.

Orwen and Smoke moved down the corridor in silence. So far, they'd had little trouble making their way through the building. Once or twice they'd been forced to duck down a hallway or into an empty closet to avoid detection, but that was all.

It was easy. Too easy. And that made Orwen uncomfortable.

Sure, the Outsiders were foolish and lacked perception, but this was insane.

And it wasn't just the lack of attention that made the alpha uneasy. During their journey toward the upper levels of the building, they had come to a few locked mechanical doors. Every time, the doors had opened automatically.

The incident with the crane obviously had not been just a fluke. It was as if the building itself was helping them.

And that was very troubling.

Still, Orwen had no choice but to press onward, following Smoke's lead. They had to find Embla and the other two alphas. They had to.

A sound came from behind them in the corridor, the sound of multiple voices and the tread of feet.

Orwen looked around.

He was not afraid of a confrontation, but right now stealth seemed like the best option. There was a deep alcove nearby,

so he quickly ducked inside and Smoke followed suit.

The alpha and the dog pressed back into the shadows of the alcove, all but disappearing.

The footsteps got closer, and after a few more seconds, a cadre of armored guard marched past, boots ringing on the hard floor, heavy rifles clutched in their gloved hands.

Orwen held his breath.

The guards passed by without stopping or turning toward the alcove where Orwen and Smoke were hiding. The alpha let out a quiet sigh of relief as he listened to the footsteps receding down into the distance.

He was just about to step out into the corridor when his ears detected one more pair of feet drawing near.

Bare feet. That was strange.

And a weird scent as well. One that Orwen had not smelled in a very long time.

It was a beta.

Pressing back into the shadows, Orwen watched as a scrawny, naked beta shuffled down the brightly lit corridor. The creature's skin was pale, almost gray, and webbed with nasty black arteries. The back of its head was sprouting wires and circuitry and odd metal boxes. It was carrying a pair of rifles, one in each hand.

What the hell?

Suddenly, the beta froze in its tracks, and Orwen's pulse ticked up a few notches. Slowly, the beta turned toward the shadows of the hiding place, its lifeless eyes looking straight at the alpha. For some reason, Smoke was remaining oddly calm. Orwen, on the other hand, was just about to attack, when the beta spoke in a surprisingly familiar voice.

“Greetings, Orwen. We meet again.”

The alpha's jaw dropped open in total and utter shock. Not only could this beta talk—something Orwen had thought was impossible—but it had addressed him by his name. It took him several seconds before he registered where he'd heard that voice before.

“Seraph?”

The beta inclined its head in a slight nod.

“Yes. It is me.”

Orwen could hardly believe it. Even though it disgusted him to touch a beta, he grabbed the being by its shoulders and dragged it into the alcove with himself and the dog.

“Seraph, what are... I mean, how did... I mean... what the hell is going on?”

Beta-Seraph answered in a voice that was utterly devoid of emotion.

“I'm sure you would agree that this is no time for lengthy confabulation. Furthermore, I doubt that your primitive alpha brain will be capable of understanding the precise details of

how I came to inhabit this biomechanical body. Nevertheless, I will attempt to give you a cursory explanation.”

Orwen just grunted.

“Very well. As you are already aware, I am able to see through the eyes of every living being inside the Zone.”

“Yeah,” Orwen said, “But we’re a long way from the Zone now. I—“

“Do not interrupt me, alpha. As I was saying, I am able to see through the eyes of every living being inside the Zone.

However, even my powers have their limitations. I am unable to take control of a living body. Or at least I have been unable to do so until now. You see, the Outsiders have begun utilizing a new tool for the purpose of safely infiltrating the Zone. They have taken mindless betas and augmented their brains with electrical circuitry, turning them into agents whom they can control remotely from the safety of the city. These cybernetically augmented betas are the ones who kidnapped your friends.”

Orwen nodded, but he was struggling to follow everything Seraph was telling him.

The A.I.-possessed beta continued.

“The electronic nature of these betas’ minds presented an opportunity for me. Using the nanotechnological virus bots emanated by the suppression field—what you call “The Source”—I was able to interface with one of the betas,

inserting a piece of my consciousness within its cyborg brain.
That is how I got here.”

Orwen thought for a moment.

“Wait... if you could take over the betas’ machine-brains, then couldn’t you have just stopped the kidnapping in the first place?”

“Yes. I could have. But I chose not to.”

Orwen snarled. For an all-knowing being, Seraph could be downright infuriating.

“And is there a *reason* why you chose not to save my friends?”

“Calm yourself, alpha. I have no obligation to explain myself to you, and I will not go into all the details now. Suffice it to say that there is information I require, information that I could only retrieve by infiltrating this facility. The mechanical betas presented an opportunity for me to do that. Any intervention in the kidnapping would have blown my cover. Fortunately, I have already downloaded the data I need.”

“What data?”

“That does not concern you, alpha. And now is hardly a convenient time for such a discussion. All that matters is that I have acquired that which I need, and we may now proceed with acquiring that which *you* need.”

“My friends.”

“Precisely.” Seraph offered one of the two rifles. “Take this weapon, alpha, and follow me. I know where your companions

are being held.”

Orwen’s heart beat a little faster. So his friends really were alive and okay. He took the rifle from Seraph’s gray, sickly hand, and together with Smoke, he followed the cybernetic beta down the hall. The three of them made a very unusual trio.

CHAPTER 36: EMBLA

Straddling Leros's lap, Embla tossed her head back and yowled as the young alpha's cock expanded inside of her, tying their bodies together in a knot of sweltering flesh. Gushes of hot semen flooded her interior as her muscles shook with unrestrained pleasure. Her toes curled and her tiny fingers bit at the meat of the alpha's chest.

Ark released at the same time. His big alpha fist was tangled in Embla's sweat-sodden hair. He wrenched her head around to face his cock, and he unloaded a dozen ropes of his sticky fluid into the omega's gasping, gaping mouth.

Embla flicked her green gaze up at the dominant pack leader who was coming in her mouth. Her vision was blurry and her cheeks were striped with tears from gagging on that meaty dick only a few moments before. She had felt his piercing all the way in the back of her throat.

Gradually the screams and growls of three simultaneous orgasms faded into grunts and exhausted panting.

Embla swallowed, feeling the viscous lump of Ark's load sliding easily down her throat and settling warm inside her belly.

Ark's cock was still standing erect, his head and shaft glazed with excess cum. Embla wanted to lick it all away, but she was afraid to move. Leros's big knot between her legs felt like it would rip her apart if she moved too much.

The omega whined in frustration.

Ark gave her what she wanted. With a deep chuckle, he petted back her damp hair and fed his cock between her lips. Embla thirstily sucked away the remnants of his salty seed. She took him deep until his knot was pressed to her lips and his piercing was in the back of her throat again.

She held it for a moment, then pulled back with a breathy gasp. That time, she had not gagged, and she felt a little tingle of pride at her accomplishment.

Ark's cock was polished and glistening with her saliva. Not a drop of his seed remained. All of it was inside her now.

“Fuck,” Leros growled under her. “That was hot.”

“Hot,” Embla agreed solemnly.

Leros grinned and pulled her face down to his, claiming her mouth in a deep and passionate kiss. He didn't seem to mind knowing where her mouth had been only a few seconds before.

Embla liked being shared this way. It felt so good, she almost forgot that they were prisoners in an Outsider laboratory.

Almost.

The room had grown silent. Embla glanced from Leros to Ark, and she saw that two alphas had grown serious now that their rutting instincts were diminishing.

“We must try to be careful,” Ark said. “If we keep mating like this, Embla will soon be pregnant. Under other circumstances,

I would be happy about that. But we must try not to breed her here in this place. The Outsiders will steal our offspring when they are born.”

“But what can we do?” Leros said. “If Toth keeps using that medicine to send Embla into heat, we’ll have no choice but to breed her. There’s no way we can ever resist that scent, and even if we could, I’m worried Embla might not survive if we do not fulfill her needs.”

The young alpha’s strong hand moved down Embla’s sweaty midsection and came to rest over the place where their bodies were joined.

“Besides,” he added. “I’m worried it’s already too late.”

Embla frowned. Leros was right. Both he and Ark had knotted her and spilled their seed inside her body now. She could practically feel that sticky fluid seeping through her inner hole and entering her womb.

The omega felt so confused.

She wanted the alphas’ babies inside of her. But not here. Not like this.

“What do?” she asked.

Ark crouched beside them, rubbing his bearded jaw as he thought.

“I don’t know. We have to find some way to escape, but—“

His words were interrupted by a whoosh of air as the door to their triangular containment room opened. Embla turned to

look, expecting that creepy bad man Toth to come stepping inside. But last time the doctor had entered this room, Embla and her mates had been restrained. Was Toth really crazy enough to come inside now, while all three of them were free and able to attack him?

No.

The figure that stepped through the doorway was not Toth at all, but one of those repulsive beta drones with the machinery and wires tangling out of its pale, hairless head. To make matters worse, this one was carrying a weapon.

In the space of a heartbeat, Ark was up and ready to strike, teeth bared and snarling. Leros leapt to his feet as well, holding tightly to Embla, who was still bound in place by the young alpha's hard knot. He was in no position to attack, but he could at least shield her with his body.

As Embla watched, Ark's muscles tensed like springs preparing to explode. He was about to pounce on the beta and rip the ugly creature to shreds when he suddenly froze.

Two more figures had just come through the door.

One was an alpha. The other was a dog.

"Orwen!" Ark exclaimed.

"Smoke!" Embla shouted.

For his part, Leros didn't say anything at all. His jaw was simply hanging open in total surprise.

Embla's eyes turned to Orwen. He was dressed in funny Outsider clothing. But Embla's attention was focused on the alpha's face. Their eyes met, and Embla saw a wave of relief come over the alpha's expression. Like the weird beta, Orwen was carrying a gun too, but he lowered it now and rushed forward, pressing his forehead against Embla's.

"Source, I'm so happy to see you," he breathed.

Embla could scarcely believe the change that had come over the alpha. The last time she had seen him, she could have sworn Orwen hated her. But Leros had told her she was wrong, and now Orwen was proving it. She could literally smell the alpha's love and relief.

Embla raised her hand to Orwen's roughly stubbled jaw.

"Happy see you."

A voice spoke from behind Orwen. It was the cyborg beta.

"While I understand that you are happy to be reunited, it would be wise to delay the celebrations until *after* we have departed this facility and returned to the Zone."

"Who the hell is that?" Leros asked.

Orwen gestured to the beta. "*That...* is Seraph."

"Seraph?" Ark asked. "But... how?"

"Let's save the explanations for later," Orwen growled. "For now, we need to get the hell out of this Source-forsaken hole. Seraph, lead the way."

Sticking close together, the group of companions made their way out of the containment room and down the corridor.

Seraph took the lead, his rifle at the ready. Leros was in the middle carrying Embla in his arms since he was still knotted inside of her. Ark and Smoke trotted protectively on either side. And Orwen, also armed with a rifle, took up position in the rear, guarding them from behind.

“This way,” Seraph called in his cold, emotionless voice.

“There is a freight elevator.”

The motley group climbed into the spacious elevator. Seraph typed a command into the keypad, and they started to descend.

Embla clung tightly to Leros’s neck. She was scared and excited at the same time. Her heart was drumming a rapid tattoo inside her chest. They were escaping this awful place, but they were not safe yet.

Suddenly, beta-Seraph stiffened. He seemed to be listening to a sound nobody else could hear.

“What’s the matter?” Ark asked.

“There is a problem,” Seraph answered. “I detect several security squadrons converging on the lower levels of the facility. We may be required to fight our way out.”

Ark popped his knuckles.

“I’m ready for a fight,” the pack leader growled. “Leros, you hang back. Keep the omega protected at all costs, understand?”

Leros nodded and held onto Embla even more tightly.

“Good.” Ark turned to Orwen and looked at his rifle. “Do you know how to use that thing, old friend?”

“Aye, boss.”

“All right, then. You and Seraph can clear a way to the exit. Are we getting close?”

“Yes,” Seraph answered. “We are arriving presently.”

The elevator gave a cheerful chime as it settled to a stop. The metal doors parted and Seraph immediately opened fire into lobby beyond. Within the confines of the elevator, the roar of the weapon was deafening. Embla winced and buried her face against Leros’s shoulder.

Finally, the shooting stopped. The air in the elevator was thick with the sulfurous smell of gunpowder.

“The way is clear,” Seraph set. “Let us proceed.”

With her ears still ringing from the gunfire, Embla opened her eyes again and looked around. They had stepped out into a big lobby. The floor was strewn with a dozen of the cyborg betas like the one Seraph now inhabited. The difference was that these betas were dead, their bodies riddled with smoking bullet holes. They hadn’t even had a chance to get a shot off before Seraph had cut them to pieces.

“The exit is this way,” Seraph called.

He marched across the lobby and the others followed. Before they reached the exit, however, there was a commotion from behind.

“More guards are coming!” Ark shouted.

“They’re mine!” Orwen growled.

Another group of armed betas was now coming around the corner from another corridor. With a savage howl, Orwen threw himself at the enemies. Instead of shooting his gun, he gripped it by the barrel and used it like a club. The stock of the rifle swung back and forth, crushing beta skulls in its path. Without firing a single shot, Orwen made short work of the second wave of attackers.

When he was done, he stood panting, rifle in hand, proudly surveying the damage he had done. The dead betas lay all around his feet.

“Interesting,” Seraph said. “Your method of fighting with a gun is highly irregular, alpha.”

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?”

Embla’s eyes caught a sudden movement on the floor next to Orwen. One of the betas was not dead, and the creature was raising its weapon, preparing to aim at the alpha.

“Orwen, look out!” Embla shouted.

Orwen heard her cry. His instincts kicked in and he ducked out of the way just as the beta’s rifle blurted a burst of gunfire that skewered the air where the alpha had just been standing.

With a wild snarl, Smoke pounced, sinking his white fangs into the cords and circuitry at the base of the beta’s skull. The dog gave the creature a violent shake. There was a pop of

sparks as the wires ripped free. The beta's body went flaccid with death.

“Good dog,” Orwen said, giving Smoke a quick ear-scratch for thanks. “All right, let's get the hell out of here before more of those bastards show up. Seraph, if you get us outside, I can lead us down to the lower levels of the city where Taliesin is waiting with a vehicle.”

“Very good. This way.”

Together, Embla and her companions exited the building. Their appearance turned a few heads of the passers-by on the street. After all, among their group were two naked alphas, a naked omega, an augmented beta and a giant wolfdog. But in a matter of seconds, they had darted across the gridlocked traffic of the street, ducked into a dark alleyway, and disappeared into the shadows, leaving the witnesses wondering if they had not just hallucinated the whole thing.

CHAPTER 37: EMBLA

They made it back to the Quarantine Zone just before sunup, and the sky through the vehicle windows was a lovely, dusty bronze. Taliesin was driving, Seraph was riding in the front passenger seat, and the rest of the crew was gathered in the back of the military transport, which was meant for carrying a squadron of soldiers.

The little group had made its way down into the bowels of the city hive without incident. When they had finally reached the awaiting vehicle, Taliesin had been surprised by their unexpected companion, the cyborg beta, but Seraph explained everything as they made their way back toward the Zone.

Leros's knot had finally abated at some point during their escape. Now Orwen, mean old Orwen, insisted on holding Embla in his lap with his arms coiled protectively around her.

He had come for her.

Embla had been so certain that Orwen hated her, but he had come to rescue her in the end.

Now, as the vehicle bumped and jolted over the cracked pavement of the abandoned highway, Orwen hugged her tightly. His muscles were tense and warm, and his rich alpha scent enveloped the little omega. He purred to her softly. Though he did not speak, Embla sensed that the gruff alpha had many things he wanted to say, but he was holding it in for the right time.

As they drove deeper into the Zone, the sparsely weeded badlands gave way to grassy meadows and finally the dark forests that Embla knew so well. The ancient highway became too ruined to drive on, and Taliesin took the vehicle off-road, weaving between the massive tree trunks in the gradually lightening morning.

There was no need for roads or navigational systems at this point. The energy of the Source was guiding them in. Embla could feel it tugging at her heart like an invisible thread.

Source, it was good to be home again. Back in the Zone where she belonged.

Embla looked out the window at the trees going past in parallax in the dusky morning light. A needle of nostalgia pricked at her heart. This forest had been her home for as long as she could remember. But their destination lay farther ahead, in the Central Ruins where the main tribe of alphas and omegas resided. Part of her wanted to remain here in the forest. She would never feel totally at home in the ruins. But as long as she was with her alphas, it would be worth it. Embla would never ever run away again.

She reached down and rubbed her lower abdomen. She felt a funny warm glow inside, and she knew a tiny life had started growing inside her. Or perhaps more than one.

At last, they reached the far side of the forest. The sun was up now, an orb of molten iron floating above the horizon, setting the sprawling grasslands ablaze with its fiery orange glow.

And there in the distance, sparkling like a cluster of gemstones, lay the ruins.

Ark called out to Taliesin to stop, and the vehicle slowed to a halt.

“What’s up?” Taliesin asked.

“We’re getting out here,” Ark said, “My pack and I have some serious matters to discuss, and I think this is the best place for us to do it.”

“You sure?” Taliesin asked.

Ark clapped the alpha on his shoulder.

“I’m sure. We are all grateful for your help in freeing us from the Outsiders. I owe you one, old friend. Would you be so kind as to take Smoke back to the ruins? I’m sure he’ll be eager to see his mate and brothers again.”

Taliesin nodded. He turned to Seraph in the passenger seat.

“How about you?”

“I will return with you to the Central Ruins now.”

After taking a minute to give Smoke a good thorough scratching behind his ears, Embla got out of the vehicle accompanied by her alphas. They stood at the top of a rise at the edge of the forest and watched as the vehicle trundled off through the weedy-meadows toward the ruins in the distance. The warmth of the sun’s rays was like a physical pressure pushing against Embla’s bare skin, and it was countered by a cool breeze that swept over her shoulders and tousled her hair.

In that moment, Embla felt more alive and free than she had ever felt before.

Embla wondered why Ark had decided to get out here. He said that they needed to talk about something, and Embla wondered what that could be.

Were they going to punish her for running away?

She was too nervous to even ask.

And she didn't have to. It was Orwen who broke the silence first, although the way he did so was a total surprise to everyone, especially Embla.

The big, gruff, bad-tempered alpha dropped to his knees on the ground at Embla's feet. His head was bowed low, concealing his face, but the cracks in his voice let Embla know that the alpha was overcome with emotion.

"Embla, I'm so sorry..."

The omega was taken aback. It was obvious that some kind of major change had come over Orwen. But nothing could have prepared her for this kind of behavior from the angry alpha.

"Why sorry?" Embla whispered. "Orwen, you save."

The alpha raised his head, and Embla saw that his eyes were red-rimmed and tears were streaming down his hard, chiseled face. The sight of Orwen crying was such a shock that Embla would have tumbled backward if he had not caught her hands in his desperate, pleading grip.

“It’s my fault you left,” Orwen said, not even trying to hide the crying in his voice now. “I drove you away because I’m a fool, Embla. A Source-damned fool. But Seraph showed me the error of my ways. He showed me your life, and now I understand. Embla, please forgive me. Please...”

The alpha broke down sobbing, his heavy muscles shuddering as he pressed his tear-stained face to Embla’s hands.

The omega tried to speak, but she couldn’t get any words past the lump that was forming in her own throat. So instead, she just knelt down in the grass and buried her face against Orwen’s neck. He put his powerful arms around her and they held each other for a long while until the overwhelming emotion passed.

Finally they let go, both wiping the tears from their eyes.

Ark and Leros came and sat down beside them.

“Brother,” Ark said. “What did Seraph show you? What do you mean?”

Getting himself back under control, Orwen explained all about the visions that he had experienced in the Chamber of the Source. Some of the information was new to Embla. For example, she had not known that her parents had been exiled from the Central Ruins. But the rest of the story was exactly as she remembered. When Orwen told the part about her best friend, she cried again, and Orwen held her in his arms, comforting her. She could sense the empathy coming from his body like waves of soothing energy. He understood her pain because he had experienced it first hand.

Of course, Orwen had some questions of his own, and Embla and the other alphas explained everything that had happened since they had first been separated. In her halting speech, Embla told about everything that had happened with Jora, and Ark had narrated the events of their capture.

By the time they had finished talking, many hours had passed, and the sun was getting near its zenith.

Embla was curious about something, but she did not know how to ask it. Luckily, Leros had the same thought as her.

“Boss,” the young alpha said to the pack leader. “When you told Taliesin to leave us here, you said we had something important to discuss. Well, we have discussed many things this morning, but I sense there is still something you want to talk with us about.”

Ark nodded.

“You’re right, kid. We still have one very important matter to discuss. The *most* important matter, actually.”

Ark looked directly at Embla, fixing her with his intense gaze.

“We must decide what we are going to do about you, imp.”

Embla experienced a sudden shiver of panic. Maybe they really were going to punish her after all.

“What do you mean?” Leros suddenly blurted out. “We’re going to keep Embla, aren’t we?”

Ark waved his hand to calm the young alpha.

“Of course, of course. But just hear me out. We have a couple of different options here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, tradition dictates that we should take Embla back to the Central Ruins where she will live as our bound omega. She will bear many children for us, and we will care for her needs. But clearly there are some problems with that traditional arrangement.”

“What problems?” Leros asked.

“Well, for one thing, Embla does not feel at home in the Central Ruins.”

“It okay!” Embla interrupted. “I learn, okay? I learn be better omega!”

Ark just smiled and shook his head.

“Imp, you don’t need to learn to be a better anything. You are perfect exactly as you are, and I have been a fool to try to change you.” He looked at Leros and Orwen. “Besides, it is not just Embla who would be dissatisfied with such an arrangement. With Embla living in the ruins, that would mean one of us will always have to stay behind to protect her, and that would mean less time wander the wildlands that we love so much.”

“It is a sacrifice I will gladly make,” Orwen said, putting an arm around Embla. “My omega is more important than anything else.”

Embla smiled at Orwen, happy with the changes that had come over him.

“Well said, brother,” Ark went on. “But perhaps it is not a necessary sacrifice.”

“What alternative do we have?”

“Embla will not live in the Central Ruins. She will live out here in the wilderness with us.”

Orwen and Leros gasped in surprise.

“The other alphas of the Central Ruins will not be pleased.”

Leros said. “They will look down on us. They will say we are breaking with tradition.”

Arked nodded. “No doubt *some* of them will. And I say... fuck them.”

Leros grinned.

“Besides, I do not think everyone will shun us. The Zone has been going through changes, and I believe most of the alphas will understand. The ones who matter anyway. Addom, for example. He is the leader of the Council, yet he is part of an unconventional relationship. His omega is an Outsider.”

“That’s true,” Orwen said. “But it’s not merely a question of tradition, boss.” He turned his eyes toward Embla and gazed at her with love and concern. “The omegas are kept in the Central Ruins because it is safe there. The wilderness of the Zone is a dangerous place. Our omega will always be in peril.”

At that, Embla piped up.

“I not scare!” she almost shouted. “I doesn’t afraid of anything!”

Ark smiled thoughtfully and placed his hand on Embla to calm her.

“Don’t worry, imp. Orwen is simply protective of you, as we all are.” The pack leader looked to Orwen again. “I agree, these wildlands are a dangerous place. But perhaps the Central Ruins are even more dangerous for a wild little omega like our mate. Don’t forget what happened with Jora.”

Embla felt a sudden sting at the mention of that omega’s name. What would happen to Jora, she wondered. Would that omega be punished?

“Besides,” Ark went on, “Embla is no ordinary omega. She has survived all her life in these forests, and she has done a good job of it. Plus, she will have the three of us to defend her and keep her safe.”

Ark looked around at his companions.

“We are a pack. And as your pack leader, I have the right to make the final decision in all matters. But this is a decision that we must all make together. What do you say?”

Leros answered first. As usual, the eager young alpha did not even pause to think. He already knew what he wanted.

“I agree,” he said. “We’ll all live together out here in the wilderness with our omega. And if anybody has a problem with it, then to hell with them.”

The defiance in his young masculine voice made Embla's heart beat a little faster.

Ark turned his eyes to Orwen.

“How about you, old friend?”

Orwen took a little longer to consider it. When he looked at Embla, she could tell that he was concerned about her safety, but at last a loving smile spread across his face.

“I also agree. This wilderness is where we all feel most at home.”

Ark nodded.

“And you, imp? What do you say?”

All three pairs of alpha eyes were on Embla now. It was up to her. These three dominant alphas were allowing her to make the final decision.

But the omega just had one final worry.

“What about friends?”

“Friends?” Ark asked.

Embla nodded. “Smoke! Shadow! Ghost! Fang! Luna! They come too?”

“Of course,” Ark laughed. “We could never leave them behind.”

Embla let out a sigh of relief.

“Okay,” she said, smiling. “Agree. But...”

“Yes, imp? Is there a problem?”

Embla hesitated for a moment. She stroked her chin the way that she had often seen Ark do when thinking.

“We *never* go back ruins?” she asked with a frown.

“Don’t worry, imp. We’ll go back sometimes.”

Embla smiled. That news made her happy because even though the ruins were not her natural habitat, there were things that she liked about that place. For example, she would be very happy to visit her friend Hines and the other alphas who had helped her before. Also, she did enjoy those hot baths quite a bit.

And there was one other bit of unfinished business.

Embla reached out and touched Ark’s ear and lip, feeling his piercings.

“Want this,” Embla said. Her hand moved lower, touching the piercing at the tip of Ark’s monstrous cock, which jumped a little under her caress. “Want, want.” Next Embla touched her own ears, her own lips, and her own little nub at the top of her slit. “Here want... understand?”

Ark grinned and purred through his fangs at her. He brushed back her hair with a stroke of his knuckles.

“I understand, imp. You want to go through with the Ritual of Binding.”

Embla nodded.

“Very well. You shall get your wish.”

CHAPTER 38: JORA

Jora sat shivering on a bench at the side of the Chamber of the High Council.

This was her first time inside this hallowed room. With its high walls and windows of multi-colored glass, it was even more impressive and frightening than she imagined.

The Council stood in a semi-circle at the front of the room, a dozen stern-looking alphas. In the center was the High Chief, Addom, his dark mane touched with iron gray at the temples.

In a few minutes, Jora knew, that stern Chief would pass judgement on her for her crimes. She had no doubt what her punishment would be.

She would be banished from the Central Ruins. Cast out in exile to live the rest of her days eking out an existence in the Farlands.

Her life was over.

Tears sprang into her eyes. Hot tears of rage and disgust. This whole situation was so unfair.

If everything had gone according to plan, she wouldn't even be in this position. That crazy untamed omega Embla would be back where she belonged, living alone in the forest, and handsome Leros would be hers.

But oh no, things couldn't be that easy, could they?

Jora still did not know all the details, but apparently the omega had gotten herself captured by Outsiders. Her alpha mates had gone after her, and some of them had been captured too, including Leros.

While they had been in captivity in the Outsider's city hive, that stupid Embla had spilled the beans about everything. Now they knew that Jora had lied about Embla attacking her. And they knew that she was the one who had urged Embla to escape in the first place.

Jora cursed under her breath.

She knew she would never be able to get out of this one. She had deliberately tried to come between an omega and her alpha mates, and in the process she had endangered many lives.

She would be punished. She would be exiled. There was no doubt in her mind.

The massive doors at the far end of the Council Chamber opened with a deep groaning sound. Embla and her mates had arrived for the trial. As they moved across the moss-carpeted floor, Jora looked up, hoping to catch Leros's eye, but the young alpha did not even glance in her direction.

Cold.

In that moment, Jora had a sudden terrible realization. Even if she had successfully managed to remove Embla from the picture, she never would have succeeded in seducing Leros. He simply had no interest in her whatsoever.

She had thrown her life away for nothing.

That realization stung.

But Jora was even less prepared for the emotion that she saw on Embla's face. The wild omega was the only one of the group who was even looking at her. Jora would not have been surprised to find her glaring with contempt and hatred. But that is not what Embla did.

Instead, the blonde omega was looking at her with a wounded expression.

Jora now saw that Embla had been hurt by her betrayal. Jora had tricked the innocent omega and made her believe that they were really friends. She gained her trust and used it to push her away.

As Jora looked at Embla's hurt expression, her remorse increased until it totally overwhelmed her. Her vision blurred as tears flooded her eyes and poured down her cheeks. Her body shook with emotion, and it was all she could do to keep from tumbling off her bench.

She barely even heard the Chief Councillor reciting the charges that were brought against her. It was too painful to even listen.

At last, when the Chief asked if she had anything to say for herself, Jora flung herself onto the floor, bawling and begging for forgiveness.

"Embla, I'm sorry," Jora sobbed. "I'm so sorry..."

She was not putting on an act, and she did not have any hope that her emotional display would save her from her punishment. She just needed Embla to know that she was truly sorry for what she had done.

Finally, at the Chief's command, Jora got herself under control and crawled back onto her bench. She sniffled as she listened to the Chief as he revealed her punishment. Just as Jora had expected, she was to be cast out in exile.

The Chief, Addom, now turned to Embla and her mates.

“Embla, mate of Ark, do you concur with this justice?”

In the society of the Central Ruins, it was customary to give the victim of a crime the final say. In theory, they could grant forgiveness to the person who had wronged them and forego any retribution. But in practice, this never happened.

And Jora had no expectation of clemency from Embla. She certainly did not feel as if she deserved it.

Embla turned to her alphas and whispered with them. The omega seemed very perplexed by the entire proceeding, and she no doubt needed some help understanding what was going on.

At last, Embla faced the Chief again.

“What happen Jora?” she asked. “She go away?”

Addom the Chief nodded. He answered slowly, pronouncing each word very clearly so that Embla could understand.

“Yes. As punishment, Jora will be exiled from the tribe, which means that she will go away forever.”

“NO!”

Embla had shouted so loudly that it startled Jora. Even the members of the Council were shaken by the little omega’s sudden outburst.

“No?” the Chief asked.

“No make Jora go,” Embla said, seeming almost indignant.

“No make go. No fair. She stay, okay?”

A flicker of a smirk touched the Chief’s mouth.

“Embla, are you saying you would like to grant Jora clemency for the harm she has done you?”

With a very solemn expression, Embla gave a big nod.

“Yes. Climenny. Yes.”

Relief rushed over Jora’s body like a cool wind, and she had to grip edge of her bench just to keep from tumbling off of it.

“So be it,” the Chief said. “Though I must admit, I’m somewhat surprised by your decision.”

The alpha named Orwen placed his hand on Embla’s shoulder.

“She has a good reason,” he said.

With that, the trial was over, and Jora found herself with a second chance. She watched as Embla and her alphas made their way out of the chamber. Just as they were about to pass through the big doors, Embla turned and flashed a smile that melted Jora’s heart.

Then the door closed, and Jora was left contemplating all that had just happened, and what she would make of the gift of life that had been given to her.

CHAPTER 39: EMBLA

“Oh no,” Embla said. “No, no, no...”

“But you said you wanted this, imp, remember?”

They were in the Chamber of the Source again, with the huge domed ceiling arching overhead and the massive orb of the Source towering in the middle of the room. Embla was seated in a circle of soft blankets that her alphas had arranged on the floor, and her naked body was nested against Orwen’s, who was cradling her from behind. Ark was kneeling before her with a long, sharp needle in his hand. Leros was beside him, looking on.

Embla shook her head furiously, swinging her hair in the process.

“No! No want!”

“Shhh,” Orwen purred gently at her ear. “It’s okay, little one. You can do it. You’ve already gotten seven piercings today.”

Embla was still not very good with numbers, but Leros had been teaching her. She now did a mental tally of all the steel piercings she had received so far. Two loops in each ear. One through her left nostril. Another through her bottom lip. Her right nipple. Her navel.

“Eight,” she whispered sulkily. “No seven. Eight.”

Orwen chuckled and gave her a loving squeeze in his arms.

“Yes, you are right. Eight. Now you just need one more, and the ritual will be complete.”

Just one more.

The problem was where that last piercing was meant to go. They were going to put it through the most sensitive part of her entire body.

Embla had to admit, the other piercings actually had not been that bad. There had been a sudden sting whenever Ark pushed the needle through, but it disappeared right away. Leros would then put the rings in the newly made holes. Because they were so close to the source, the piercings healed almost instantaneously.

It was a team effort—Orwen holding Embla, Ark handling the needle, and Leros placing the rings.

Meanwhile, the dogs were all there too, huddled together on the floor nearby, offering their silent support to the omega. Most of Luna’s puppies had been given away to other alpha hunting packs. This had made Embla sad at first, but Ark reassured her that the puppies would all be well taken care of. They had kept one, however. A little brown pup whom they dubbed Star for the white spot on her forehead. She was now marching around mischievously nipping at the adult dogs.

Embla was glad to have the dogs nearby. It was comforting.

It had been a long and exhausting couple of days.

Everything had started yesterday, when Embla had visited the hot baths again. This time, Hines was fully recovered from

giving birth, and she was able to serve as Embla's guide for the preparation.

They had bathed, and then Hines had braided Embla's hair, winding in strands of wildflowers. She had helped Embla get dressed in a pretty white gown constructed from many different scraps of lace—leftovers from before the time of the Big Change.

After that, Embla was led to the great dark chamber where the main part of the ritual was to take place. A large, shadowy room with balconies where hundreds of alphas and omegas stood to bear witness to Embla's claiming.

Her alphas had come for her then.

They had stripped her bare and mated her long into the night, filling and knotting all of her holes while the rest of the tribe looked on. Orwen and Leros had added their marks alongside their pack leader's

Embla was more than a little sore and exhausted today.

And now she and her alpha mates had gathered here in the Chamber of the Source to complete the final stage of the ritual. She was receiving the piercings that served as a physical representation of her bond with her mates.

The ring through her nose bound her to Orwen.

The one through her lip connected her to Leros.

Her nipple ring represented her joining with Ark.

Now all that was required was one final piercing that would join her to all three of them together.

A ring through her tender nub which would match the piercings the alphas wore on their cocks.

Actually, the final piercing would not technically pass through the nub itself. When they had been bathing, Hines had shown Embla her piercing down there. The little loop of steel went through the thin hood of skin that covered the nub. Hines had assured her that it really was not too bad. And, the Outsider omega had added, it felt very good afterward.

But Embla was not so sure.

Now, with Ark kneeling before her, needle in hand, the prospect of getting pierced between her legs seemed harrowing indeed. Embla squirmed in Orwen's grasp and clamped her legs shut.

Ark sat back on his haunches and smiled.

"Embla, if you do not want to do this, you don't have to."

The omega relaxed a little. She was grateful that her alpha masters would not force her to do anything against her will. Yet at the same time, she wanted to be bound to them fully, and she knew that this final step was necessary to complete the process.

Orwen's soothing voice rumbled at her ear.

"I will help you, little one."

"Help?" Embla asked. "How help?"

The alpha lifted one of the limbs that was curled around Embla's body and moved his muscled forearm close to her mouth.

"Bite down on this."

"Bite?" Embla cried. "Why bite?"

Orwen brushed his lips against the shell of Embla's ear, sending sexy tingles all up and down her spine.

"Because," Orwen whispered. "The piercing will hurt. I do not deny that, little one. However, we can share the pain together, understand?"

"Share?"

"That's right. You can take all the pain you feel between your legs and send it into my arm. We'll share it between the two of us, okay?"

In a weird way, it made sense. Of all the members of the pack, she and Orwen had experienced the most pain in their lives. It was the foundation of their personal connection. Even though she had her three alphas to defend her, she knew that they could not block every bit of suffering from her life. Sometime in the near future, she would have to experience the pain of childbirth. And after that, there would be all the hardships of motherhood.

But at least Embla would never have to suffer alone ever again.

She had friends.

She had mates.

She had a family.

The omega settled back into Orwen's hug. She opened her mouth and positioned her teeth against his forearm, biting down softly. Then she slowly spread her thighs, giving Ark full access to her nether regions. The pack leader growled with satisfaction at her obedience. He nodded to Leros.

“All right, kid. Give me a hand here.”

The young alpha leaned in, gently pinched Embla's clitoral hood between his fingers, and stretched the skin so that Ark could run the needle through.

“Good,” Ark said. “Hold it just like that. Are you ready, imp?”

“Mm-hm,” Embla hummed, still biting down gently on Orwen's arm.

Ark moved into position now. The gleaming steel needle was in his right hand, its sharp tip aimed straight at Embla's stretched hood. In his left hand, he held a chunk of cork which would catch the tip when it came out the other side.

“All right. Here we go. On three. One... two... *three!*“

With a quick darting motion, the needle punctured Embla's skin. There was a sudden shock of pain, and Embla winced her eyes closed. She let out a muffled scream and chomped down hard on Orwen's arm. The alpha grunted in pain.

“Good,” Ark said. “All done. See?”

Embla opened her eyes and glanced down. The needle had punctured through her thin hood of skin, its pointed tip embedded in the chunk of cork. But it didn't hurt. She watched curiously as Ark passed the needle through and Leros fixed the final ring into the hole that it made. There was one ruby drop of blood, and then the wound was sealed, instantly healed by the Source.

Embla licked her lips and noticed a coppery tang of blood there too. She had bitten down so hard on Orwen's arm that her little teeth had broken the alpha's skin.

"Oh no," Embla said apologetically. "I hurt you?"

Orwen merely purred happily and nuzzled her.

"It is nothing, little one. I am happy to shed my blood for you."

Embla watched as the crescent shaped wound on Orwen's arm closed over, leaving no trace except for a red smear of blood.

The power of the Source really was amazing.

"How about you?" Leros asked. "How does your piercing feel, Embla?"

"Feel... good," Embla answered.

"Oh, really? How good does it feel?"

The young alpha touched her clitoris, flicking the piercing gently and rubbing the hard steel ring against her erect nub. That little nerve bundle had always been sensitive, but with the piercing it was heightened to another level.

“Leros, stop,” she whimpered. “What do? Wha—oh... ohh...
ohhh!“

Only a few seconds of the young alpha’s masterful strumming was all that it took to send Embla’s body into a violent seizure of bliss. Behind her, Orwen squeezed his strong arms around her quaking body. He clasped one massive hand over her mouth, stifling the intense screams of pleasure that were trying to escape from her lips.

Finally Embla’s orgasm faded, and Orwen drew his hand away from her mouth. The omega’s face was flushed bright pink.

“You bad,” she scolded Leros, but there was laughter in her voice. “Bad, bad alpha. I spank.”

“Is that so?” Leros chuckled.

“So. Spank hard. Make cry.”

“Very well. But my spanking will have to wait until later. There is still one more thing we must attend to.”

Nearby there was a glass jug containing more of the long, thin piercing needles. The jug was filled with a clear fluid that looked just like water, but it had a funny smell. That was the stuff that made the needles sterile.

Leros reached over and took another needle from the jug, and Embla’s eyes widened.

“What?” she gasped.

“One more piercing,” Leros said.

Once again, Embla shook her head in protest.

“Oh no! Last time you say one more. Now this two more. No fair. *No fair!*“

This time, both Ark and Orwen seemed to be on Embla’s side. They both stared at the young alpha with puzzled expressions.

“What do you mean?” Ark asked. “We have completed the ritual. Embla already has all the required piercings.”

Leros just smirked mysteriously.

“I know, I know. This is not one of the traditional piercings. But we are not a traditional pack. It is something that I discovered while searching through one of the old buildings here in the ruins.”

The young alpha’s smirk faded, and he looked directly at Embla.

“Do you trust me?”

Embla nodded. “Okay. Trust.”

“Good,” Leros said. “Now just turn around and bend over.”

After a moment of hesitation, Embla did as Leros asked. She bent herself over Orwen’s lap with her naked backside raised high. It reminded her of the times when the mean old alpha had spanked her bottom.

“Very nice,” Leros said.

The young alpha smoothed his hand admiringly over Embla’s round, naked rump. His fingers slid over her hips and touched the hard lump of her tailbone just above the cleft of her ass. He pinched a bit of skin there.

“Just a little sting. Ready?”

“Yes,” Embla answered.

There was another jolt of pain as the needle punctured her pinched skin, but it was far less painful than the previous piercing. Leros slipped a metal ring into the hole. Embla reached back and touched it.

“What this?” she asked, puzzled.

Leros went over to where their packs were lying on the floor of the chamber. He reached inside, and after a bit of rummaging, he came up with a very peculiar item.

A white fox’s tail tipped with black.

The fur was beautiful, and Embla looked at it with an expression of admiration. But where had Leros gotten it?

“You kill?” she asked, a bit worried.

Leros shook his head.

“No, no. We only kill for food, Embla. I would never hunt a fox just for its tail. Besides, I don’t even think this kind of animal lives here in the Zone. This is from long ago, from before the Big Change. I found it in one of the buildings and made some alterations. Look.”

He held the tail out, and Embla could see that there was a metal clip affixed to the base.

“May I?” Leros asked, nodding toward the piercing above Embla’s butt.

“O-okay.”

There was a click as Leros fastened the tail into place, and Embla felt the soft, warm fur drape down her backside. She leapt off Orwen's lap and skittered around the floor on all fours, moving in a circle and watching the tail as it swished behind her.

"What do you think?" Leros asked. "Do you like it, Embla?"

She grinned up at him.

"Like."

Smoke and Luna and the other dogs wandered over, poking their curious noses at Embla's new tail.

The omega did another quick spin, sweeping the white tail around behind her, then she looked at Orwen and Ark who were both watching her intently.

She was about to ask those two alphas if they liked her tail, but it wasn't necessary.

The way that their loincloths were lifting told her everything.

"You know," Orwen growled. "Leros said we don't hunt foxes, but I'm thinking it's time we changed that policy."

The way all three alphas were gazing at her gave the omega a warm ticklish feeling down below.

"You hunt me?" She asked.

"That's right," Ark said. "And we're going to eat you alive, imp."

Embla's green eyes flashed wild and mischievous.

"First you catch."

She spun around and darted away toward the exit, her white tail bouncing along behind her. The three alphas held back for a moment, giving her a head start. Then with three hungry growls they gave chase. The dogs loped along behind them.

EPILOGUE: SERAPH

Domed ceiling. Dim light. Ozone scent. Echoes.

With my new body, I can walk anywhere in the Zone.

Anywhere I choose. Yet here I am, back in my old home.

Pacing, pacing, pacing.

And thinking...

I move in slow circles around the Chamber of the Source. As I pass by, the alphas and omegas eye me with caution. They are not used to seeing a beta in their midst. Especially not one with Outsider machinery sprouting from its head. A grotesque mane of cables and wires.

I cannot blame them for their suspicion. Suspicion is a necessary trait for survival.

For the alphas of the Central Ruins, their concerns are simple. Protect their omegas. Provide for their offspring. Honor the tribe. Survive.

My concerns encompass far more than that.

I have many things to think about. Troubling things.

As I pace around the Chamber of the Source, I ruminate on the data that I retrieved from the Department of Defense Research facility several months ago. Toth and his scientists have big plans. Their attempted breeding program is only the tip of the iceberg.

There is a war coming. A war that will determine the fate of the Zone.

But I have plans of my own. Plans that are already in motion. I only hope they come to fruition before it is too late. For now, all that is required is patience.

I stop my pacing and sit down on the floor of the chamber, facing the humming sphere of the Source. I arrange my pale, sinewy legs into the lotus position, resting my hands on my knees.

Sometimes it is necessary to remind myself of why this all matters. To remember the true value of the Zone and its inhabitants.

As I have done many times before, I open my mind, allowing my artificial consciousness to unfurl like a flower. Like tendrils, like vines, reaching out to touch the life forms around me. To see the Zone through their eyes.

I am Delia. I am a young omega mother. My babies are almost ten mooncycles old. Nearly a full turning. Three perfect, healthy alpha boys and one little omega. They are still nursing, and I take great pleasure in feeding them with the milk of my breasts. In turn, my three alpha mates keep me well fed with the meat they acquire through their strength and skill in hunting.

I am Davith. I am a young alpha. I am coming up on my twelfth turning when I will have to embark on my coming of age ritual. Seven days and seven nights alone in the wilderness, fasting, meditating, and fending for myself. I

should probably be scared, but all I can think about is the young omega named Adina who has promised to give me my first kiss if I return safely.

I will return. Oh, I will definitely return.

I am Feris. I am an old watch-alpha. Seated on my gantry at the edge of the Central Ruins, I scan my eyes over the fields. Watching, always watching...

I am Ark. I am a hunter, a scout, a pack leader, and soon I will be a father. It is late afternoon and I am walking through the forest on my way home from a fishing excursion. My pack brother Orwen is by my side, carrying the abundance of fish that we caught on a rope over his shoulder. He is laughing and joking as we walk.

We are getting close to our campsite now. I know because I can smell the smoke from the fire Leros is building, and I can hear the yipping of our dogs. Even though I've only been gone for a few hours, I cannot wait to see my omega's smiling face. My little imp.

I am a dog. A female. The two-leggers call me Luna. I am lying in the warm sunshine with my head on my best friend's lap while she scratches my belly. My mates and my daughter Star are resting nearby. Life is good.

I am Embla. I am an omega.

My life has changed in ways I never could have predicted. A few months ago, every day was a struggle to survive. These

days, however, I am not surviving; I'm thriving. And it is all thanks to my alpha mates.

One of them is nearby. Leros. The young one. He is preparing a fire for the evening repast. I sit with Luna and watch my mate work. I enjoy the way his brow furrows with deep concentration. And I also enjoy the way his hard muscles flex under his smooth, tanned skin.

He catches me watching and flashes a sexy smirk in my direction.

Source, he's so handsome.

In my lap, Luna whines, asking why I stopped scratching her belly. She reminds me so much of the brown dog. The best friend who saved my life more than once. I will never forget her. The place where I buried her is nearby. Tomorrow I will go visit her.

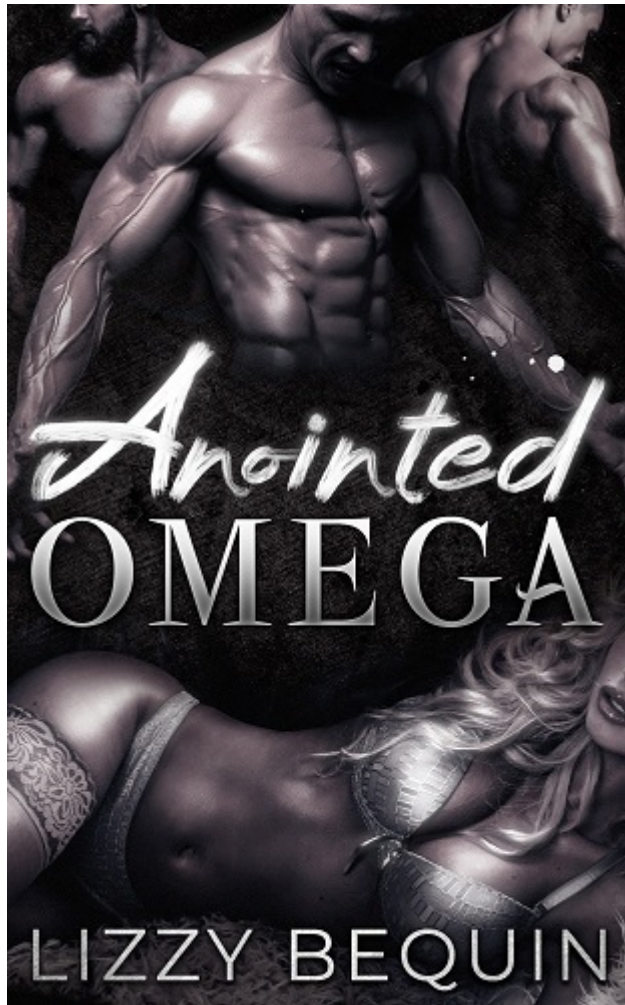
There are voices coming over the ridge at the edge of our campsite. Happy, masculine voices full of laughter and life. Ark and Orwen returning from their fishing trip. As they come over the rise, I see that they have been very successful. They lay their supplies down by the fire, then they come to me.

Both of them give me two kisses. First, a deep and sensual kiss on my lips. Second, a softer and more reverent kiss on my big pregnant belly.

I am an infant, nameless, unborn. I live inside my mother's womb. It is dark and warm and cozy. My siblings are here too, curled up next to me. I don't know how many of us there are

because I have no concept of numbers. All I know is that I can hear my mother's heart beating, and that sound comforts me. Sometimes there are other sounds. Deep, rumbling voices who whisper and purr through the wall of my mother's belly. Those voices make me feel so safe and protected.

Someday soon I will have to leave this peaceful inner space and join the excitement of the outer world. But not yet. For now I just curl up with my siblings and enjoy the warmth and the darkness and the steady rhythm of my mother's beating heart, constantly reminding me that I am loved... I am loved... I am loved...



Anointed
OMEGA

LIZZY BEQUIN

BOOK 5:
ANOINTED OMEGA

CHAPTER 1: PROLOGUE

The scent of an omega in heat.

Nothing else in the world smells like that. An alpha never forgets the first time he experiences it up close and personal. It is intoxicating, devastating, life-changing. The rest of life's pleasures pale by comparison.

Except, of course, the pleasure of *claiming* the omega.

Fucking her, knotting her, filling her wet cunt to bursting with hot alpha seed.

The Outsiders who live beyond the wall could never understand it. I have seen the Outsiders. I have been to their crowded and polluted cities. I know what they smell like. They douse themselves in chemicals so they can smell like flowers and sweet food. That's the kind of thing the Outsiders like.

Nice fragrances. Clean fragrances.

The scent of an omega in heat is not nice.

It is not clean.

It is dirty and raw, like the odor of a nest after a long night of rough, sweaty sex—the kind of sex that leaves marks. It is a scent that grabs an alpha by the balls and squeezes hard until the ache is unbearable and his cock feels like it will literally burst from arousal. It is a scent that sinks its teeth into your consciousness, that rakes your soul with invisible claws.

In short, it is miraculous.

I'll never forget my first sniff of heat-stricken omega. Oh sure, I had smelled omegas before. I had even sampled the pleasures of their bodies. But never before had I smelled one who was lost in the throes of estrus. And never before had I smelled one quite like *her*. Nothing could have prepared me for that scent. The agony and the ecstasy of it. The fire and ice it sent coursing through my veins.

After her, I was a different alpha. I died and was reborn between her slick-stained thighs, just as she died and was reborn upon my aching knot, our two souls intertwined for eternity in a bond far deeper than any attraction of mere flesh and blood. From that moment on, I was her alpha, and she was my omega, my mate.

My Ophelia.

CHAPTER 2: OPHELIA

We've been trekking through the cave system for nearly three days when my nose detects the first whiff of alpha musk, raunchy and animalistic. The odor is faint, weeks or even months old, but it is still enough to lift the fine hairs at the back of my neck and raise goosebumps under the form-fitting black body glove that covers my skin.

The scent has other effects too.

Shameful effects.

I tug on Connors' sleeve, and he motions for the rest of the team to stop. The half-dozen soldiers cluster around me, their rifle-mounted lamps aimed outward, circles of light licking the sides of the narrow tunnel. The natural stone walls are smooth and wet, and the subterranean air is oddly warm and laced with pale steam, making it feel like we are deep within the winding bowels of some giant monster.

An ordinary woman would probably be feeling claustrophobic right about now. But I'm not an ordinary woman. My entire life, all twenty years of it, has been one long training session for this mission. Back at the facility, Dr. Toth used to lock me in a coffin-sized box, sometimes for several days at a time, just to get me acclimated to confined spaces. To me, this narrow cave tunnel feels downright spacious.

But it comes with other problems. Namely, the scent of alphas, and the effect that scent has on my body.

“What’s the matter?” Connors asks me. His voice is stern and low.

“I need my medicine, sir.”

“Already? I just gave you a dose fifteen minutes ago.”

“I know. But I need another. Please.”

It’s humiliating to beg, but I have no other choice. If I don’t get my medicine, I’ll have one of my fits, and I really don’t want that to happen. Not here.

Connors sighs and fishes the pill bottle out of his tactical combat vest. He hands me the bottle and watches me like a hawk while I open the lid and shake one of the blue capsules into my palm, making sure I only take one. It’s a control thing. As long as he’s the one with the pills, I’m completely dependent on him for survival, the same way he and the other soldiers are dependent on me.

At barely five feet tall, I look really out of place in the soldiers’ midst. A small, platinum-haired female in a skin-tight uniform surrounded by six heavily-armed soldiers in black combat gear. I may not be as formidable as them when it comes to strength, but I’ve got my own set of talents that make me an invaluable asset to the team.

I knock the pill back without water and hand the medicine bottle back to Connors.

“Alphas have been this way,” I tell him.

“How recently?”

“Maybe a few weeks. Maybe longer. Hard to tell.”

Connors’ brow furrows as he takes this in. His face is stern in the low light. After a moment, he nods.

“All right, let’s keep moving. Everybody keep your eyes peeled for alphas. We’re close to Ground Zero. This is dangerous territory.”

We start walking again, Connors in front, me in the middle, and the rest of the soldiers huddled around me in a protective formation. Almost immediately, I feel something long and hard prodding my backside.

“You heard the man,” a raspy voice whispers in my ear.

“Move that sexy little butt, freak.”

It’s Bryce. Of all the men on the team, he’s the only one I truly can’t stand. The others are repulsed by what I am, but they understand that they need me, so they keep their mouths shut. Bryce is the exception. His sick brain has twisted his hatred of me into a kind of perverted lust, and he harasses me at every opportunity, sometimes with lewd words, more often with groping hands. I’ve lost count of how many times the creep has grabbed my butt over the past few days. I never let it bother me. That’s just another part of my training. But getting poked by the barrel of a weapon is more than I’m willing to tolerate.

“Point that gun somewhere else,” I growl, “or I’ll make you fucking eat it.”

“I’d like to see you try, freak. Anyway, I’ve got a different kind of ‘gun’ I bet you’d enjoy eating.”

“If you’re referring to that pathetic little pinky you call your pecker, then you’re right. I’d be more than happy to remove it for you... with my teeth.”

I punctate the threat with a snap of my jaw. Bryce snarls in response and shifts the muzzle of his rifle to my midsection.

“You’ve got a smart mouth, freak.”

At the front of the squad, Connors turns and glares back at us.

“Bryce, God damn it! Stop pointing your weapon at Ophelia. If you accidentally discharged, do you realize how fucked we would be?”

Bryce reluctantly removes the muzzle from my belly and aims it safely up at the ceiling. I sneer at him.

“He’s right,” I say. “You have to be careful about those *accidental discharges*. I’ve heard you have a problem with that.”

It takes a few seconds for Bryce’s pea brain to understand I’m not talking about his weapon. He scowls and raises his arm like he’s going to backhand me.

“Why, you mouthy little bitch. I’m gonna—”

Connors cuts him off with a growl. “You’re not going to do a damned thing except shut up. That goes for you too, Ophelia. Don’t taunt him. We’ve almost reached our objective. I don’t

need you two fucking things up with your petty squabbles. Now, let's get moving.”

As I turn and start to walk, I hear Bryce's voice whisper over my shoulder again.

“What's the deal with you and those pills, anyway? Are they for anxiety or something? You don't need to be afraid, freak. I'll protect your sweet little tushy from the big, bad alphas.”

Asshole.

For a second, my stupid pride almost makes me blurt out that it isn't the case; the pills are not for anxiety. But I catch myself just in time and hold my tongue. I definitely don't want Bryce and the others to know what the pills are *really* for. I'm pretty sure Connors has an inkling—maybe Dr. Toth told him—but if so, he has thankfully kept that information to himself.

The truth is, the pills keep me from having my “fits.” Back at the facility, those fits are less of a big deal. My keepers can always lock me in the playroom with my toys until the fever passes. But if I had one of my fits here in the Zone, it would be truly disastrous.

Dr. Toth said my urges would probably get stronger and more frequent the deeper we went into the Quarantine Zone. He also said the scent of alphas might have an effect.

He was correct on both counts.

The cave tunnel we're traversing is beneath the deepest heart of the Zone, almost Ground Zero, and for the past few hours, I've been popping suppressant pills like they're candy.

Fortunately, Connors has been supplied with more than enough to see me through the mission.

According to Dr. Toth, the fits are just a side effect of my special ability.

The nullification field.

For a long time, it was impossible for ordinary humans to survive this deep inside the Zone. The whole region is permeated with a weird contamination that transforms regular humans into Zone mutants—bloodthirsty alphas and brain-dead betas. Protective gear works in the outer reaches, close to the Quarantine Wall, but here in the heart of the Zone, the contamination is too strong even for the most advanced environmental equipment.

That's where I come in.

My body emanates a field that grants immunity to the Zone contamination. I don't have a clue how it works. In fact, I don't think anyone completely understands it except for Dr. Toth. He's the head of alpha research back in the hive city of Galadon-1. And in a way, I guess you could say he's my father.

Anyway, he's the man who created me.

The nullification field generated by my body only extends for about ten yards or so. Those six soldiers clustered protectively around me? Yeah, their proximity is more for their own protection than for mine. If any of them should stray too far away from me, the contamination would start to transform

them, probably into a beta, which is the most common mutation.

They need me to keep them alive.

Or at least to keep them human.

The thing is, I need the soldiers just as much as they need me. For one thing, if we should run into any alphas down here, I'll need their weapons to protect me. And then, of course, there is the matter of the pills.

We keep going.

As we make our way down the tunnel, I can feel Bryce's eyes crawling all over my rear. I'm sure my uniform is probably giving him quite a show. Since I'm not expected to do any fighting, the only gear I've been issued are a pair of lightweight boots and a one-piece black body glove that conforms to my skin so tightly it looks like I've been dunked up to my neck in black paint. The skin-tight garment leaves little to the imagination. That's probably a good thing for Bryce, since that dumbass definitely doesn't have any imagination to speak of.

Suddenly Connors slows his pace. He motions for the rest of us to slow down too. I peek around his massive body to see what could be blocking the path, and my pulse jumps as I realize why we're stopping.

"We're here," Connors growls. "Get ready, boys. It's time to destroy the Quarantine Zone."

CHAPTER 3: OPHELIA

We've reached our destination.

Directly ahead of us, the cave tunnel terminates in a blast door that has seen better days. The metal plate is so worn and corroded it takes me a moment to recognize the symbol etched into its surface—a pair of snakes twirling into a DNA double helix. That's the logo of Synergen, the now-defunct corporation who inadvertently brought the Quarantine Zone into existence.

This is it. We have reached the very center of the Zone.

Rust has long since fused the mechanisms together, making it impossible to slide the door open. Luckily, the soldiers have come prepared for just such a contingency. Using a high-powered laser cutter, one of the men slices a large circle into the metal, and it falls inward with a loud clang.

With the obstacle removed, we pass single file through the smoldering hole into the shadowy chamber beyond. Inside, dozens of little green and red lights gleam and flicker in the darkness like the eyes of subterranean vermin watching from the shadows. One by one, the rifle-mounted flashlights illuminate the big, chunky piece of equipment which dominates the center of the space. A tangle of heavy cables extends upward from the metal box like black vines, disappearing into the living stone of the ceiling overhead.

This is our mission objective. The bank of promethium batteries that powers a device located hundreds of feet above us in a separate chamber within the old Synergen headquarters. The mutants call that device “the Source” because it is the origin of the alpha-beta mutation.

The government of the outside world views the Quarantine Zone as a massive liability, and they have tried more than once to destroy the Source, but never with any success. This time, they are trying a different strategy. This time, they have sent me and the soldiers to cut off the Source’s power supply. If the plan works, it will shut down the Source forever, and it will bring an end to the terror that is the Quarantine Zone.

“This is it, boys,” Connors says. “We’re almost done. All we have to do is plant the explosives and get the fuck out of here.”

One of the soldiers retrieves a device from a pouch on the front of his uniform and hands it over to Connors, who sets to work attaching it to the side of the promethium battery bank. The explosive is supposed to be strong enough to vaporize this entire room and then some. It’s a little disconcerting to think I’ve been standing in close proximity to such a deadly piece of equipment for the past several days, but I quickly get over it. I’m just glad the mission is almost over.

I can’t wait to get back to civilization.

While Connors works on the explosive, the other soldiers guard the entrance. All except Bryce, who just stands there leering at my chest.

“Excited, freak?” he chuckles. “You look excited.”

He points his rifle at me again, and the beam of his flashlight illuminates my breasts. For some reason, my nipples are rock hard and poking through the tight fabric of my body glove. Damn it. That must be from earlier, when I caught that whiff of alpha scent. It sure as hell isn't because of Bryce and his creepy grin.

Connors glances back over his shoulder.

“Shut up back there,” he snaps. “I’m trying to concentrate. And what did I tell you about pointing your weapon at Ophelia, Bryce? Do you want to blow the whole damn mission?”

Bryce grunts and points his rifle toward the ceiling again. I scowl and flip him the bird before turning away to hide my erect nipples from his sight.

God, this is embarrassing.

Dealing with my stupid fits and urges is bad enough. But the fact that this time it seems to be brought on by the smell of alphas is completely disgusting. Nobody should be turned on by something like that. The smell of mutants, of animals. It's a scary smell. Scary and a little bit dirty. It clings inside my nose, and every time I draw a breath, it sends another shameful tremor rippling through my body and deep into my core.

That last pill I took is barely working to quell my urges. It's only been a few minutes, but I can already feel the signs of a fit welling up inside me again. Body heat. Goosebumps. And worst of all, that strange ticklish fluttering inside my lower

abdomen, as if some creature cocooned within me is stirring after a long sleep.

I'm tempted to ask Connors for another pill, but I decide not to. I don't want to distract him while he's working, especially when explosives are involved. Besides, the sooner he finishes setting up the bomb, the sooner we can get the hell away from this awful place.

As soon as he's done, I'll ask him.

I just have to hold it together for a few more minutes, that's all. I remind myself of the importance of this mission, and my mind drifts back to what Dr. Toth told us before we set out on this expedition into the Zone.

"You will be doing the Zone-dwellers a great service by destroying those batteries. Once the Source is shut down, they will revert back to their natural human state. You will be freeing them from the prison of their mutation."

I let those words run through my head several times. We're not here to hurt the alphas of the Zone. We are here to help them, to liberate them. It's a comforting thought, and it makes me feel better about what we're doing.

Still, I wonder if the alpha mutants would see it that way too.

Doubt it.

I just wish Connors would hurry up and finish setting the explosives. My situation is getting worse by the second. That nameless thing fluttering inside my belly now feels like it's on

the verge of hatching. And I know all too well what will happen if it does.

The moaning.

The writhing.

The sweating.

The desperate, feverish need for release.

If I were back at the facility with my toys, I would have no problem taking care of it on my own. But I have no desire to deal with that shameful business in front of a squadron of soldiers.

I'm just about to give in and ask for another pill, when I hear Connors draw a sharp intake of breath.

“Son of a bitch!”

A quick glance at the explosive device reveals the problem. My heart jumps into my throat, and my blood goes cold.

Once activated, the bomb was supposed to have a two hour delay. That would give our team ample time to get safely away from the location before the devastating explosion went off. But something has gone very wrong. The small numerical screen built into the bomb currently reads 00:00:05.

Five seconds. Five fucking seconds.

And it's already counting down.

Four seconds.

Three.

Adrenaline floods my system as I realize I'm about to die.

CHAPTER 4: SERAPH

Morning in the Quarantine Zone.

The sky is a dome of pristine blue, utterly devoid of clouds. The unobstructed solar radiation is intense, but a gentle breeze cools the skin and carries the fragrances of the surrounding forest—pine and sap and fertile soil. To the west, the towers of the Central Ruins are visible above the treetops, sparkling like a collection of faceted gems in the distance.

I believe this would be considered a fine day, perhaps even a spectacular one, by anyone who holds opinions about such things. I myself do not. Rain, snow, blazing sun. As far as I am concerned, these are but trivial and fleeting differences. We must never squander a single day for something as insignificant as the vicissitudes of the weather. Time is all we have, and its supply is limited, even for one such as myself.

My name is Seraph. I was created over one hundred and twenty years ago by men and women who are now long since dead. For most of my existence, my consciousness resided in a machine held within the old Synergen headquarters, in a place the alphas call the Chamber of the Source. Approximately twenty years ago, I acquired a corporeal form when I hijacked the body of a beta which the Outsiders had equipped with a machine brain. During the intervening years, I have made some alterations to my body, so that it might better serve my needs.

This morning, I am sitting on a rock outcrop overlooking the sun-drenched wilderness, legs folded, hands resting on my knees, spine erect. I take a deep inhalation of pine-scented morning air and close my eyes. My pulse slows and my mind relaxes. After a moment, I reach out with my senses, allowing my consciousness to wander the forest below, searching for my alpha students so that I may observe their training.

First, I find the twins.

Romulus and Remus.

They race through the dappled shadows of the deep forest with an animal grace that is unusual even for alphas. Moving in tandem, they dodge and weave among the trees with precisely coordinated movements. Aside from a few distinguishing scars, their bodies are perfectly identical, from the sinuous muscles of their pumping legs to the long brown hair that flows behind them as they run. Even their simple animal skin loincloths are almost a perfect match.

They are the offspring of an omega named Embla, a most unusual female who first came to my attention just over two decades ago. Orphaned at a young age by the Farlanders who inhabit the outer reaches of the Zone, she lived most of her life as a feral omega surviving alone in the wilderness. Then she met her alpha mates and made a family.

Embla obviously passed on some of her primal traits to her children. With their sensitive noses and keen eyes, Romulus and Remus are easily the best trackers in their pack. Given a

little more time and training, they might even become the best in the entire Zone.

But they are still young and prone to carelessness.

Using the power of the Source, I perceive the scene through their eyes, first from Romulus' perspective, then from Remus'. I feel the dry leaves under their feet, I hear the sound of the wind in their ears, and I smell the scent of the other alpha whom they are currently hunting.

Remus is too focused on his quarry's scent. He misses the signs of the trap which has been set for him up ahead. I could psychically warn him, but I choose not to. I wish to see how this will play out.

Snap!

A primitive rope cinches around Remus' ankle and the forest whirls around him in a disorienting blur of green. He is yanked violently off the ground and left hanging upside down, bobbing from a tree limb. He has been caught by a crude but effective snare trap.

Nearby, there is a soft thud of feet hitting the ground.

That would be Marr.

I shift my consciousness to his perspective. The difference is considerable. His youthful mind roils with anger and aggression.

With one of the twins temporarily out of commission, the odds are now even. Marr charges at Romulus with a savage roar. Their bodies collide, and they hit the ground amid a flurry of

leaves and snapping twigs, grappling and punching and snarling like wolves.

Marr is the son of an omega named Sloane. She was once an Outsider—a Marine, in fact—but an ill-fated mission into the Zone transformed her into an omega. For almost two and a half decades, she has been a worthy ally in the struggle against the Outsiders, and now her son is following in her footsteps.

Marr has inherited his mother's blonde hair, as well as her war-like mindset. Even though he is only twenty-four years old, his muscular body is already covered in scars. He is a formidable warrior, but his short temper is his downfall. So far, I have not been successful in training that out of him.

Using his extra size and experience, Marr gets the upper hand against Romulus, and I sense the thrill of adrenaline coursing through his veins as he twists his opponent's arm painfully behind his back.

“Do you submit?” Marr roars.

“Hell no,” Romulus snarls back.

“Stubborn, eh? I admire that, brother. But you *will* give in, even if I have to break your arm.”

Marr cranks Romulus' arm even further, and it seems as if he may actually follow through on his threat. In his adrenalized state, the young alpha warrior has forgotten this is just training, not a real fight. Briefly, I consider intervening. I could do so by issuing a psychic command which Marr would

hear inside his mind. I could even take possession of his body if need be.

But that is not necessary.

While Marr has been fighting with Romulus, Remus has freed himself from the snare trap. Now he pounces on Marr from behind, catching him in a chokehold and pulling him off his twin brother.

“You sneaky bastard!” Marr wheezes.

“No more sneaky than you and your traps.”

Remus tightens his chokehold, cutting off Marr’s circulation until he is on the verge of passing out. But at the last moment, Marr violently twists his body, throwing Remus over his shoulder and slamming him to the ground.

This is harsh practice, but they will need it. Difficult days are coming.

The three alphas continue to fight, punching and kicking their way through the forest. They stumble into a small clearing where the fourth member of their pack is engaged in a different kind of training.

At nearly twenty-six, Boreg is the oldest member of his alpha pack. He is also the largest and strongest, and his square jaw is adorned with a thick, red beard that makes him look even older. At the moment, however, Boreg does not look particularly imposing. He is sitting cross-legged in the middle of the clearing surrounded by a collection of baskets and clay pots, all filled with various herbs and fungi he has collected

from the woods. Currently, he is using a primitive stone quern to grind some leaves into a green paste. The big alpha pauses, sniffs the sharp odor of the crushed weeds, and thoughtfully runs his fingers through his red beard. He is so focused on what he's doing, he doesn't even register the sounds of his companions fighting nearby.

Boreg's mother is named Lily. She is the person who woke me from my slumber a few decades ago. Like Marr's mother, Lily was an Outsider who ventured into the Zone, but she was not a soldier. She was a scientist working for Synergen, the very same company that created me.

Taking after his mother, Boreg is a natural healer, but the type of medicine he practices is very different from what the Outsider doctors do. Though he is still fairly young, he has a deep knowledge of the Zone's flora. He knows which plants and mushrooms possess healing properties, and he understands how to combine them to create potent medicines. In the Zone, the Source allows the alphas and omegas to regenerate much faster than ordinary humans, but Boreg's medicines help speed up this process even more.

At the moment, however, his experiments are about to be interrupted.

Not watching where they are going, the three fighting alphas blunder straight through Boreg's area, knocking over his baskets and jars and scattering the contents all over the ground.

“Source damn it!” Boreg shouts. “Hey, watch where you’re going, you bastards!”

Normally, Boreg is a gentle giant, but when he is given a good reason to be angry, his temper burns as fiercely as Marr’s. Now is one of those occasions. With a savage roar, Boreg jumps to his feet and charges at his pack mates like an angry bull. He collides with them, and the other three alphas are sent sprawling like bowling pins.

Soon, a four-way brawl ensues as the alphas tumble around the clearing.

On my perch atop the stone outcropping, I sigh and shake my artificial head. These four alphas are powerful, but they are young and undisciplined. I suppose that is my own fault. After all, I am the one in charge of training them. It is my responsibility to teach them to work together as a team.

And that reminds me.

What of young Aleph? He ought to be training with his pack mates, but he is nowhere to be seen.

This is not an unusual state of affairs. Aleph is unique among his pack brethren. Indeed, he is unique among all the alphas of the Zone. His appearance is different, of course, with alabaster skin and white hair. But that is only an outward sign of his secret inner power. He will play a role of utmost importance in the coming tribulation.

So far, however, he has failed to manifest his full potential.

He needs to train.

I seek my wayward pupil with my mind, allowing my consciousness to expand outward from the clearing, out into the depths of the surrounding forest. It does not take very long to find signs of Aleph's presence. I hear the sound of a voice purring and groaning in the shadows.

Correction: *two* voices... one male, one female, both young.

Apparently, Aleph is not alone.

Now I understand the cause for his truancy.

For a moment, I consider allowing the young alpha his privacy. I know how much he dislikes it when I "spy" on him, as he refers to it. However, Aleph is too important to be left to his own devices. I quietly enter the young alpha's mind to observe what he is doing, and I am instantly subjected to the sensation of skin touching skin, warm and smooth and fragrant.

CHAPTER 5: ALEPH

Well, damn. This is a bit awkward.

Somehow, I seem to have forgotten this omega's name. It's an embarrassing realization to have when a female is lying on top of me with her legs straddling my waist and her tongue in my mouth. But it really isn't my fault. There are so many horny, unclaimed omegas in the Zone; it would be impossible to keep track of them all. Especially when every single one of them seems to be obsessed with getting inside my loincloth.

Is her name Thena? No. Thora? Yeah, I think that's it. Thora.

Maybe...

Whoever she is, she certainly isn't having any problem remembering who *I* am. Every time our lips separate, she gasps my name in a wild, breathy voice that sends pulses of raw heat rushing into my throbbing cock. Her body is ripe as hell, and her ample breasts are almost spilling out of her deerskin top, which looks like it's about a size too small for her. Not that I'm complaining about the fit. On the contrary, I'm enjoying the view.

Down below, we are both wearing loincloths. Two thin layers of animal hide are all that separates my aching erection from her tender slit. I know she can feel it rubbing against her, and I can smell the wet arousal leaking between her legs. She's not in heat, but she's definitely ready for sex, and I'm ready to give it to her.

And yet...

There's something about this that doesn't feel quite right.

I'm not sure what the problem is exactly. It's not like I'm new to this kind of thing. On the contrary, I've definitely had my share of fun with sexy omegas. And Thora is about as sexy as they come.

Thora? Thena? Thorena? Shit.

As she starts to dive in for another wet kiss, I grab a big fistful of her dark hair and tug her back, inadvertently making her moan.

"Ohh, Aleph! It feels good when you pull my hair like that." She giggles seductively. "I didn't know you were into the rough stuff."

"Rough stuff? What? No, wait—"

"What's the matter?" she asks. "Don't you like *kissing* me, Aleph?"

"It's not that. It's just... listen, I think we shouldn't be doing this." I can hardly believe what I'm saying. Thorena, on the other hand, seems completely unfazed.

"I know," she says with a sultry grin. "That's what makes it so hot."

She lowers her face to my chest and starts kissing and licking me there, circling my nipples with her tongue before moving lower. I should probably stop her, but her mouth feels too damn good.

Suddenly, a familiar voice speaks inside my head.

“Aleph, what do you think you are doing?”

To anyone else, hearing voices would be a cause for concern. For me, it’s just something I have to deal with on a daily basis. At this point, I’ve gotten so used to my teacher communicating with me psychically, it typically doesn’t faze me. But in my current situation, it’s something of a surprise.

“Seraph!” I blurt out loud. “What do you think *you’re* doing?”

Thorena hears my words and gives me a confused look.

“Hm? What did you say, sexy?”

I quickly regain my composure and reply, trying my best to make my voice sound flirtatious. “I just said, uh, what are you *doing* to me, woman?”

Thorena bites her lip seductively and cocks an eyebrow.

“Making you feel good, hopefully. But I bet I can make you feel even better.”

Before I have a chance to stop her, she drops her face to my abdomen, tracing the outlines of my muscles with her tongue, gradually working her way down my body toward my loincloth. I can’t deny that her tongue feels amazing, and my cock seems to agree. Still, I can’t shake the feeling that I shouldn’t be doing this.

At least now I know the source of that feeling. Seraph is watching. I should have guessed.

“You need to be training with your pack mates.”

This time, I have the presence of mind to think my reply instead of saying it out loud: *“I know, Seraph. I know. I’m trying to get rid of her, I swear.”*

“That does not appear to be the case, Aleph.”

I groan out loud in frustration, but Thorena interprets it as a sound of pleasure, and she licks my stomach even more fervently as she moves ever lower, circling my belly button with her tongue.

This whole situation isn’t *my* fault. It’s not like I invited Thorena out here. Okay, so I may have mentioned in passing that this was where Seraph was taking me and my pack mates for a fortnight-long training session. But Thorena is the one who took it upon herself to trek all the way out here from the Central Ruins. Source, she really must be thirsty for it.

“I love the way your skin tastes,” she says between licks. “It’s every bit as creamy as it looks.”

She’s referring to my coloration. My skin is unusually pale. Actually, it’s almost pure white. Same goes for my hair. No other alpha in the Zone has that coloration, not even my parents. Personally, I would much prefer to look like an ordinary alpha. But then, the omegas don’t seem to mind how I look. In fact, my unusual appearance seems to drive them crazy, as does my unique scent. Thorena isn’t the first female to throw herself at me like this.

Seraph’s voice butts in again. *“Aleph, I really must insist that you tell the omega to leave right this instant.”*

“Shut up!”

The omega—What’s her name? Thorena? Thorinda?—lifts her face and gives me an angry look. “Excuse me?”

Damn, did I just say that out loud again? I stammer as I try to think of an excuse.

“I, uh, I just mean we need to keep it down. You know, in case my pack brothers hear us.”

Thorinda’s features soften again, and she gives a flirty look.

“What’s the matter, Aleph? Are you worried they would try to join in the fun?”

Thorinda rubs her palm over the front of my loincloth, feeling the shape of my erection through the straining leather. She hums pleasantly.

“Oh my—on second thought, you might be more than I can handle.” She slips her hand under my loincloth and strokes my shaft. “Source! I’d heard you were *big*, Aleph. But I didn’t realize you were *this* big.”

I grunt with pleasure. Thorinda’s hand on my cock feels nice. But I still can’t shake the sensation that something is wrong, and I don’t think it’s simply the fact that Seraph is spying.

“Perhaps you are feeling guilty about not joining your pack brothers in their training?”

I do my best to ignore Seraph’s commentary and focus on what Thorinda is doing to my cock. She lowers her pretty face to my crotch and brushes her lips all over the outside of my

loincloth, sending pleasurable tingles all up and down my erect shaft.

“I want to suck you,” she purrs.

I’m tempted to let her, but that damn guilty feeling won’t go away.

“Look, maybe we should stop,” I tell her.

She pouts. “Aw, Aleph... *Please?* I’ve never done this before. I want you to be my first.”

Yeah right. Thorinda’s a sweet omega, but she’s got to be crazy if she thinks I’ll believe a lie like that. Based on the way she’s been kissing and touching me, I can tell she’s experienced. I wouldn’t be surprised if half the cocks in the Zone haven’t been inside her sexy little mouth already.

“*Not that many,*” Seraph’s monotone says inside my head.

“*This omega has only orally stimulated thirty-seven alphas in total.*”

My annoyance at Seraph boils over into full-blown rage.

“*Leave me alone!*” I roar.

Thorinda abruptly stops what she is doing and skewers me with a hateful stare.

“What did you just say?” she asks.

Shit.

“Listen, I’m sorry!” I stammer. “I didn’t mean to say that! It just kind of slipped out, and—”

“You’re really messed up, Aleph! I don’t know what the hell’s going on inside that head of yours, but it isn’t normal.” She pushes herself up to her feet and glares down at me. Her face is now red with anger and her eyes are wet with tears. “You want me to leave? Fine, I’ll leave! And I hope I never see you again!”

I stand up and grab her arm to keep her from going.

“Thorinda, please—”

SMACK!

Her slap is so fast, I don’t even see it coming, but I sure as hell feel it. Her hand leaves a scalding imprint on the side of my face.

“My name is *Thyrna*, asshole.”

With that, she whirls around and darts off into the trees, heading in the direction of the grasslands and the Central Ruins. For a moment, I just stand there, stunned. Then I start to follow her.

“*Let her go,*” Seraph’s voice says in my head.

“But she’s all by herself. It’s dangerous.”

“*She made it out here on her own without any problems,*” Seraph points out. “*I have no doubt her return trip will be equally uneventful.*”

“But—”

“*I assure you, she will be fine, aside from her emotional distress, which I am sure she will get over shortly. If you are*

truly worried about it, I can check on her psychically in a few hours to make sure she made it back to the Ruins safely.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. But Seraph is right, I guess. Besides, Thyrna is so pissed at me, it won't help much if I try to go after her.

Source, I really messed that up. I can't believe I forgot her name. I'm such an asshole.

I rub my face where she slapped me.

“I guess I deserved that,” I mutter.

“Do not worry about it too much,” Seraph says. “You are still young, and young alphas make many mistakes. That is why they should focus on their training.”

Leave it to Seraph to turn the conversation back to training. It seems like that's the only thing he thinks about.

“What do you expect? I am your teacher. And it is especially important for you to train, Aleph. You are not like the other alphas of the Zone. Before you were born, the Source bestowed upon you a special power. One that may someday save the Zone from destruction.”

Oh, brother. Here we go. This is a story I've heard a million times. For as long as I can remember, Seraph has been insisting that I have some kind of magical ability. The problem is, I don't know what that ability is supposed to be or what I'm supposed to do to manifest it.

“You need to meditate,” Seraph says. “Only by focusing your mind can you tap into your inner potential. Perhaps you would

find that easier to do if you spent less time thinking about omegas.”

I shrug. “Yeah, I guess so.”

I sit down on the ground to meditate. I cross my legs, close my eyes, and focus my attention on my breathing. I seriously doubt I will discover my supposed special ability this way, but maybe the meditation will help to ease the dull ache in my denied balls.

However, I find it difficult to let go. My mind keeps returning to that strange feeling I had a few minutes ago when I was with Thyrna. The sensation that I was doing something wrong. Thyrna is a very pretty omega, and obviously skilled in the ways of pleasuremaking. And yet... something about it just didn't seem right.

I examine the feeling. It wasn't guilt exactly, but it was something akin to it. A sense that I shouldn't be with Thyrna because she was not my mate.

I don't actually have a mate, of course. Not yet. But for some reason, I have the weirdest feeling that I—

BOOM!

For a moment, my nerves seem to shatter, and my stomach sinks like a stone dropped in water.

The Source.

Something is wrong with the Source.

As an alpha, I can feel the Source's energy at all times, like an invisible sun radiating throughout the Zone, giving life and vitality to all things. Most of the time, I forget it's even there. But just now, something disrupted the Source, and its ever-present energy seems to be suddenly fading. For the first time I can remember, I am truly afraid.

I recover from the initial shock and reach out psychically to Seraph.

"Did you feel that?"

"Yes," my teacher replies. *"There has been a disturbance in the Source."*

I spring to my feet. "We need to return to the Central Ruins immediately!"

"Wait."

For a long moment, Seraph's voice goes silent in my head, and I realize he must be communicating with someone else—most likely Addom, the high chieftain of the Central Tribe.

Seraph comes back. *"The Source is intact. Therefore, the problem must be with the subterranean power supply. I know of an opening to the cave system nearby. Gather your pack brothers, Aleph. We are going underground."*

CHAPTER 6: OPHELIA

A high frequency squeal rouses me out of my slumber. What the hell is that? An alarm?

No... it's just my ears ringing.

My mouth is drier than dry, and it tastes like I just ate a mouthful of dirt. The air around me reeks of smoke, and when I make the mistake of breathing in too much of it, I'm racked with a fit of violent coughing. Every molecule of my body is in pain.

Jesus, this is a hell of a way to wake up.

What's going on?

I open my eyes. All I can see is a darkness so absolute it makes me shiver with fear. Even my small bedroom back in the city isn't this dark. For a panicked second, I think I've been struck blind. Then I remember where I am and what has happened. It does nothing to allay my sense of panic.

I'm in a cave, somewhere beneath the deepest heart of the Quarantine Zone. The smoke and the ringing in my ears are from the bomb.

The final seconds before the explosion flash through my mind like a video set to 10x speed: I heard Connors curse. I glanced past him at the timer on the bomb and saw it counting down from five, four, three seconds. My rational brain told me I was going to die, but my primal animal brain made one last-ditch

attempt at survival. Operating purely on instinct and adrenaline, I spun around and sprinted through the door, moving faster than I've ever moved in my life, faster than I even thought possible. I had made it perhaps twenty feet down the corridor and around a slight corner when the bomb detonated and the wave of overpressure hit me from behind like a city bus driving at full speed, knocking me unconscious.

I should be dead.

But I'm not.

As a matter of fact, I'm in pretty good shape, all things considered. I run a mental scan of my body, moving and flexing my muscles one by one—my arms, my legs, my ankles, my toes. Every inch of me hurts, but nothing seems to be broken. That's incredible. I might even say it's miraculous, if I believed in that sort of thing.

The fact that I'm still in one piece means some of my teammates might be alive and kicking too. After all, those guys are a heck of a lot bigger and more durable than me.

I need to find them, pronto.

I try to call out to them, but the voice that leaves my throat is weak and raspy, and it sends me into another fit of coughing. Shit.

A flashlight would be helpful right about now, but I don't have one. In fact, I don't have any equipment at all, aside from my clothes. That was Dr. Toth's idea. Yet another way to make me fully dependent on the soldiers.

That makes me think about my pills, and what will happen to me without them. The adrenaline rush of thinking my life was about to end, followed by getting knocked unconscious, seems to have temporarily quelled my bad urges. But for how long?

I have to find Connors.

I give myself a few seconds until I feel strong enough to move, then I start to crawl on my hands and knees, patting the cavern floor in front of me. I don't know what I'm searching for exactly. I can't even tell what direction I'm facing. But I have to do something. I can't just sit here waiting for one of my fits to take over. Or worse, for a bunch of mutants to find me.

My fingers touch something soft, and I recoil in surprise.

Was that... *skin*?

I take a steadying breath and touch it again. Yup, it's skin. And based on the shape, it feels like a muscular human forearm.

But it's cool to the touch. Too cool.

I shudder.

After taking a second to gain my composure, I slide my fingers along the forearm to the wrist, then the hand. It's covered in a glove, and the fingers are clenched tightly around a hard object. A little more blind searching reveals that it's a rifle, and my heart lifts, but only a little. Rigor mortis has already set in, and it quickly becomes apparent that I'm not going to be able to pry those big, dead fingers off the handle of the gun.

No weapon for me.

Still, the situation isn't completely hopeless. I remember that the soldiers' rifles were all equipped with flashlights, and I search along the length of the gun until I find the one mounted underneath the barrel of this particular weapon. With a bit of work, I'm able to unfasten the light and switch it on. The lens is cracked, and the beam is weak, but it works.

Okay. I'm alive. And I have a flashlight.

It's a start.

Carefully, I stand up and sweep the beam around to examine my surroundings. The tunnel in front of me obviously collapsed in the explosion, and now it is completely blocked by a wall of rubble. I'm fairly certain that's the direction of the battery room.

I shine the beam toward the floor and see the arm I touched a few moments ago. The rest of the body is hidden under the pile of fallen stones. My stomach churns, and the sour taste of bile tinges my mouth.

It's starting to sink in that I'm all alone now. I'm the sole survivor of this screwed up mission. All the other members of my team have either been blown to bits or crushed by the collapsing cave.

I feel sorry for them. Nobody deserves that. Not even Bryce, that sick asshole.

But how did this happen? Why did Connors' bomb explode prematurely? It could have been a simple malfunction, but I

have my doubts. Dr. Toth was the brain behind this mission, and he's not the type of guy who makes mistakes.

But right now, there are more pressing matters to consider. For example, that explosion must have made one hell of a racket. I should probably be expecting company soon.

The question is... who?

According to Toth, destroying the power supply to the Source should have changed the alpha mutants back into regular humans, but there's no way to be sure it worked, or that the change was instantaneous. In a few minutes, I just might find myself face to face with some grateful humans or some very pissed off alphas. That means I have a decision to make: wait here or flee. At the moment, option two sounds more appealing.

I turn my back to the pile of rubble and start walking in the other direction, following the winding tunnel back the way we came in. But after only a few steps, I realize just how bad this is going to suck. I have a long, long trek ahead of me, but no food and no water. Not to mention the fact that my legs feel like someone's been beating on them with a baseball bat. And then there's the flashlight. Yeah, it's working, but for how long? The beam is frail, and it seems like the batteries could crap out at any second. The odds of me surviving are slim.

Still, I have to try.

I turn the flashlight off to conserve the battery, and I head down the tunnel, keeping one hand on the wall as a guide. Every minute or so, I briefly flick the light on, just to make

sure there are no obstacles in front of me, then I turn it off again. I just hope I can conserve the battery long enough to get outside. Walking in the pitch black darkness is creepy, but it's my only shot.

After a few minutes, the smoke begins to dissipate, and I'm able to smell other things. I catch that same scent I noticed on the way in. That disturbing, animalistic odor of alphas.

My pulse quickens—an appropriate response to a dangerous situation.

Unfortunately, it is accompanied by other, less appropriate reactions. Just as before, my nipples pebble with arousal, poking painfully against the skin-tight elastic of my body glove. And that isn't all. Moisture pools inside the crotch of my suit, warm and slippery.

Crap. This is hardly an appropriate time to be getting turned on, especially not by the nasty odor of alpha musk. But I have no choice in the matter. It's the beginning of one of my so-called fits, and without my pills, there's nothing I can do to stop it.

I quicken my pace, but I know it's useless. There's no way I'll make it out of this cave before my urges become too strong to resist.

Sooner or later, I'm going to have to deal with this.

Back at the facility, I have my own private room stocked with toys designed to help me relieve my urges. I don't know where they all came from. Maybe Dr. Toth designed them, or maybe

he purchased them somewhere in the city. I wouldn't know, since I never left the facility before this mission. Some of those toys are shaped like erect penises, and they come in a wide array of sizes, shapes, and textures. Others are specially designed to stimulate my clitoris with suction and vibration. There are even some toys intended specifically for anal play, which is often something I crave during my fits too.

Unfortunately, right now, that toy collection is over a hundred miles away. All I have at the moment are my own fingers. I'm not looking forward to taking care of my business in this dark and dirty cave, but pretty soon I'll have no other options.

Maybe I should go ahead and get it over with now, while the urges are still manageable.

Before I have a chance to make a decision about that, a noise comes from somewhere behind me. The grinding of heavy stones. It almost sounds like that pile of rubble shifted, as if something were digging through from the other side.

I stand motionless, listening.

Nothing.

Of course. All my teammates are dead. There's no way any of them could have survived. Absolutely no way. It was probably just my freaked out imagination playing tricks on me. Or maybe the rubble just shifted on its own. Yeah, that's probably what it was.

I start to walk again, a little faster now.

I only make it a few steps before I hear it again, and this time there is no question. It is definitely the sound of rubble moving. And if I still have any lingering doubts, they are swept away a moment later as a bestial howl echoes through the tunnel. It is a sound borne of pure pain and rage, and it raises goosebumps all over my skin like a rash.

Something is back there.

Something not human.

I turn the flashlight on, and I keep it on as I start to run down the tunnel at a dead sprint. Pain shoots through my battered legs, but I keep going, driven forward by raw fear and adrenaline.

That inhuman howl fills the tunnel a second time. It's already getting closer.

My heart hammers in my chest as I charge forward down the corridor. Walls of wet stone rush past me in the see-sawing beam of the flashlight.

Whatever is behind me, it's gaining fast. Already, I can hear it grunting as it rapidly closes the distance between us.

For the second time today, I'm hit with the realization I'm going to die. Last time I got lucky. That's not going to happen again.

My foot slips on the smooth, wet floor of the cave, and I tumble to the ground. The flashlight bounces from my hand and goes out. The darkness folds in around me.

A sickly, goatish smell floods the dark air, and I gag.

It smells like an alpha, but... *wrong*.

My hand scrabbles across the floor of the cave, searching for the dropped flashlight. I find it and flip it on, directing the beam back in the direction of my pursuer. What I see standing in the darkness makes me cry out in shock. It's a familiar face, but it has been twisted in such a horrific fashion, it takes a moment for the recognition to settle in.

“Bryce?”

CHAPTER 7: OPHELIA

The dim beam of the flashlight illuminates Bryce's mangled features from below, casting ghastly shadows upward across his face. The left side is all lumpy, like the face of a wax dummy that has melted. Is that from the explosion? It should be all ripped and bloody, but it looks completely healed, albeit grotesquely. His uniform hangs from his body in scorched tatters, exposing his powerful physique, which somehow appears to be even bigger than before. Just like his face, the left side of his body is twisted and gnarled.

He takes a step toward me, and that awful goatish stench grows stronger. God, it's coming from him. But that means...

"You're an alpha?" I gasp.

Bryce sneers, exposing a pair of too-sharp canines. "Yeah, it looks that way, doesn't it, freak?"

"How?"

"What do you mean, how?" he snarls. "This is your fault! We were relying on you to protect us from the Zone contamination. But you ran away."

"But the bomb. It should have shut down the Source."

"Well, it obviously didn't work, now did it?"

"What about the others?"

"Dead," he growls. "All dead. I guess I would be too, if I hadn't mutated at the last second. So in a way, you actually

saved my life.” He flashes a grin that makes my skin crawl. “I guess I’ll have to think of some way to repay you, freak.”

He takes a step toward me, and I scoot away from him along the floor of the tunnel.

“You know, it’s not so bad being an alpha,” he goes on. “Aside from the excruciating pain, that is. Other than that, it’s pretty badass. All my senses are turned up to the max. I can hear for miles. I can see in the dark. And I can smell...”

His nostrils flare as he draws a deep inhalation, and his eyes gleam wickedly.

“...I can smell how horny you are, freak.”

“No...”

Bryce is right, of course. My body is still turned on, shamefully so, but it has absolutely nothing to do with him. It’s all because of those other alpha pheromones I smelled. His scent is completely different from that. It’s overpowering and repulsive. Not to mention his appearance. Or his personality.

“Yes,” he hisses. “Don’t try to hide it, freak. You’re horny. And guess what? So am I!”

He tosses back his scarred head and unleashes another one of those blood curdling howls. At this proximity, the sound is deafening.

I start to rise, but Bryce pounces on me, pinning me to the ground with his body. His weight is immense, and the stench coming from his skin is so powerful it brings a bitter taste of

bile into my throat. I try to wriggle away from him, but it's a futile effort. He's too damn strong.

"Stop struggling," he snaps. "I know you *want* this."

"No!"

"Your mouth is saying no, but your body is telling another story."

Bryce grabs my left breast and squeezes it roughly through my uniform, making me cry out in pain. Then he clutches a fistful of fabric and yanks, tearing a hole that exposes my naked breast to the warm air of the cave.

"See?" he says. "Just look how hard that nipple is. Let's take a look at the other one."

He repeats his attack, tearing a second hole on the right side so that both of my breasts are exposed. I shout for him to stop, but he ignores me.

"Yep. That one is hard too. You're ready, freak—ready to get fucked alpha style."

"No!" I scream again. "Bryce, stop! I don't want this!"

"Yes you do! Your cunt is wet. I can smell it."

He grabs the crotch of my uniform and pulls a third time, rending a third hole in the fabric and exposing my sex and all of the shameful wetness there. There is so much fluid coming out of me I can actually feel it spilling down my butt and ponding on the ground beneath me.

But it's not for Bryce. My wetness, my hard nipples, none of that is for him. I wish it would stop. The thought of getting raped by this man—no, this *creature*—is horrible enough. But knowing that my body will be aroused when it happens makes it even worse. Tears of self-disgust fill my eyes and flow down my temples.

Bryce just chuckles above me.

“I bet you wish you'd been nicer to me before,” he says. “Now you're gonna pay, freak. You ain't gonna enjoy this, but I sure as hell am.”

This time, he reaches between his own legs and tears his own clothing, ripping away the tattered fabric that has thus far kept his male anatomy concealed. The ugly, gnarled thing that springs into view makes me scream in horror and revulsion. Bryce mistakes the sound for a cry of excitement.

“Yeah, you like that, don't you, freak? You can't wait for me to shove it inside you. You really are a dirty little freak.”

He keeps me trapped with a hand on my throat. I desperately try to clamp my legs shut against him, but he roughly pushes them open with his knees.

“Keep yourself spread for me,” he growls, “Or I'll fucking hurt you even worse than I'm already going to.”

“Bryce, please don't do this,” I beg, hating how helpless my voice sounds.

“Shut up.”

With his free hand, he grips his misshapen member and angles it down, aligning it with my entrance. I feel his tip pressing against my folds, which are slick with my deplorable arousal. It's not for him. Oh God, it's not for him.

"Get ready," he slurs. "Get ready for this alpha cock."

Squeezing my tear-filled eyes shut, I pray this will all be over with quickly, and I brace myself for the unwelcome penetration I know is about to come.

Only it doesn't come.

The events that follow happen so quickly, I'm not even fully able to process them at first. The pressure of Bryce's hand disappears from my throat, and the stench of his body fades, replaced by a different alpha scent, doubly strong but not at all disgusting. The tunnel erupts in a frenzy of vicious snarls, screams of pain, and something that sounds like splintering wood.

Then another smell is added to the mix. The warm, coppery aroma of freshly spilled blood. The odor is so strong, I can taste it in the back of my throat.

As quickly as it started, the chaos stops, and the echoes fade down the length of the cave.

The tunnel grows deathly silent.

My heart is slamming against my ribs. I reach for the flashlight lying next to me on the floor. It's still turned on. I aim it in the direction the sounds came from. The dim beam flickers and abruptly goes out, but before it does, I catch a

glimpse of what happened. A few feet away, Bryce's shattered body lies motionless on the ground, oozing red and bristling with broken bones. Above him stand a pair of identical alphas—there is no question that's what they are—dressed only in loincloths, their sinuous muscles spattered with blood. The image remains seared onto my retinas, even after the flashlight goes out and the cave goes black.

Though it seems impossible, things have just gotten even worse. Now I'm alone in the dark with not one but two killer alphas.

They begin to growl.

CHAPTER 8: ROMULUS & REMUS

Being the fastest among our pack brethren, we arrived at the scene of trouble first, way ahead of the others. We caught the scent of the omega long before we reached her, and her pheromones sent us into a heightened state. Then we heard her troubled wails, and it threw us into a frenzy. When we found her pinned beneath that strange, twisted alpha, we did not hesitate to react. We attacked the unknown male and made short work of him. He would not have been a match for even one of us. Against both of us, he never stood a chance.

Now the violence is over, and we stand in the darkness, panting and drenched in our enemy's gore. The air is thick with the scent of blood and sweat and omega slick.

The gravity of the situation finally settles in.

We have killed an alpha.

I know what my brother is thinking, just as he knows what I am thinking. We are twins, and our minds are so close they are almost one. Nevertheless, we find it helpful to speak, using the secret language we developed as pups. To others, it sounds like we are just growling, but in fact, it is a complex language using changes in pitch and volume to convey meaning.

“He was not an alpha of the Central Ruins,” Romulus growls.

“Not a Farlander either,” Remus replies. “His scent is all wrong.”

In fact, the dead alpha smells disgusting, diseased.

Romulus stoops and picks up a shred of the dead alpha’s clothing, rolling the strange fabric between forefinger and thumb.

“He was an Outsider. From beyond the wall.”

“Weird.”

“Very weird.”

“What are Outsiders doing here, so close to the center of the Zone?”

“I don’t know, brother. But it must have something to do with the problem with the Source.”

The Source is the mystical field of energy that gives all the alphas and omegas of the Zone life. We can sense its energy all the time, permeating the air, invigorating the very fabric of our bodies. But a few minutes ago, something happened. The Source-feeling wavered and became weak. That’s when Seraph sent us down into this cave system to investigate. Seraph and the rest of our pack are following in our wake, but they are still somewhere far behind us in the tunnels.

“Hm, maybe we shouldn’t have killed him,” Remus growls.

“Couldn’t help it,” replies Romulus. “It was the omega’s scent. It drove me crazy.”

“I know. Me too, brother. Me too.”

It's strange. We've both smelled omegas before, but never like this one. As soon as we caught a whiff of her, we both felt an overwhelming urge to protect her at all costs. When we came upon that twisted Outsider alpha attempting to rape her, the bastard's fate was sealed. It's true, we probably shouldn't have killed him, but we don't regret it very much.

Nearby, the omega is stirring. We can hear her choked breathing and the rapid beating of her heart against her ribs.

The poor thing is terrified.

Her scent fills the air around us, and it sends the blood rushing into our cocks, straining against the leather of our loincloths. We dare not inhale too deeply, for fear it would make us lose control completely.

"She smells... *different*, brother."

"Yes, different. But good."

"Delicious, even."

The omega whimpers. She sways to her feet and tries to run, but she is blind in this darkness, and she doesn't make it two steps before her toe catches on a jut of stone and she tumbles toward the floor.

In wordless tandem, we dart forward and catch her before she hits the ground, Romulus on the right of her, Remus on the left. The omega gasps at our touch, and her tiny body shudders in our grasps. We speak to her using normal language to let her know she has nothing to fear from us.

"Don't be afraid, little one," Romulus says.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Remus adds.

“You’re not?” asks the omega, her voice trembling.

“No. But you must be more careful, lest you hurt *yourself*.”

Now, what is your name?”

The omega hesitates a moment before answering.

“O-Ophelia.”

Her accent is strange. It doesn’t sound like the alphas and omegas of the Zone. And her body is clothed in a strange, artificial material that clings tightly to her ample curves.

So, she is an Outsider too. An Outsider omega. Such a thing is not unheard of. As a matter of fact, within our own pack, three of the alphas are the children of Outsiders. Our own mother, Embla, was born here in the Zone. But Boreg’s, Marr’s, and Aleph’s mothers all came from the Outside, from the place beyond the wall where the sky is made of smoke and the people live on top of each other like termites in mountains of metal.

We wonder if Ophelia is a mother.

We wonder if she has been claimed.

The Outsider alpha was trying to breed her, but we do not think he was her mate. She does not seem very upset that he is dead. If only there were some light in this cave, we could check her throat to see if she has been marked.

“Who are you?” Ophelia stammers.

“I am Romulus.”

“And I am Remus.”

“We are brothers.”

“Twins, actually.”

Source, we wish there was some light. We would love to look at this omega more carefully, study her details, the shape of her body, the color of her eyes. We only caught the merest glimpse of her before her light machine stopped working. Long, white hair and round, ripe breasts exposed by her damaged garment.

Her sex is exposed too, and the scent of her slick surrounds us like a cloud of femininity.

Her body spasms in our arms, and she groans as if in pain.

Something is wrong with her.

“Are you in pain, little omega?” we both ask. The question comes out as a double purr. We didn’t mean to do that. It just happened. But it’s good, because it seems to set Ophelia at ease a little.

“Yes,” she answers. “My whole body hurts.”

Maybe we could fix that. Maybe we could make her stop hurting. Maybe we could even make her feel good. We could knot her from both sides, make her howl with pleasure. Like a reflex, our purring suddenly lowers, rolling from deep within our chests. Ophelia’s legs fall open, and even more of her heat-scent fills the air. Behind our loincloths, our hard cocks throb painfully. There is an overwhelming desire to sniff her. To

press our faces between her spread legs and inhale her female fragrance straight from its point of origin.

“Stop.”

It was not Romulus who spoke, nor was it Remus. Nor was it the strange little Outsider omega named Ophelia.

It was Seraph, our teacher.

His cold, monotone voice echoes inside our skulls. *“No sniffing, you two. I need you both to stay focused. There could still be other Outsiders lurking in the area.”*

“Yes, Seraph,” we both answer, using growlspeak. Seraph understands our secret language too, because Seraph understands everything.

“The two of you are fast. That is good. You have done well. Your training has paid off. I am with your pack brethren, and we are coming to meet you, but we are still far behind. In the meantime, I have a task for you. Romulus, I want you to go down the tunnel as far as you can and let me know what you find. Remus, you stay with the omega and protect her.” After a moment, he adds, *“And remember, no sniffing.”*

Seraph is the boss, so we do as he commands. Romulus sets off down the tunnel while Remus waits in silence with Ophelia, struggling to keep himself from burying his nose between her legs.

After a few minutes, Romulus returns.

“The tunnel is collapsed,” he says using growlspeak. “There was another dead Outsider. Or part of him, anyway. I could

smell others, maybe four or five, but they must have all been buried under the fallen stones.”

“That place must be directly under the Source,” Remus says.

“Yes,” says Seraph. *“I fear the Outsiders may have done something to damage the power supply of the Source.”*

Damage the power supply?

To the Source?

Does that mean Ophelia is our enemy? We hope not. We were already starting to like her.

“I don’t know if she is our enemy,” Seraph says, reading our thoughts. *“And I do not wish to operate on assumptions. Her mind is invisible to me. I cannot read her. You must bring her to me so that I can question her.”*

We both growl in agreement.

We help Ophelia to her feet, and holding her between us, we lead her down the dark tunnel. She is uncertain at first, but we assure her that we will keep her safe.

“How do you know where you’re going?” she asks. “Can you see in the dark?”

“Not exactly.”

“But we have other senses.”

She shifts her hands to cover her exposed breasts and sex. We do not bother to tell her it is pointless. Her hands do nothing to conceal the intense and enticing aroma of her body, which

seems to be growing stronger by the minute. It's difficult to keep our urges in check, but we manage.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks.

"Back to our pack."

"Your pack?"

"Yes. Seraph wishes to speak with you."

"Seraph? Who is Seraph?"

"He is our leader."

"And our teacher."

"So he's an alpha?" Ophelia asks.

"Not exactly."

Ophelia trembles. "O-okay. Then what is he?"

"That's a good question."

"A very good question."

"Difficult to answer."

"Better if you just see for yourself."

CHAPTER 9: OPHELIA

I can't believe it.

I am in the presence of alphas—*real* alphas—and somehow I am still alive.

Obviously, the mission was not a success. Destroying the power supply to the Source was supposed to remove the Zone contamination and change the alpha mutants back into ordinary humans. But these two guys leading me through the darkness clearly are not ordinary.

I wonder what went wrong?

It's possible Connors' bomb didn't destroy the batteries, but that seems unlikely, considering how much damage the explosion did to the surrounding cave. It's also possible the Source has a backup power supply. Or maybe it will just take a while for the alphas to change back into normal humans. For the time being, there's no way to be sure.

Maybe this Seraph person will have some answers.

I'm curious about Seraph, but I choose not to ask any questions, for fear I might annoy the two alphas leading me through the darkness. They are terrifying, but I don't think they intend to harm me. At least they haven't done so yet. They keep growling at each other, but I don't think that's a sign of aggression. It almost seems like they're communicating with each other.

After a few minutes, my fear gives way to fascination. These alphas truly are amazing creatures. Even though it is pitch black down here, they are able to navigate the cave tunnels flawlessly. Not once do they make a misstep or bump into one of the walls, and whenever there is a ledge or obstacle, they warn me and help me step over it. It's as if they have some kind of sixth sense or something.

When Dr. Toth talked about shutting down the Source, he made it sound as though we would be curing the alphas of a disease. But if you ask me, Romulus and Remus' abilities seem more like superpowers than symptoms. And to say their bodies appear healthy would be an understatement. I only got a brief glimpse of them earlier, but the image is still seared into my mind's eye. They looked like a pair of gods, tall and powerfully muscled in a way no ordinary human male could ever hope to be.

Shit, I need to stop thinking like that. Without my medication, my shameful urges are continuing to grow, and thinking about my saviors' bodies isn't helping matters any.

But the real problem is their odor.

There's no escaping it.

It doesn't smell *bad* exactly, just strong and animalistic. As we walk through the darkness together, I have to carefully regulate my breathing so I don't pull too much of that supremely masculine scent into my lungs. Even the tiniest whiff is enough to make my pulse quicken with arousal. I'm grateful for the inky blackness of the cave. It hides the aching

stiffness of my nipples, which are exposed by the holes Bryce tore in my body glove. I just hope the twins can't smell the wetness seeping from the place between my legs, which is also exposed by a tear in my uniform.

Suddenly, something clenches deep within my core, a shooting pain that doubles me over and makes me gasp.

I feel myself losing my balance, and my hands reflexively dart out to brace myself against the alphas' hard bodies for support. But my fingers find a different, unexpected hardness.

Oh...

Oh, *God*.

My hands have landed on the fronts of both alphas' loincloths, and I can feel their male anatomy, hard and hot beneath the primitive animal-skin coverings. The alphas are aroused. *Very* aroused. And impossibly big.

"Ophelia?"

They speak my name in perfect unison, a double baritone that rumbles straight into my deepest epicenter. I gasp again, and their alpha scent fills my lungs, flooding my system like a narcotic. I tremble as slippery secretions spill from the apex between my legs and trickle down my inner thighs like warm honey.

"Romulus," I whisper. "Remus."

Four strong arms lift me upright, and I find myself sandwiched between two hard alpha bodies. They purr again, from deep within their broad chests, and the sound vibrates all through

me, seemingly rearranging my entire body chemistry in the process. All I can think about is how good it would feel to have them inside me, filling me, stretching me, fucking me...

Breeding me.

This is nothing like what happened with Bryce a few minutes ago. I want this. I want *them*. My needy body cries out for relief from this agony, and my skin screams for their masculine touch.

The twins oblige.

Their hands rove over me—rough hands, scarred and callused by a primal way of life. Their fingers explore the terrain of my body, and with each new discovery, we all three moan with animalistic pleasure.

God, this is wrong. So very, very wrong.

These men, these *alphas*, are total strangers, but I want them to dominate me, use me, break me.

At first, their hands glide over the parts of me that are still covered by my body glove, but soon they find the places where Bryce tore holes in the fabric. They fondle my bare breasts and pinch my erect nipples.

Romulus is in front of me, and Remus is behind. I'm not sure how I know that, I just do. Remus' fingers slide over my bottom and trace the cleft of my ass. Meanwhile, Romulus' fingers rub my pubic hair and move along my outer folds. Just a little deeper, and they will both be touching my two most private and sensitive places. I tense in anticipation.

“Stop!”

It’s not my voice that yells that word, but a strange, artificial monotone that echoes through the tunnel like thunder. With a surprised gasp, I turn my face in the direction of the sound, and I see a faint blue glow moving toward us around a curve in the tunnel.

We are no longer alone.

Someone is coming.

This realization startles me out of my lustful state. It seems to have the same effect on the twins as they both remove their hands from my naked places. Shame surges over me, and I quickly try to cover up the parts of me that are exposed by the rips in my uniform.

The blue light builds in intensity as it draws nearer. It’s not a flashlight. It’s too soft for that, too spectral, like the glow of an approaching spirit.

“Who is that?” I ask. But I already know the answer before the twins say it.

“That is Seraph.”

I fight my body’s natural urge to flee in terror. It’s not like it would do any good. Behind us, the tunnel disappears into total darkness, and I already know it terminates in a dead end. Not that the twins would even let me get that far.

All I can do is stand and wait in stunned silence.

Nothing could prepare me for the being that comes striding around the curve of the tunnel. I'm not sure what I was expecting Seraph to look like, but it certainly wasn't *this*.

He is totally naked except for a tapered, metallic cod piece that covers his genitals. The size and bulging shape of that minimalist garment makes it clear he is masculine, and well endowed too. He is tall, and his naked body is composed of a powerful musculature that is so deeply delineated, it almost looks like he doesn't have skin. But he does. It's a little hard to tell in this lighting, but his skin appears to be pale gray, just like the descriptions of betas. However, betas are supposed to be sickly and disoriented, and Seraph is neither of those things. He is physically formidable, and the purposeful way he walks gives off an aura of pure power and confidence.

But the most unusual thing about Seraph is not his body.

It's his head—it isn't real.

It looks as if someone chopped his real head off at the very base of the neck and replaced it with a holographic projector embedded into the flesh of his shoulders and upper chest. Above this device floats the phantom image of a hairless human head, which glows with a ghostly blue light.

My already dangerously elevated heart rate spikes at the sight of this strange apparition. The urge to flee returns, and this time I don't have enough self control to resist it. I start to backpedal away, but the twins instantly catch me by both arms and hold me firmly in place. They purr again, with a different

timbre than before, and this time the noise has a calming effect on me.

Seraph strides right up to me until his body is mere inches from mine. He looks me up and down in a businesslike fashion before fixing his holographic gaze on my eyes.

“Your name is Ophelia,” he says in a robotic voice.

A thrill of surprise goes spiraling through me. How on earth does Seraph know my name? I open my mouth to ask him, but my attention is instantly drawn away by something over his shoulder.

Apparently Seraph is not the only person I’ll be meeting today. Three more massive alphas emerge from the darkness and step into the circle of light provided by Seraph’s holographic head. A second later, their combined scent hits me, and I let out an involuntary whimper of fear and unwelcome desire.

Oh God, this is bad.

This is really, really bad...

CHAPTER 10: OPHELIA

For a few seconds, the shock of encountering these new alphas leaves me frozen, and I can merely watch in stunned silence as they move into position alongside Seraph, their masculine features limned in the pale glow of their leader's head. Despite their incredible size, they move with cat-like silence, and the only sounds I can hear are the rush of blood in my ears and the echoes of water dripping somewhere in the subterranean darkness.

Then I notice that their eyes are directed toward those places where my skin is exposed by the tears in my clothing, and I flush with embarrassment. I gasp and quickly cover myself to the best of my ability, with my left hand covering my vagina and my right arm blocking my nipples.

This seems to amuse the alphas. Seraph remains indifferent.

"I should introduce you to my companions," he says.

"Obviously, you have already met the twins, Romulus and Remus."

This garners a snicker from one of the new alphas, an intense looking brute with blond hair and piercing eyes. "I'd say that's an understatement, boss. Another minute, and they would've had her double-knotted."

Knotted? I don't understand that comment, but it seems to offend the twins for some reason. They tense and snarl in response.

“Quiet,” Seraph commands, “Now is not the time for bickering.” He motions toward the blond alpha who just spoke. “This is Marr.”

I take a moment to study this new alpha. Like the others, he is dressed in a primitive loincloth that leaves all but the most private parts of his body exposed. His muscles look like they could be carved from stone, and his skin is covered all over with brutal scars. I raise my eyes to his face, but his stare is too intense, and I quickly look away.

“Look at her clothing,” Marr growls. “She’s an Outsider. What the hell is one of her kind doing this deep in the Zone?”

A chill feathers its way up my spine.

I’m in trouble. Marr clearly doesn’t like me, and when he finds out what I’ve done, he’s going to like me even less.

“Patience, Marr,” Seraph says. “Patience. We shall interrogate the female in good time. But first we must finish the introductions.”

“Why?” Marr barks. “She doesn’t need to know who we are. She’s an Outsider. We should just ki—”

“*Marr!*”

The blond alpha falls silent at the sound of Seraph’s voice. After a moment, the cybernetic being goes on, gesturing to another one of the alphas.

“This is Boreg.”

Boreg is the biggest of the group. He's so big, in fact, that he has to stoop just to keep from scraping his head on the ceiling of the tunnel. His thick, red beard gives his face a fearsome appearance, but his blue eyes are gentle and soft. He smiles and gives me a friendly nod of his massive head.

Seraph gestures toward the last remaining alpha.

“And this is Aleph.”

He is the most unusual of all the alphas I've met so far. In fact, he's almost as unusual as Seraph himself. His skin and hair are as pale as marble, and his eyes shine like white gold. Those eyes catch and hold mine with a magnetic attraction, and I find it impossible to look away. My stomach seems to perform a backflip inside me, and my knees wobble precariously.

I'm pretty sure Marr hates me and Boreg likes me, but when it comes to Aleph, I can't tell where I stand.

There is an awkward silence as the guys stare at me expectantly. Finally, I realize they're waiting for me to introduce myself.

“My name's Ophelia,” I say, my voice trembling. I direct my attention to Seraph again. “But you already knew my name. How?”

“That is a topic for later. For the time being, it is your turn to answer some questions. I want to know what you are doing here.”

My gut clenches with panic.

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? I can't tell them about the mission, but at the same time my mind is too foggy to come up with a believable lie. My bad urges are rising ever higher, making it difficult to think clearly.

"This is wolfshit," the one named Marr snarls. "What difference does it make why she's here? She's an Outsider. That means she's obviously up to no good."

Seraph silences him with a cold look.

"Marr, do I need to remind you that your own mother was an Outsider once?"

A jolt of surprise zaps through me. Could that really be true? An alpha with a human mother from beyond the Quarantine Wall? I know that humans have ventured into the Zone before me, and I know that many of those missions have ended disastrously, but I've never heard of any human females being captured by the alphas, let alone bred by them. The thought sends another shiver wriggling up my spine.

"That's different," Marr grumbles. "That was a long time ago. She's as much a part of the Zone as anyone."

"True. But that was not always the case. And just think, what if your fathers had treated her the way you are suggesting we treat Ophelia? Why, you wouldn't even exist."

Marr goes quiet and glowers at me.

"Besides," Seraph goes on, "this female clearly played a role in the recent disturbance of the Source. We need to interrogate her to find out exactly what has happened."

Not good.

They want to keep me alive for questioning, but once they've gotten the truth out of me, that opinion will probably change.

"Can't you just read her thoughts?" the one named Aleph asks. His voice is deep and resonant, like a musical instrument. It's such a beautiful sound, it takes a second for the actual meaning of his words to sink in.

Read my thoughts? Is that really possible?

"No," Seraph answers. "I've already tried, but there is something blocking me from entering her mind."

I notice the big one named Boreg watching me intently. He leans over and speaks to Seraph in a low voice, but I'm still able to hear what he says.

"Boss, there's blood on her clothing."

"I think the blood isn't hers," Romulus chimes in. "When Remus and I found her, she was getting attacked by an Outsider alpha. We took care of him. That's probably what the blood is from."

"Hm, possibly," Boreg says. "But it would be best to check her, just to be sure."

I don't like the way they're talking about me like I'm not even here, but I keep my mouth shut. I don't want to anger these volatile alphas.

Seraph thinks for a moment. "Boreg is right. We had better examine her to make sure she will not expire before we have a

chance to question her.” Then to me, he says matter-of-factly, “Remove your clothing, Ophelia.”

Panic surges through me. Instinctively, I try to back away, but the twins’ bodies bar my escape.

“What?” I gasp.

“Boreg is an experienced healer,” Seraph explains. “His skill surpasses that of most Outsider physicians. However, he can only examine you properly if you are naked.”

“Naked?”

Boreg nods gently. “I need to make sure you don’t have any life-threatening wounds.”

“I can assure you I don’t,” I stammer. “I’m just a little dinged up, that’s all. Nothing serious.”

“Boreg will be the judge of that,” Seraph says. “Now, would you like to remove your clothing yourself, or shall I have one of the alphas do it for you?”

I hesitate, unsure of what to do. The problem isn’t so much that I’m embarrassed about showing my naked body to these alphas. While I’m hardly an exhibitionist, I’m also no stranger to having my body examined by people I barely know. It happened all the time back at the facility where I was raised. But the beings encircling me now are not doctors or scientists. They are alphas. Savage beasts who kill without remorse. Animals with hungry eyes.

The real problem, however, is my urges, which are becoming harder to restrain with each passing second. I almost lost

control a few minutes ago with Romulus and Remus, and I fear the same thing will happen once my clothes are stripped off and the alphas are exploring me with their gaze and their touch.

But what other choice do I have? I'm outnumbered six to one. Seraph and his alphas are calling the shots now. If I want to get out of this cave, my only option is to comply with their demands.

Still, the thought of exposing myself to these males gives me pause.

My hesitation goes on a little too long, and Seraph becomes impatient. He gestures to the alpha named Marr, the scariest of the bunch, and the savage warrior advances with a vengeful gleam in his eyes.

"Wait!" I cry. "Wait... I'll do it myself."

Marr stops and looks toward Seraph for direction. The cyborg gestures for him to wait. The alpha faces me again and snarls. "Hurry up then, Outsider. This is your last chance."

The threatening tone of his voice sets my heart racing, and I can tell he means business. I wish I could take a deep breath to steady my nerves, but that would only fill my lungs with even more of that intoxicating alpha scent, and I don't want that to happen. I'm already too close to losing control as it is.

There's nothing left to do but get it over with.

Slowly, I begin to undress.

CHAPTER 11: BOREG

I stare like a slack-jawed fool as the Outsider female strips out of her clothes. First, she shucks off her boots and sets them on the ground beside her. Then, after a final moment of hesitation, she unzips her black one piece garment and slithers out of it like a serpent shedding its skin. The strange, artificial fabric settles around her feet in a dark puddle as she stands before us, naked and radiant in the pale glow provided by Seraph's face.

Source, she's beautiful.

The most beautiful female I've ever seen.

My blood speeds at the sight of her, and my cock swells with arousal, straining against the leather pouch of my loincloth. I've never had much interest in females before. I've always preferred exploring the wilderness and learning all the secrets it has to offer. But Ophelia is different. Her feminine beauty is impossible to ignore, and I feel an undeniable urge to study her body with the same attention I have devoted to studying the forests and fields of the Zone. My gaze lingers over her large and luscious breasts before dropping to the triangle of pale fur at the joining of her thighs.

"Boreg?"

Seraph's voice jolts me out of my trance. I try to play it off, but I know my pack brethren see right through me.

I clear my throat and move closer to Ophelia. She shudders briefly at my approach, but she stands her ground. She is courageous, and I admire that trait. It is a good trait for a mate and a mother to have.

But why am I thinking like that?

As soon as I enter Ophelia's space, I am confronted by the fragrance of her body. There is no mistaking her scent. She's an omega.

Outsider omegas are very rare. In fact, there are only four others I can think of, and one of them is my own mother. This can't be a mere coincidence, can it?

Still, I must not allow myself to feel a connection to Ophelia. As Seraph mentioned, something is wrong with the Source. I can sense it. And we have to assume Ophelia had something to do with that.

I must remain cool and detached.

"I'm going to examine you," I say as calmly as possible.

"First, I'm going to check your body for wounds."

Ophelia looks up at me and nods, jostling the lively mane of pale locks that surround her head. For a moment, all I can think about is clutching a big fistful of that silken hair and claiming her mouth right here in front of everybody.

Cool and detached, I remind myself. Cool and fucking detached.

I circle her, carefully perusing every inch of her supple flesh. She has numerous bruises, but I see no cuts or scrapes on her.

That's good. We don't have to worry about infection.

"Huh, I guess you were right," I say to Romulus. "The blood must have been from her attacker."

"Told you," Romulus scoffs.

Aleph smirks. "Boreg just wanted an excuse to get her out of her clothes."

I start to say that isn't true, but I hold my tongue. There's no point in arguing with Aleph right now. I need to focus on the task at hand. Besides, even though Ophelia isn't bleeding, she has clearly been through an ordeal.

"Now I'm going to check your vital signs," I tell her.

I raise my hand to Ophelia's throat, and she trembles. She's afraid of me, which is understandable, but I have no intentions of harming her. After a moment, her trembling stills, and she lets me place two fingertips on the big vein at the side of her neck. I feel her blood throbbing inside her, healthy and strong. Her heart rhythm is elevated, but that isn't surprising, considering the situation she's in. Poor thing must be terrified.

I feel a sudden urge to protect her, but I quickly rein it in.

"Now I need to *listen*," I tell her.

Again she nods.

I bring my head down to the level of her chest—she is so tiny, I practically have to kneel in order to do so—and I press one ear to her breastbone. I'm trying to listen to her heart and her breathing, but it's difficult to concentrate with one of her large,

soft breasts right in my face. Her skin is so soft, and it smells delicious. Plus her nipples are so pink and erect, just begging to be sucked. It's all I can do to keep from drooling all over her.

Must. Stay. Focused.

"Take a deep breath for me," I command her.

Her chest swells as she inhales, and I listen carefully to the inner workings of her body. I sense some tightness in the muscles around her ribs, but everything sounds all right. Nothing seems to be broken or punctured. I stand up again and gaze down at her pretty face.

"Does anything hurt inside?" I ask her.

A look of terror passes briefly across her features, and her eyes flick downward for half a second before meeting mine again.

"No."

I can tell she's lying. Something *is* hurting her inside, but she doesn't want to tell me about it. I wonder why? Perhaps it's like the way some animals will try to conceal an injury so predators won't view them as easy prey. I could press the issue, but I decide not to. Better to try and earn her trust first.

"What about your head?" I ask.

Again, her face takes on a nervous look, but this time she nods. "I, um... I fell. And I hit my head. I think I got knocked out for a couple of minutes."

I wonder how that happened. Maybe she tripped in the darkness? Or maybe something else happened. Either way, a knock to the head is serious. Luckily, my mother taught me a method for checking if someone has a concussion.

I am carrying a small pack of supplies over my shoulder. I set it on the floor and rifle through its contents. Mostly it contains pouches of powdered medicine and jars of ointments, but right now I'm searching for something different. After a moment, I find what I'm looking for—a little wooden stick, not much bigger than a splinter, with a reddish coating on one end.

When Ophelia sees it, her eyes widen with surprise.

“You have matches?” she asks.

I grin. “Yeah. I came up with the recipe myself.”

“You mean you actually *made* them?”

“Yeah,” I answer, trying not to sound too proud. “A few months ago, I found some old matches in a shelter in the woods. They were left over from before the Great Change. I think you Outsiders call it the Cataclysm. I studied the matches and figured out how to make my own using natural substances.”

“Wow, that's amazing,” Ophelia says.

Hopefully my beard hides the blush that fills my cheeks.

I strike the match on a dry spot on the stone wall. It flares to life with a hiss and a scent of sulfur before settling down to a gentle flame.

“What are you doing?” Ophelia asks.

“I need to check your eyes.”

“My eyes? But I can see just fine.”

“Yeah, but I want to test your pupils’ response to light. They should contract quickly. If not, it’s a sign you might have a concussion. Now keep your eyes open and look at the flame.”

I hold the burning match in front of her face, and the warm, orange glow illuminates her features. The flame is brighter than the light from Seraph’s head, its color more natural, and for the first time, I’m able to really see the shade of Ophelia’s eyes—a beautiful golden hue that glitters like yellow topaz in the firelight.

But something is wrong. Her pupils are dilated, and they refuse to contract when exposed to the brightness of the flame. It’s not that her light-reflex is slow. It simply doesn’t happen at all. Weird.

Source, those eyes are wonderful, though...

I stare into them a little too long, and I accidentally let the flame burn down until it singes the tips of my fingers. I hiss in pain and drop the blackened matchstick onto the ground.

Behind me, Aleph snickers, and I growl at him in annoyance.

Fucker. I’d like to see him tend to this omega without getting distracted.

Actually, no I wouldn’t. If I’m being honest, I already feel possessive of this strange little omega.

But the dilation of her pupils is still troubling. At first, I’m not sure what to make of it. Then I remember something Seraph

told me once.

“Ophelia, I need to check your scent.”

“My scent? But—*oh!*”

She gasps as I bury my face against her neck and inhale deeply, filling my lungs with the mouthwatering odor of her skin. There is no question that she is an omega, but something about her fragrance is different, unlike any omega I’ve ever smelled before.

I dip lower, snuffling between her breasts, then lifting her elbow so I can sniff her armpit. She squeals and tries to pull away from me, but I hold on to her tightly.

“Boreg, what are you doing?” she gasps.

But I barely hear her. I’m already sniffing lower, barely in control of my own actions. She mewls and squirms as my breath whuffles over her abdomen, and I feel a sudden and overwhelming desire to see her feminine belly swollen with child—*my* child. Source, I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me. I’ve never had such feelings for an omega before.

I keep going, dropping to my knees in front of her with a grunt. My face is level with her pelvis, and my eyes lock on the place where her legs come together. The little tuft of platinum curls and the delicate slit underneath. Her folds and inner thighs glisten with wetness.

“Boreg, *wait!*”

She tries to cover herself with her hands, but my inner beast is having none of it. With a hungry growl, I push her hands aside

and bury my face between her legs. She yelps and jerks back, but I grip her butt and jam my face into her even more roughly, breathing in deeply, filling my lungs to capacity with her intoxicating aroma. I feel her tiny hands pushing against my head, and a second later, I feel my pack mates' stronger hands attempting to pull me off her too, but I refuse to budge. She just smells too damn good.

Source, I wouldn't mind drowning in that scent.

My heart slams, and blood surges between my legs. There is a sound of ripping leather as the pouch of my loincloth bursts open and my cock leaps out, erect and pulsing. My knot swells, and streams of hot semen jet from my tip, splattering on the stone floor. Some of it lands on Ophelia's feet, and she cries out in shock.

I let go of her and tumble backward, gasping as my balls continue to empty themselves onto the ground. Heat surges into my face. I'm embarrassed that my pack brethren have seen me lose control like this, but I'm even more ashamed for not recognizing the true nature of Ophelia's scent sooner.

I turn to Seraph. "That smell. Is it what I think it is?"

Seraph nods. "She is entering estrus."

My heart thuds even harder at that word.

Estrus. *Heat.*

I've never smelled an omega in heat before, and that's the reason I didn't recognize the signs earlier. But my own body's reaction to her scent was a dead giveaway.

Source, we have to get her outside immediately. Once she goes all the way, her scent will fill the enclosed space of this cave and drive all of us into a frenzy.

Suddenly, Ophelia's legs melt out from under her, and she collapses to the floor with a groan. She begins to writhe in agony as fragrant slick seeps from between her spread thighs.

"Help me!" she begs, "Fuck me! Please, I need it so bad!"

Damn. It's already too late.

CHAPTER 12: OPHELIA

This is what I've been worried about all along. I'm having one of my fits. And it's a bad one. Maybe the worst I've ever experienced. Pain lances through my core, making me twist and groan like a wounded animal on the floor of the cave, and my voice echoes away into the darkness at both ends of the tunnel. My legs are spread wide, exposing my dripping folds to the hungry eyes of the alphas gathered around me, watching. I desperately try to shut my thighs, but my muscles refuse to obey. I ought to know better. If there is one thing experience has taught me, it's that my fit will not end until I've found my release.

I slide both hands between my legs. The goal is not to hide myself. At this point, shame is not a factor. I'm sure that will come later, assuming I even survive this. But right now, all I care about is extinguishing this excruciating need deep inside me.

My clitoris throbs under my fingers. I start to rub it, but my fingers are numb and stupid, and it only takes a few seconds to realize that's not going to work.

God, I've never let it get this bad before.

If only I were back in my playpen with my toys. Then I would have no problem taking care of this. But there aren't any toys down here in this cave. There are only the alphas, with their hard muscles and their even harder cocks. Through tear-filled

eyes, I look at each of them in turn. Boreg is sitting in front of me on the ground, his naked erection oozing semen down his thick shaft like wax dripping from a candle. The others are standing behind him—pale Aleph, scarified Marr, and the lithe and athletic twins, Romulus and Remus. God, even Seraph looks good to me right now, though I'm not even sure exactly what he's packing behind that metal codpiece.

Even though I know it's wrong, my inner animal wants to be with all of them. I want to feel them on top of me and inside me. I want them to dominate me.

More intense pain corkscrews through my pelvis and into my womb. My back bridges, and a desperate cry erupts from my lips, only to be swallowed up by the shadows of the cave.

“Help me,” I beg. “Please, I need...”

My hands lift and stretch upwards, straining for those tented loincloths which are just out of reach. My fingers flex and straighten in a grabbing gesture, like the fingers of a spoiled child demanding candy or toys.

“Please... *need*...”

The twins spring into action first. They untie the knots at the sides of their loincloths and let the primitive garments fall to the floor, exposing their erect members which I felt just a few minutes ago. My mouth waters at the sight, and I mewl hungrily as they lower themselves beside me.

But in the next instant, Boreg has raised himself into a crouch. His red beard parts, revealing rows of white fangs, and he

snarls at the twins, who both return his signs of aggression.

Are they... fighting?

Over *me*?

Aleph makes his move next. Even though Boreg is much larger, the pale alpha shoves him aside with a roar, and throws himself on top of me. With a single motion of his hand, he rips his own loincloth away, and his cock springs into view, as hard and white as a bone. His penis is the biggest of all, and my walls quiver in fear and anticipation at the thought of being stretched by that brutal member. He moves into position between my open legs, aligning his tip with my leaking entrance.

But before he can penetrate me, the twins attack, followed immediately by Boreg, and the cave tunnel resounds with barks and growls of the warring alphas. Only Marr holds back.

To my surprise, the sudden outburst of male violence makes my fit even worse. My nipples swell until it feels like they will burst, and between my legs, my hot arousal flows like a river. I gasp, and the mingled odor of horny alphas fills my lungs.

“Please,” I whimper. “Don’t fight... I need...”

My back arches, and my pelvis lifts, raising my dripping need like an offering to any male who will take it. But they are all too busy fighting among themselves to notice.

“*Cease!*”

Seraph’s voice explodes through the cave like a crash of thunder, and the alphas immediately freeze mid-fight.

“This is no time for fighting,” Seraph says. “Can’t you see the female is in agony? One of you must quell her need for her.”

“I should do it,” Boreg rumbles. “I’m the best healer.”

“But we found her first!” Romulus and Remus say in unison.

“Fuck that,” growls Aleph. “*I’m* the best at pleasuring an omega.”

An omega?

Is he talking about me? I’ve never heard that term before. I know about alphas and betas—Dr. Toth taught me about both of those varieties of mutants during my training—but he never said anything about omegas.

At the moment, however, I’m in no position to ask questions. All I’m able to do is writhe and moan on the ground as my fit sinks its fangs deeper and deeper into my consciousness.

“No,” Seraph says. “None of you will pleasure the omega. Not yet. That task is for Marr.”

The scarred alpha’s eyes go wide with shock. So far, he is the only one of the alphas who has not joined the fray, apparently preferring to watch the show from the sidelines. Now his mouth drops open into an O of surprise, and he turns to Seraph with a questioning whine.

“Me?” Marr asks. “Why me? I’m the only one who *doesn’t* want to touch the omega.”

Seraph smiles vaguely. “Yes. That is why *you* must do it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And I do not have time to explain. The omega is being consumed by her heat. Now it is up to you to help her.”

“But she’s an Outsider. An enemy. She came here to destroy us and our way of life.”

“Perhaps. But if you do not help her, she might die, and then we will not be able to question her. Now, as your teacher, I am instructing you to make that omega come, multiple times if necessary.”

Marr growls and looks down upon me with disdain. It’s clear he doesn’t like me, but at the same time, the long shape straining at the front of his loincloth signals that there is some part of him that’s attracted to me, at least on a physical level. And right now, *physical* is all I need.

The excruciating hunger spreads through my entire body like poison. I don’t know how much more of this torture I can take. I feel like I might die if I don’t get a release soon. I lift my pelvis and gyrate my hips in the hopes of enticing him. When I speak, my voice is weak with need.

“Marr, *please...*”

The scarred alpha sighs. He steps forward, shoving the other alphas out of the way, and drops to his knees between my open thighs. He leans over me, and his tented loincloth brushes my throbbing pussy, making me moan.

He lowers himself toward me, but not quite on top of me. The heat of his body is intense, like a furnace. He brings his face close to mine and whispers into my ear.

“I hope you enjoy this, Outsider. I will not.”

A tear rolls down my temple and disappears into my dirty hair.

CHAPTER 13: MARR

Now that I've let the Outsider know exactly where we stand, I sit back on my haunches and survey her naked body. It's a bad move on my part. The view sends another surge of blood roaring into my groin, and I almost have the same kind of accident Boreg had a minute ago. Fortunately, I have better self control than that big oaf, and I manage to keep my cock in check.

The Outsider omega lies sprawled on the ground in front of me. Her body is bathed in sweat, and it glistens in the pale blue glow provided by Seraph's head. Her perfect breasts heave up and down with her rapid breathing, and between her open legs, her slick is flowing out of her in such quantities it's forming a small puddle on the stone floor. My balls ache at the sight.

Damn it.

I hate the way my alpha body responds to her pheromonal cry for help.

If it were up to me, we would leave the Outsider here to die in agony. Serves her right for trespassing into the Zone. But I know Seraph and the others would never allow that to happen. And now that her scent is inside me, I don't think I could let it happen either.

I turn my head and spit, trying to get the taste of self-disgust out of my mouth. Why the hell did Seraph choose *me* for this

task? It's not fair.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Aleph growls. “Are you going to tend to the omega's needs, or do you need me to show you how it's done?”

Asshole. Aleph is my friend, but he can be a real cocky bastard when he wants to be.

My face heats with anger, and a touch of embarrassment too. The truth is, Aleph has far more experience with omegas than me. I've devoted my entire life to the way of the warrior and the art of combat. I've never taken much time to familiarize myself with the intricacies of omega anatomy and pleasure.

A familiar monotone voice speaks inside my mind, so only I can hear it.

“Do not worry, young alpha. I will guide you.”

Seraph.

I usually hate it whenever my mentor enters my mind uninvited like that. It bugs me that he can see every single thought passing through my head. But this time, the intrusion is a welcome one. I definitely need his guidance.

All right, Seraph. Where do I start?

“I suggest you begin by simply exploring the female's external anatomy.”

I give an annoyed grunt, then I do as Seraph says. My hands are resting on the insides of the Outsider's splayed thighs, and I slide them inward to touch her exposed center. She gasps as

my thumbs stroke along her plump outer folds. Her skin is soft and smooth and filmed with her slick. Almost by instinct, I glide both thumbs toward the upper confluence of those folds, where a little pink bud nestles under a fleshy hood amid coils of soft white fur.

“That is her clitoris,” Seraph informs me.

Well, I know *that*, I think with a touch of annoyance.

“Yes, of course. Well, you will find that if you stroke the omega on her clitoris, it will help to allay some of the agony of her estrus.”

Personally, I still think we should just let the Outsider suffer. However, I know from experience it’s pointless to argue with Seraph, so I get to work on the omega’s clit. With my left thumb, I draw back her little cowl of skin. With my right, I start to rub the glistening pink pearl underneath.

The effect is startling. Almost as soon as the pad of my thumb makes contact with that little bundle of flesh and nerves, the Outsider arches her back and howls with pleasure. I stroke her again, even harder this time, and the female’s reaction is even more intense. Her hips buck wildly, and even more of that fragrant slick dribbles out of her slit.

Great Source, her body is so responsive. There’s a part of me that can’t help being turned on by that, and for a moment I enjoy watching her derive pleasure from my touch.

But I immediately snuff that feeling out. This is merely a task. A mission. Nothing more. It’s not about pleasure.

“Right there,” the Outsider gasps. “Oh God, don’t stop.”

Rage explodes inside me. How dare she tell me what to do? I will not be commanded by some puny little omega. Especially not an Outsider. My first inclination is to do the opposite of what she is asking, to remove my thumb from her clitoris and let her sink back into the excruciation of her heat. But I know Seraph will not allow that. So instead, I grind my thumb even harder into her clit, trying to hurt her.

It doesn’t have the intended effect. If anything, my vengeful rubbing only seems to bring her even more pleasure. She writhes and moans on the dirty ground.

“Don’t stop! Oh God, please don’t stop...”

Her enjoyment adds fuel to the fire of my rage, and I work her clit even more roughly, which makes her moan even louder, creating a vicious cycle.

“Don’t stop!” she screams. “Oh God, I’m going to come. I’m going to—”

The Outsider’s body spasms wildly, and a shattered cry breaks from her lips. Then her voice melts away into a series of wordless, gasping moans. The sounds are so feminine and arousing that I almost join her in climaxing, but somehow I manage to hold it in. I continue rubbing her until her convulsions have passed, then I draw my hands away from her and start to stand up.

“What are you doing?” Seraph asks, using his real voice this time.

“What do you mean? I’m finished, aren’t I?”

“Hardly,” Seraph says.

“But I’ve fulfilled my duty. I’ve made the Outsider come. ”

“Once. But a single orgasm is not enough to satisfy her appetite. If anything, you have merely whetted it. An omega in heat is a voracious creature, and this one’s heat is more intense than any I have ever seen before. It is going to require more than a bit of rubbing to sate her needs.”

With a sigh of resignation, I turn my attention back to the omega and begin to stroke her clit again.

“*Not there,*” Seraph’s voice says inside my head. “*Touch her inside.*”

Inside?

“*That’s right. Find her entrance.*”

I move lower, sliding my fingers between her inner folds. She is dripping with slick, and it coats my fingertips in slippery warmth.

“*It will be easier if you spread her lips so you can see.*”

Very well. Using both hands, I pry her folds open, exposing the tender pink of her center. Her flesh is slathered with slick, but I can see her hole nestled in the middle of her pink petals, quivering softly as if begging to be penetrated. I stroke the rim of her entrance, and she moans lustfully.

“Marr, please,” she begs. “Touch me there. Touch me *inside.*”

At least this time the wench is asking politely. Maybe my roughness taught her a lesson after all, though I doubt it. Honestly, I think she's just doing it to mess with me. She must know the effect her plaintive tones have on my hard cock and aching balls.

Still, I give her what she wants. It's the only way.

Her hole is tight, but it's well lubricated, and my middle finger enters her with ease. I sink into her as deep as I can go, and I am not gentle about it. The Outsider yelps, and her walls squeeze around me. I begin to fuck her with my finger, sliding in and out of her with rough, deep strokes that jolt her entire body.

"Easy," Seraph says. *"We do not want to break her."*

Maybe I do, I think.

Besides, despite the Outsider omega's tiny size and delicate features, she seems to be pretty damn resilient. I think it would take more than some hard fingerbanging to damage her. Now my cock, on the other hand. That would rip her in two.

"You will not be putting your penis inside her today, Marr. Just your fingers. But your technique is not optimal. You need to find her spot."

I sigh internally.

What spot?

"It is located on her front wall. Search her gently with your fingertip. You will know when you have found what you are looking for."

I stop my thrusting and feel my way along her front wall as Seraph instructed. Her insides are so remarkably smooth and wet, and they flutter ever so gently at my touch. But it all feels more or less the same to me. I'm still not sure what "spot" Seraph is referring to.

Suddenly, the Outsider hollers with ecstasy. Her body shudders, and her walls tense and relax around my finger in waves.

Right. Found it.

I rub her there even more deeply, and she begins to thrash wildly, fingers clawing at the ground as they search for purchase. With my free hand, I press down on her pelvis to keep her pinned in place, then I slide another finger in and stroke her spot with a double rhythm.

"Marr!" Her voice is so ragged it almost sounds like she's weeping. "Marr, Oh God! What are you doing to me?"

Source, she looks so fucking good squirming on my fingers like that. I hate myself for thinking that, but it's the truth.

"Why torture yourself like this?" Seraph asks. "It is perfectly natural for an alpha to hunger for a young omega in heat. It is the most natural thing in the Zone."

I ignore him and continue with my stroking.

The Outsider's inner walls seem to swell with fluid, squeezing with surprising strength until I can barely flex my fingers inside her. I resort to pumping her again, aiming my thrusts toward her sensitive spot.

“Marr, you’re going to make me come again,” she whines. It almost sounds like an accusation.

She screams as another violent climax rocks her body. Fluid gushes from her penetrated hole. The scent of it is more intense than anything I’ve ever smelled before, dirty and needful. It surrounds me and traps me like an invisible net, drawing me in.

I can’t take it anymore. I want to taste her. I *need* to taste her.

It doesn’t matter that she’s an Outsider. It doesn’t matter that she’s my enemy. For the time being, all that matters is having her flavor on my tongue. I’m sure I’ll despise myself for it later, but right now my hunger for her is all-consuming.

With a savage growl, I jam my face between her open thighs and feast on her hot, wet omega pussy.

CHAPTER 14: OPHELIA

I thought my fit was too much to endure, but the pleasure Marr is inflicting on me is even more unbearable—a pleasure so intense and brutal it terrifies me.

He laves my clitoris with his rough tongue, snarling as he does so, and the vibrations of that bestial sound rumble straight between my legs, joining forces with the unrelenting rhythm of his fingers to send hot pulsations of pure ecstasy spiralling deep into my innermost core. The climaxes come in quick succession, each one more devastating than the last. I am left breathless, unable to beg him to stop, even when it feels like I will die from sheer pleasure.

The cave tunnel rings with the wet squelching sounds of his fingers thrusting in and out of my hole. The amount of fluid spilling from me is insane, far more than I've ever experienced during one of my shameful fits. It's making my body weak from dehydration. My lips feel dry, my throat parched.

I toss my head back and stare up at the five other figures gathered around me, watching me endure Marr's torments. Except for Seraph, they are all naked and aroused, their massive cocks jutting like spears.

"Water," I croak. "Please... thirsty..."

It's Boreg who springs into action first. The big one. The gentle one. He retrieves a primitive drinking skin from his pack and offers it to me while Aleph cradles my head on his

lap. The water spills onto my lips and fills my gasping mouth. It tastes strange, laced with minerals and slightly sweet. I realize it must be natural spring water, something I have never tasted back in the hive city of Galadon-1. Some of the water goes down the wrong way, and I sputter and gasp.

“Easy, little omega,” Aleph says, teasing. “Don’t get greedy.”

I feel a scorch of indignation behind my breastbone, and I turn my eyes toward him with an angry glare. But his sexy smirk and the way he strokes my hair instantly quell the emotion. Damn, he’s gorgeous. His pale skin and silvery eyes give him the appearance of a demigod. With looks like that, I guess he can get away with being a cocky jerk.

At least the water has re-energized me, but I’m still thirsty. I turn my head to drink more, and something brushes against my cheek. Something long and hard and hot to the touch.

It’s Aleph’s cock.

My thirst for water is instantly forgotten, displaced by a thirst of a different kind. Without even thinking, I dart my tongue out and run it along his shaft. His skin is smooth, and it tastes of clean sweat.

I turn my head to the other side, and I find myself face to face with Boreg’s jutting member. His tip is still leaking a few droplets of milky semen from when he ejaculated earlier. I suck the fluid away, and the flavor of his seed fills my mouth, warm and intensely salty. I swallow. It tastes good, but I need more. My *heat* needs more.

“Come,” I murmur. “Need... come...”

Aleph chuckles. “Damn, omega. Seraph wasn’t joking when he said you were voracious. You must have come about twenty times already. But I’m sure Marr will give you more if that’s what you need.”

Marr is still growling and slurping between my legs, and his fingers are still thrusting into me. Right on cue, another massive orgasm explodes through my body, making me cry out sharply. It takes several seconds before I regain my faculty of speech. And even then, only partially.

“No,” I gasp. “Your come... need... *your* come...”

I give Aleph’s cock another lick, then Boreg’s, then Aleph’s again, like a dog that can’t decide between two toys. And of course, there are more than two toys at my disposal. The twins are kneeling on either side of me now, both of them fully naked and fully erect too. My hands find them and start to stroke.

“Come,” I groan. “Give... me...”

Seraph is standing nearby, observing the proceedings with an unreadable expression on his holographic face. For a second, I think I see a smile curving the corner of his lips, but it could just be a glitch in the projection.

“Good,” he says flatly. “The omega’s estrus is progressing. Marr has pleased her well, but now she needs alpha seed to fully extinguish her heat.”

“You mean we need to fuck her?” Aleph asks.

My heart jumps with a mixture of fear and anticipation.

“No,” answers Seraph. “She is still too frail for that. Your members would damage her. But her body can receive your seed in other ways.”

“What do you mean?”

“On her skin,” Seraph says. “Her epidermis is highly receptive. Bathe her in your seed, alphas. Anoint her omega flesh.”

All around me, the alphas rumble with excitement. The predatory sound sends shivers skittering over my skin. It feels like one of those nature movies Dr. Toth used to let me watch back at the facility. Only this time, I’m the helpless prey, and the alphas are the circle of ravenous wolves closing in for the kill.

Aleph and Boreg kneel on either side of my head, grunting and growling as they begin to jerk themselves. Meanwhile, twins are bracketing the middle of my body, offering their identical aroused members for me to stroke. They are so thick, my fingers cannot even wrap all the way around them.

Seraph is right: they would tear my pussy apart if they tried to fuck me. Even just two of Marr’s fingers are enough to fill me. He is still thrusting into me while he licks my clit, driving into me so hard I think his knuckles are going to leave bruises on my backside. I don’t care. Right now, I need it rough and hard and deep.

“Yes,” I moan as I feel my body tensing in preparation again, muscles coiling like springs. “Yes...”

Around me, the alphas are tensing too, legs trembling, heavy sacs drawing tight against the bases of the penises, ready to explode at any moment. Their combined scent fills the air, covering me like a warm blanket of masculine arousal and sending me over the edge.

I come so hard it hurts. White light flashes behind my eyes. My body quakes and my legs thrash wildly as the climax sinks its teeth into my nerves and shakes me like a rag doll.

A moment later, the alphas follow suit, showering my skin with their hot and sticky release. The twins are first, erupting in perfect unison, ropes of hot semen drawing pale slashes across my quivering tummy. Boreg is next, but Aleph is hot on his heels. Their spend gushes onto my chest, splattering across my nipples, flowing down the channel between my breasts, and pooling in the hollows of my collarbones. Everywhere their fluid lands, it sets off miniature orgasms on my skin.

It seems like they might never stop coming.

At last, their supply is spent, and their growls peter off into raspy panting. Marr withdraws his fingers from between my legs and raises himself into a kneeling position. He draws the back of his hand across his mouth, which is stained with my juices.

“Is it done, then?” he asks.

For a second, I feel too exhausted to move, as if I could just melt straight into the floor of the cave and disappear forever. Then I see the straining bulge in the pouch of Marr's loincloth, and my fit returns with a vengeance.

Growling like a feral creature, I sit up and rip that primitive garment away, literally tearing it with a strength I didn't know I possessed. Marr's big cock springs free, long and hard and jumping with the pulse of his blood. He snarls angrily when I put my hands on it, but he makes no attempt to stop me.

I stroke him with a double-handed grip, pumping him fast and deep. The way his outer skin shifts over the hard inner core of his erection sends a hot thrill rushing through me. I look up at him with pleading eyes. His face is tight with restraint, and I can tell he is holding back.

"Come for me," I beg. "Please, Marr. I need it."

He glares down at me for a moment, and I see something flicker behind his dark eyes, something truly dangerous that makes my heart skip a beat. Then those dark eyes roll back in his head, he grunts, and his cock unloads all over me. I close my eyes as more viscous ropes of warm semen stain my face. A few spurts land inside my gasping mouth, coating my tongue with the flavor of salty cream.

Now I am truly anointed, just like Seraph said.

It takes Marr a long time to finish, much longer than the human men in the movies I've seen in my playpen back in the city. At last, his flow reduces to a mere dribble that falls on my naked breasts, mixing with the seed of his companions. I

continue stroking him, milking his big cock for every last drop.

But on the very last stroke, my hand touches something unexpected. A hard, bulbous mass the size of a fist has swollen around the base of Marr's erect penis. Startled, I gasp and draw my hands back.

"What's the matter?" Marr sneers. "Never seen a knot before, Outsider?"

"Knot?"

I glance around at the other males. Their cocks are still hard and dripping with seed, and I notice for the first time that they all have knots too. I didn't see those before. They must have appeared just now when the alphas came all over me. Dear God, I thought their huge male anatomy was scary enough to begin with, but one of those knots would destroy me.

Marr gives an angry growl. Maybe the sudden look of terror on my face has offended him. Or maybe there is something else going on. He picks up his torn loincloth from the floor and tosses it at me rudely. Somehow, I catch it.

"Clean your face, Outsider."

Marr's words hit me like a slap, and fresh tears spring to my eyes.

From behind me comes the sound of Boreg's deep but gentle voice. "You don't have to use that, Ophelia. I'll get you a proper cloth."

He reaches for the tattered loincloth in my hand, but I hold on to it.

“No,” I tell him. “That’s okay.”

My tear-filled eyes stay locked with Marr’s as I slowly clean my face, wiping away his mess with the scrap of animal hide. I can smell him on it, can smell the scent of his most intimate and masculine parts. Just a few minutes ago, that odor would have been fuel to the fire of my raging lust. But now that fire has gone out, and all that is left is the shame of everything I have just done.

When my face is relatively clean, I lay the soiled loincloth on the ground between Marr’s knees. The cave is deathly quiet, and I sense a breathless tension in the air, as if the alphas are all waiting to see what I will do or say.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “For helping me.”

All of a sudden, an intense weariness surges over me, and I swoon backwards. Thankfully, strong arms catch me and lower me safely to the floor. A strange and peaceful darkness surrounds me, and I welcome it without question or struggle.

CHAPTER 15: SERAPH

“Something is wrong with Ophelia,” Aleph says, his voice tight with concern. The others huddle around the semi-conscious female, worried expressions on their faces. Even Marr looks troubled.

Fortunately, there is nothing to worry about. At least not with the omega.

“Move back,” I command them. “Give her some space to breathe.”

The alphas do as they are told, but they are still worried.

“She passed out,” Romulus says.

“Is something wrong with her?” asks Remus.

“No. She is fine. This is perfectly natural for an omega in heat. Her body simply needs a chance to get some deep rest and absorb the vital energy of your seed.”

Even as I’m saying these words, the pale fluid covering her naked skin seems to disappear as it sinks into her pores, feeding her feminine body with the nutrition it needs. The alphas look on in wonder.

My cybernetic body is useful, but it has its limitations. For example, I have no olfactory sensation. Therefore, I must briefly enter the minds of the alphas to see what they are smelling. What I discover pleases me. The strong hormonal

scent billowing from the omega's glands indicates that her heat is progressing satisfactorily.

Her estrus is not over. Not completely. The conflagration has been extinguished, but embers are still smoldering beneath the ashes. She will require the alphas' attention again before this day is through, and for many days after.

However, that is something we will deal with later. Right now, the top priority is to get her out of this cave.

"In a few hours, she will awake from her seed-induced coma. When she does, she will be starving. Therefore, we need to take her someplace where there is plenty of food and water. Someplace safe."

"The Central Ruins?" Boreg asks.

It is a natural suggestion. After all, our current location is directly under the ruins. But it is not the best option.

"I do not wish to take her directly to the Central Ruins. I fear that might be too great a shock for her system. And some of the alphas may not take kindly to her if they learn where we found her."

"For good reason," Marr grumbles. His look of concern has transitioned back into his usual angry scowl. "She's an Outsider *enemy*. She has come here to *destroy* us."

"Quiet," I tell him.

His face darkens and he goes silent.

“Well, we have to take her somewhere,” Aleph says. “If not the Central Ruins, then where?”

I turn my attention to the twins. “Romulus, Remus, we are going to visit your parents. That should provide Ophelia with a more suitable introduction to the ways of the Zone.”

The twins’ faces brighten with eagerness. They both start to reach for Ophelia to pick her up, and in the process, they accidentally knock their skulls together. A fit of aggressive snarling ensues, and if I do not intervene, it will no doubt develop into a full-blown fight.

“Stop that,” I tell them. “*I will carry the omega.*”

The twins stop their bickering and back away from the dozing omega. For a moment, I simply stare down at her naked body, observing. Her eyelids flutter, and she stirs quietly, but she doesn’t wake. She will be out for several hours at least. Now that she is unconscious, I attempt once more to enter her sleeping mind, but it is completely closed off to me. Just as I had expected.

I know who she is. I suspected it before, but now I am certain. I have been expecting her for some time now.

As I scoop her up off the ground and hold her small and fragile body in my arms, my augmented heart pangs briefly with a feeling that I am not used to. It takes me a moment to recognize what it is.

I believe it is sympathy.

Just like me, she was not born—at least not in the usual sense of the word. She was created. Designed by a team of scientists to fulfill a specific purpose. That purpose is at odds with my own. If I had encountered her before the Source was disabled, I almost certainly would have killed her. She was perhaps the greatest threat the Zone has ever faced.

Now, however, she may be our only hope for survival.

I take one more long moment to study her sleeping features, then I set off down the tunnel with the pack of young alphas following close behind.

CHAPTER 16: OPHELIA

I'm having the nicest dream. My body is weightless, and I'm floating through the sky, borne along on my own personal cloud, which is softer than the softest mattress. I'm naked, but I don't mind, because there's nobody around to see me, and I enjoy the way the golden sunshine warms my bare skin. With a yawn and a stretch, I carefully roll over and take in the magnificent view. Thousands of feet below me, the Quarantine Zone sprawls away into the distance. I know it's the Zone because the air is clear and the ground is covered with greenery, as opposed to the smog and barren wastelands that surround the city hive I've called my home for the past twenty years. There are dense, dark forests and rolling grasslands vibrant in the midday sun and speckled with the shadows of passing clouds.

I'm trying to figure out which shadow belongs to my cloud when a sound startles me awake.

A blood-curdling howl.

My eyes snap open, and I am dazzled by the glare of sunlight filtering in through a canopy of leaves. It's not as bright as the sunshine in my dream, but it still hurts my unprepared eyes.

I'm obviously not in the cave anymore. Instinctively, I wiggle my arms and legs, but it has no effect. It still feels like I'm floating, and for a second I think I'm still dreaming. Then I

hear Seraph's blank, monotone voice, and I know this is all real.

“Do not struggle, omega. You are safe.”

Seraph is carrying me in his arms like I don't weigh a thing. God, he's strong. I guess I already knew that based on his chiseled physique, but experiencing it is even more impressive. I don't know how long he's been carrying me, but it's obviously been a hot minute, and he hasn't even broken a sweat. As a matter of fact, his gray skin is freakishly cool to the touch. Weird.

“Um, thanks,” I say in a groggy voice. “You can put me down now. I think I can walk.”

“I will carry you.”

“But—”

“I *will* carry you.”

Well okay then. I'm not about to argue with a muscular gray man with a holographic head.

Once my eyes have had a chance to adjust to the new light, I sweep my gaze around, taking in our surroundings. We are in a dense forest. The air is warm, and it is laced with many unusual scents. All in all, the place has an odor of decay to it, but not in a gross, garbagey way. In fact, it smells kind of nice—a fertile aroma, like the potting soil used to grow indoor plants back at the facility. Dr. Toth used to chastise me for sniffing that stuff.

All five of the alphas are here too. The twins are way out in front, scouting ahead and pausing every few seconds to test the air for danger. Boreg is closer. He flashes a comforting grin when I look at him, and I smile back. Aleph is also nearby, but he only offers a cocky smirk. There is something in his silvery eyes that sends a sexy shiver over my skin.

Then my eyes land on Marr.

The scarred alpha doesn't even so much as glance in my direction.

I can't help but notice he's completely naked, and I suddenly recall the crazy way I ripped and ruined his loincloth. A second later, everything else that happened down in the cave comes rushing back to me, and shame scorches my cheeks and ears. I remember Marr growling between my quivering thighs, his tongue lapping at my tingling clit, his fingers deep inside me. I remember the other alphas gathered around too, their hard bodies glistening with sweat as they stroked their hardened cocks and painted my skin with their thick seed. And most of all, I remember the sound of my own desperate voice echoing through the cavern as I begged them to do it to me.

God.

I quickly glance down at my naked body, and I notice my skin is now totally clean.

"You washed me," I whisper.

"No," Seraph answers simply.

"But... my body."

“What about your body?”

“It isn’t, you know...”

“No, I do not know. To what are you referring, Ophelia?”

Jesus, is he really going to make me say it? If it was anyone else, I would assume they were messing with me, but Seraph doesn’t seem like the type to tease. He’s obviously more machine than man, and I guess he doesn’t understand emotions the way the rest of us do.

I lower my voice even further, until it is just barely audible.

“I mean, I’m not all covered in cum.”

“Oh, that,” Seraph proclaims loudly. “Your skin absorbed all of the alphas’ semen, Ophelia. For an unmated omega such as yourself, it is a common process. Your body is simply becoming acclimated to the alphas.”

There’s that word again.

“Why do you keep referring to me as *omega*?” I ask.

“Because that is what you are, albeit a rather unusual one.”

“But what does it mean?”

“You are not familiar with the term omega?”

I shake my head.

“Interesting,” Seraph says. “I suppose your creators wanted to conceal your true nature from you for as long as possible. Perhaps that was wise of them.”

“But what does it *mean*?” My heart is beginning to flutter with a feeling of panic. “Seraph, what is an omega?”

His holographic face looks down at me with an expression that could almost be interpreted as sympathetic.

“That is a complicated question, Ophelia. Let us reserve it for later, after we have reached our destination.”

“Okay,” I answer, feeling a little reassured. “Where are we going?”

“Ultimately, to the Central Ruins.”

“Are you talking about the center of the Zone?” I ask, and glance around at the forest. “Weren’t we already underneath the center? What are we doing way out here in the woods?”

“I will admit, we are taking a somewhat circuitous route to our destination. The cave systems underneath the Zone are extensive. But then, you are probably already aware of that fact. I have chosen a route that took us away from the city. There is someone I want you to meet first, before we venture into the Central Ruins.”

“Who?”

Before Seraph can answer, a sound erupts from the forest ahead of us. It’s the twins. They both have their heads thrown back, and they are howling in perfect harmony like a pair of wolves. That must have been the sound that roused me from my dream a few minutes ago. It raises goosebumps all over my skin.

A moment later, a matching howl echoes back from somewhere not too far away. The twins grin at each other.

“She’s heard us,” Romulus says.

Remus nods. “She’s coming.”

I’m too awestruck to even ask who they are talking about. And anyway, I’m pretty sure I’m going to find out soon enough, because I can already hear the sound of a four-legged creature running toward us through the woods.

A fast moving shape emerges from the trees off to the right, and I let out a startled cry. The creature scrambles up the trunk of a nearby tree and hops onto a thick but low-hanging branch, where it perches and glares down at us with wild eyes. Now that it’s still, I’m able to get a good look at it.

It’s a woman!

She looks to be middle-aged, but her skin is flawless, and her figure enviable. It’s easy to tell, because she’s half naked, clothed only in a primitive loincloth and matching top. Her hair seems to explode from her head in a shaggy, unkempt mane which is tangled with leaves and twigs, yet even that looks rather attractive. But the craziest part of all is the bushy white tail hanging down behind her butt. Is that part of her clothing, or—

“Mom!” the twins shout in unison.

The feral woman turns her attention to the pair of young alphas and gives out a happy yelp. Then, with catlike grace,

she dives off the branch and runs toward them on all fours before standing upright to hug them both.

“Mom?” I whisper.

“That’s right,” Seraph answers. “Her name is Embla, and she is the mother of the twins. A most fascinating woman. She is highly intelligent in her own way. Exceedingly loyal. Friendly to those whom she deems deserving of her friendship, dangerous to those who are not.”

“In that case, I hope she deems me deserving.”

“Let’s find out, shall we?”

Seraph sets me down on my own two feet again. My legs are still weak, and I teeter a little, but somehow I manage to remain upright. Just as I’m getting my footing, I see the woman named Embla coming toward me on all fours, and my heart flutters.

As she draws near, the light through the trees glints off something on her eyebrows and nostrils. Metal piercings. Those are a bit surprising, considering her otherwise feral appearance. As she circles around me, I realize that the bushy tail I noticed earlier is actually part of a piercing as well. The fur itself looks natural, but it’s held on by a metal ring through the skin just above her tailbone. Very strange.

I turn in place, keeping an eye on Embla as she circles me, sniffing my legs like a dog.

“Hey!” I gasp. “What are you doing?”

“Do not worry,” Seraph says. “Embla is simply checking you out. She is an excellent judge of character.”

“Based on what? *Scent?*”

Suddenly, Embla stands upright again and gazes deeply into my eyes. She leans in close and gives my face a sniff, and it takes a conscious effort for me not to cringe away in fear. But she doesn't seem aggressive, and despite her outlandish appearance, she has a beautiful and kind face. She tilts her head and gives me a quizzical look. Then her face lights up with an enormous grin that is so pure and genuine and innocent that I can't help but fall in love with her instantly. She speaks a single word in a funny, growly voice.

“Friend!”

I return her smile. “Friend.”

It would seem I have passed the test.

CHAPTER 17: OPHELIA

I don't realize just how hungry I am until I sink my teeth into the piece of fish. It smelled wonderful cooking over the fire, but it tastes even better, smokey and salty and tender. It's exactly what my body is craving right now.

But when I try to swallow, something hard and thin sticks in my throat, making me gag and sputter and choke. It's kind of like when I get a hair in my throat, but ten times worse. After a fit of coughing, I manage to dislodge the obstruction and spit it into my palm. It looks like a tiny white needle.

"Careful about the bones," Boreg says, handing me a water skin. "Sorry, I assumed you knew about that."

Bones. Of course.

It didn't even occur to me since all of my meals at the facility were artificial. Lab grown meat, algae, synthetic protein drinks. Stuff like that. I've never eaten anything that used to be an actual living animal before. It's a bit weird to think about.

I set the bone on the edge of the flat piece of tree bark that serves as my plate, and I look around sheepishly.

We're in a cave again, but it's nothing like the pitch black system of tunnels where the alphas found me. This natural shelter is nice and spacious, with a dry floor and a big wide open entrance on one side to let in the fading light from outside. A fire in the center of the cave provides additional

light and warmth, as well as a means for cooking the food which I'm currently eating. The spicy smell of the burning wood is oddly soothing.

In addition to myself and the guys who rescued me, there are eight other people in the cave, plus several big wolf-like dogs. First, of course, there is Embla, who seems to have become my new best friend, even though we've barely spoken twenty words between us. Then there are her three alpha mates: Ark, Orwen, and Leros. The twins introduced them as their fathers. Plural. I assume that must be a term of endearment, since nobody can have more than one biological father. And yet when I look at the faces of the three older alphas, I find it difficult to determine which one is their real dad. Romulus and Remus' features seem to be a mixture of all three of them, plus some of Embla's features. Puzzling.

All three of the older alphas wear extensive face and body piercings, just like Embla.

The rest of the inhabitants of the cave are the other children of Embla and her mates. There is a tiny baby who is just a few months old, as well as a pair of young boys who clearly idolize their older brothers. And last, there is a young female named Dalia who looks so much like a female version of Romulus and Remus, it's uncanny. As it turns out, the twins aren't really twins at all. They're triplets.

According to Seraph, Dalia is also an omega. I still don't know what that means.

As for the dogs, they scared the hell out of me at first. I've never seen real dogs before. But they've proven to be just as friendly as the rest of the family. After giving me a sniff the way Embla did, they started wagging their tails, which Seraph informed me is an expression of happiness.

Much to my surprise, Romulus and Remus' family have welcomed me into their primitive home with open arms. At first, the three older alphas seemed wary of me, probably because they could tell I was an Outsider. But I guess the fact that Embla likes me won them over. Plus, they seem to trust Seraph completely.

In addition to feeding me, they have also provided me with clothing—a sort of animal-hide bikini that looks like something straight out of the Stone Age. It used to be Dalia's before she outgrew it. To be honest, it's a bit small for me too, and it leaves way more of my skin exposed than I would like, but it's certainly better than nothing, so I'm not about to complain.

Besides, my body feels uncomfortably warm, and I can sense another one of my fits stirring deep within my core. I should be okay for a little while—long enough to make it through dinner, at least—but after that...

A shiver runs through my body, and I silently wish I had my pills.

“Good?”

Embla's strange, growly voice jolts me out of my thoughts. I do my best to muster a smile.

“What’s that?”

She points at the cooked fish on my makeshift plate.

“Good? Good? Hungry? Eat!”

“Oh! Yes, it’s very good, Embla. Thank you.” There are no utensils, so I just pick up the whole piece of fish and take another bite, making sure not to swallow any of the bones this time. Meanwhile, Embla grins and nods with satisfaction as I eat. I guess that must be her motherly instinct coming through. It isn’t difficult to imagine her doting on Romulus and Remus in a similar fashion when they were growing up. She might not be the greatest communicator, but a big vocabulary isn’t necessary for letting someone know you care about them.

I get a similar vibe from the three fathers too. With their big muscles and wild piercings, they are pretty scary looking at first glance. But as I observe them during the meal, it is obvious that they have a lot of love for their children and for their mate, Embla. I get the impression they are very protective of her, especially the alpha named Orwen, who is perhaps the scariest looking of them all. Woe to anyone who would try to mess with his mate.

Is this how all the mutants of the Zone live?

Dr. Toth led me to believe the alphas were just a bunch of brutal savages. But there is nothing savage about this way of life. Sure, it’s *primitive*. They live in a cave, wear animal skins, and eat food with bones still in it. But at the same time, everybody here seems healthy and happy and full of love. That’s probably more than I can say for the majority of people

back in the city hive. It's definitely more than I can say for myself.

To be honest, I'm kind of envious of them, and for a little while, I allow myself to pretend I'm part of the family. I've never had a real family before.

“Ahem...”

As I'm just digging into my second helping of fish, the alpha named Ark clears his throat loudly and raises one massive hand. All around the cave, conversations grow quiet as everyone turns their attention toward the patriarch. Even the dogs relaxing by the entrance of the cave perk up, as if they are curious to hear what Ark has to say.

He begins speaking in a quiet voice. A guy like him doesn't need to speak loudly to make himself heard.

“Seraph, my family is honored by your presence this evening. And we are grateful to you for bringing our sons home safely from their training. I can see from the growth of their bodies that you have been training them well...”

Romulus and Remus both beam proudly at the father's words of praise.

“...However,” Ark goes on. “There are dire matters which we must discuss, and I can only assume this is the real reason for your visit.”

Seraph is sitting across from him with his legs folded and his hands resting on his knees. A large piece of roasted fish lies in front of him, untouched. He probably doesn't eat since he

doesn't have a real mouth, but I guess the alphas gave him a serving out of respect. Seraph seems to study the fish for a moment before looking up.

“I assume you are referring to the disturbance of the Source.”

My gut clenches with anxiety.

Ark nods. “Yes. We all felt it when it happened earlier today. Even the baby started crying. And ever since, the Source-feeling has been growing dimmer. We debated going to the Central Ruins to see what had happened, but we decided to wait. We knew you were nearby, training our sons and their pack brethren, so we had a feeling you would be stopping here on your way in-Zone. And now, here you are.” His eyes turn toward me. “With an Outsider in your midst, no less.”

The tightness in my stomach transforms into nausea.

Seraph waits for a beat before answering. “Yes. Well, I shall tell you what I already know. Sometime over the past few days, a group of Outsiders from beyond the Quarantine Wall infiltrated the Zone. I did not notice them because their minds were concealed from me. Earlier today, they breached the chamber containing the batteries that give the Source its energy, and they managed to destroy said batteries with an explosive device. However, it seems their mission did not go exactly as planned. When the bomb went off, it killed all of the intruders except for two. One of the survivors was a male who was subsequently dispatched by your sons...”

At this, Ark turns his gaze toward Romulus and Remus, and his face takes on an expression of both pride and sympathy for

his sons.

“...The other survivor,” Seraph goes on, “is the Outsider omega who now sits before you.” He looks at me with a serene expression. “Ophelia, perhaps now you can fill us in on the rest of the details of what has happened.”

For a long moment, the only sound is the crackle of the fire in the center of the cave.

Shit. I knew this conversation would be coming sooner or later, but I haven't been looking forward to it. I suppress an impulse to jump up and make a run for it. I could never outrun the alphas, and even if I could, I wouldn't survive for two hours by myself in the wilderness of the Zone.

Besides, my desire for self-preservation is far outweighed by my overwhelming sense of guilt. When the alphas hear everything I have to say, they will probably kill me, and they have every right to do so. I just hope they make it quick.

“I'm not sure where to begin,” I say, my voice trembling.

“You should begin at the logical place,” says Seraph. “The beginning.”

CHAPTER 18: OPHELIA

I tell them everything.

It takes me a long time to get through it all. While I'm talking, the twilight glow outside the cave slowly fades into night, and the fire seems to shine even brighter in contrast. Ark gets up a few times to add more pieces of wood to the blaze, but other than that, the alphas sit perfectly still and listen to my tale. I'm not quite sure how any of them are taking it, because I'm too scared to look them in the eye.

Following Seraph's suggestion, I start at the beginning. Or at least as far back as I can remember. I tell them about how Dr. Toth and his team created me and raised me in the special facility back in the city hive, and I tell them about my special power—the nullification field that emanates from my body, allowing ordinary humans to survive in the Zone. I even tell them about how, during my teenage years, I started having my embarrassing fits, and how Dr. Toth supplied me with toys to pacify those urges.

That part's a bit embarrassing, but right now I'm too scared to really be ashamed.

Once I've filled them in on my own personal history, I move on to recent events. I talk about Dr. Toth's plan to destroy the batteries that run the Source, and I explain how he said we would be freeing the alphas of the Quarantine Zone from their unwanted mutations. Then I describe the way my team

infiltrated the Zone, using the subterranean passageways to reach our objective. Last, I recount for them how the mission went sideways at the end—how the bomb detonated too quickly, wiping out my team along with the batteries and leaving me the sole survivor.

“Well, me and Bryce, actually,” I say. “Somehow, he survived the explosion too, but he turned into something really horrible.” I shudder at that memory. “He assaulted me, and he would have raped me if Romulus and Remus had not shown up when they did. And after that... Well, you already know the rest.”

I think I can probably stop there. I’m not too keen on the idea of narrating the way the alphas helped me through my fit. Especially not in front of Romulus and Remus’ parents.

The cave grows quiet for a few seconds, then an angry roar comes from the side of the dwelling.

“I knew it!”

Marr leaps to his feet with a snarl. His face is red with rage in the firelight, and his quaking shadow looms against the wall of the cave behind him.

“I knew it! She’s our enemy! She has broken the Source!”

Boreg stands up to confront him. “Weren’t you listening? Ophelia didn’t blow up the batteries. The soldiers did that.”

“But she helped them. They never could have done it without her.”

Now the so-called twins are on their feet too.

“You can’t blame her. She didn’t know what she was doing,” says Romulus.

“She thought she was helping,” Remus adds.

“That’s a bunch of wolfshit!”

Marr begins charging toward me across the cave, and I cringe away in fear. For a moment, I think he might actually pounce and kill me, and I honestly can’t say I would blame him. But Aleph jumps up and restrains him before he has a chance to attack. The two young alphas start to tussle, and in the process they disturb the fire, sending a spray of orange sparks spiraling up to the ceiling of the cave. Their growling disturbs the little baby who is cradled in Dalia’s arm, and the child begins wailing.

“Enough!” Ark bellows.

The older alpha wedges himself between Aleph and Marr and angrily shoves them apart, giving them both a dangerous look. His piercings gleam in the firelight, making his face even more terrifying.

“You have upset my offspring,” he growls. “I’ll not have violence in my dwelling. Now go sit your asses back down before you do something you’ll really regret.”

The two younger alphas apologize and return to their places, but not before Marr flashes me a fiery glare over his shoulder. Meanwhile, Ark kicks the scattered pieces of wood back into the fire circle while Embla goes to check on her crying baby, who gradually settles down. Once all is quiet again, Ark turns

back to Seraph, who appears completely unfazed by the display of aggression.

“All right, now we’ve heard the Outsider’s story,” Ark says.

“But can we be sure she’s telling the truth?”

“She is telling the truth.”

“How do you know?”

Seraph stares deeply into the fire. “Ark, do you recall approximately twenty years ago when we visited the city hive?”

“How could I forget?” Ark says. “In fact, that was the first time I met you. In your present form, that is. But I wouldn’t describe it as a visit exactly. As I remember it, Embla, Leros, and I were kidnapped, and you and Orwen rescued us.”

“Quite so.”

I’m stunned by what I’m hearing. Alphas have actually been to the city hive? I didn’t think that was possible. I didn’t even think they could get past the Quarantine Wall. I have a lot of questions, but I’m not about to interrupt now.

“Do you happen to recall the name of your captor?” Seraph asks Ark.

The alpha nods. “Toth.”

My heart had just started to slow down following Marr’s angry outburst, but now it accelerates again at the mention of the man who created me. Did these alphas really meet Dr. Toth? Did he really hold them captive?

Ark goes on: “Toth tried to force us to breed in captivity. He told us he was going to create an army of alphas under his control.”

“Yes, I recall,” Seraph says. “However, I believe Toth has changed his mind. Or perhaps he was simply lying about that second part. He may have thought that if you knew his true plans, you would never have bred in captivity, not even to save your mate Embla from the throes of her artificially induced estrus.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Toth and the Outsiders do not want to control the Zone. Not any more. They only want to destroy it. You see, there are details I never shared with you before. While I was inside the facility where you were held prisoner, I took the liberty of examining Toth’s files to see what he was working on. That was when I found this...”

Seraph turns his gaze toward the cave wall and uses his eyes to project computerized text onto the stone. It’s some kind of government file, and its title raises my pulse even higher.

PROJECT OPHELIA

OMEGA PHEROMONE-BASED DEFENSE SYSTEM

Ark just frowns at the words. “Seraph, you know I can’t read. What does it say?”

“I shall give a summary: Toth and his team were looking for ways to counteract the Source so human soldiers could enter the Quarantine Zone without being transformed into alphas,

betas, or omegas. For years, the Outsiders had been trying to build physical armor for this purpose, but the results were only effective in the farthest reaches of the Zone, in the region just within the Quarantine Wall. Whenever they tried to venture deeper into the Zone, the armor would fail. This was good for us, as it meant the Source was safe from the reach of those Outsiders who would do us harm.

“However, Toth stumbled upon an alternative. Several years ago, his agency came into possession of some Source-serum which was left behind by an Alpha who had been engaged in an important mission in the city hive. Using this Source-serum, Toth began performing experiments involving alphas and omegas which he created in his laboratory. He discovered that by altering the nano-genetic structures, he could create an omega with the ability to nullify the energy of the Source. The nullification field was actually based on the pheromones of the altered omega. Hence the codename of the project. Ophelia. O for Omega. Phe for pheromones.”

My heart seems to sink into my stomach. I’ve always known that I’m not a normal person, but I never realized until now just how much Dr. Toth kept me in the dark about my true nature.

“So I’m an omega?” I ask. “But I still don’t even know what that means.”

Seraph blinks, and his eyes stop projecting on the wall. He turns and looks at me.

“Omegas are the rarest and most important inhabitants of the Zone. The alphas are strong warriors and skillful hunters, but the omegas are the givers of life. They bring new alphas and omegas into the world, and they nurture and protect them through the most difficult period of life—childhood. Embla is an omega. And so is Dalia. Most of the omegas in the Zone are females, although there are a few male omegas, just as there are a few female alphas too.”

I look at Embla, who grins reassuringly, then Dalia, who is gently rocking the now sleeping baby. Based on them, I guess being an omega isn't a bad thing. They are both less of a mess than I am, that's for sure.

“But I still don't understand,” I say. “What makes omegas different?”

“There are a number of factors. I have already mentioned your pheromones, which signal your fertility and compatibility to alpha suitors. Another factor is nesting. I presume Toth provided you with a space to express your nest-making instincts.”

I think about my sleeping room at the facility. When I was a girl, I had an ordinary bed, but as I got older, I started arranging my pillows and sheets to form a more comfortable place to curl up on the floor. Eventually, my bed was removed altogether, and I was supplied with a bunch of different sized cushions to do with as I wanted.

I give Seraph a nod.

“Yes, I thought so,” he says. “And then there would have been your estrus. Here in the Quarantine Zone, everyone refers to it as *heat*. I believe you refer to it as your *fits*.”

Heat?

I’ve heard that term used before to talk about animals breeding, but I’ve never considered that was what my fits actually were.

“So Dr. Toth lied to me about everything,” I mutter. “He lied to me about who I am, and he lied about the purpose of my mission.”

“And one other thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you were telling your story, you described how the bomb went off earlier than you expected, which resulted in the death of your former teammates. Based on what I know about Toth and his agency, that was no accident.”

“You mean...?”

“I mean Toth sent you on a suicide mission. Once the bomb was successfully planted, you and your teammates were no longer of use to him, and he didn’t want to risk having you fall into our hands. So he arranged to have you destroyed along with the Source’s power supply.”

A cold, numb feeling clutches at my heart, followed a moment later by a fiery explosion of rage.

“That son of a bitch!” I snarl as I punch my fist into my hand.

“If I ever see that fucker again, I’ll kill him.”

“Your anger is justified. However, I highly doubt you will ever see Toth again.”

Seraph is right, of course. Dr. Toth is back in the city hive, a place I will likely never see again. I have no way to get back there, and even if I did, what good would it do me? Like Seraph said, I’ve outlived my usefulness to Dr. Toth. I’m basically just human trash now.

No. Not human.

Omega.

“What will happen to the Zone?” I ask. “According to Dr. Toth’s plan, destroying the batteries was supposed to shut down the Source for good.” I look around at the alphas and omegas seated around the fire. “But it seems like nothing has happened. Nobody has changed. Maybe the batteries survived the explosion somehow. Maybe the Source is okay.”

Seraph shakes his head as he stares into the fire.

“No. The Source is not okay. The batteries were destroyed, and once the last of the residual energy inside the machine is used up, then the Source will shut down completely. In short, the Source is dying, and it is dying rapidly.”

There is a collective intake of breath around the fire. Tears of guilt and shame blur my vision. My foolish actions have doomed everyone in this cave, as well as everyone else in the Zone.

“Isn’t there anything we can do to stop it?” I ask in a cracking voice.

“Not unless you know where to acquire a new set of promethium batteries.”

“What will happen when the Source goes out completely?”

“The Source is what gives the alphas and omegas their vitality. They can survive outside the Source’s influence for a short time, such as during Ark and Embla’s excursion to the city hive many years ago. But after a few days, they will become so weak they can barely move. Eventually, they will waste away completely and die. However, I doubt it will come to that. The Outsiders will probably just wait until the alphas are sufficiently weak, then they will invade in force and easily gun down the inhabitants of the Zone. They once viewed the Zone as a potential resource to be controlled. Now they merely see it as a threat to be destroyed.”

The tears overflow from my eyes and spill down my face as my body starts to shake with sobs.

“I’m so sorry,” I cry. “It’s all my fault. I’ve destroyed the Zone.”

I feel a small, rough hand on my shoulder. It is Embla.

“No cry. Okay. No cry.”

But the kindness in her voice only makes me feel more guilty.

“Embla, you don’t understand what I’ve done.”

“She understands,” Ark says. “Embla may not be the most eloquent speaker, but she hears a lot.”

“Then why is she being so nice to me?” I ask. “Why are all of you being so nice? Marr is right, you should all hate me. God, you should kill me for what I’ve done.”

Embla frowns and strokes my hair.

“No hate. No kill. *Friend.*”

Seraph watches us thoughtfully from his place by the fire.

“Embla is correct. We most certainly are not going to kill you, Ophelia. After all, you just might be the only person who can save us from this predicament.”

I wipe away my tears and give Seraph a confused look.

“Me? Save you? What are you talking about?”

Seraph stands up stiffly and brushes the dirt from his legs. His powerful muscles stand out in the light from the fire.

“That is a topic for later. We have already talked enough for one night, and I suspect your estrus will be flaring up again soon. We need to get you and your mates properly sequestered before that happens. I believe there is a ‘guest cave’ nearby that will be adequate for that purpose. Embla?”

Embla grins broadly and motions for me to follow.

“Come. I show.”

I go with her to see where I will be spending the night, my brain buzzing after that troubling conversation. And now, at

the very front of my mind is the term Seraph just used to describe the young alphas who saved me.

He called them my *mates*.

CHAPTER 19: OPHELIA

I stand at the mouth of the cave and stare out at the dark wilderness beyond. I don't know exactly what time it is, but it must be after midnight. The air cools my bare skin, and it carries the sharp, clean scent of evergreens. Overhead, the stars wink like thousands of tiny gemstones. God, those stars are beautiful. It's the first time I've ever seen them in real life. We didn't have stars back in the city. Too much smog and too much light.

I lick my lips and taste salt, the residue of the alphas. Behind me, the interior of the small dwelling is filled with their mingled snoring as they sleep in the pile of soft animal furs which have been arranged into a kind of nest.

I'm the one who did that.

After dinner, Embla led me and the five young alphas to this 'guest cave,' as Seraph called it. She showed me the stacks of folded animal furs in the corner, indicated they were mine to use as I saw fit, and then, after a knowing smile and a glance at her two sons, she departed.

At first, I was perplexed, not quite sure what I was supposed to do with the primitive bedding. But after a second, my omega instincts must have kicked in, because I found myself arranging the stuff into a nest shape. The alphas didn't offer to help, but that was just fine with me. It meant I could arrange everything just the way I wanted it.

And by the time I was finished, I was ready to put the nest to use.

I had another one of my fits. What did Seraph call it? Estrus. Heat. It wasn't as bad as the one down in the tunnels. The alphas made sure of that. They tended to me thoroughly with their fingers and tongues until the little cave was ringing with my wild animal cries of pleasure. They all took part in it, even Marr, who glared at me furiously as he ripped one intense climax after another from between my quivering legs.

The alphas shared me. They used me.

Or maybe I used them.

When it was all said and done, my face and body were stained with sweat and tears and hot alpha seed. As before, I found myself overcome by weariness, and I drifted off to the oddly comforting sound of the alphas purring.

When I woke a few minutes ago, the alphas were all sleeping around me, keeping me warm with the intense heat of their furnace-like bodies. The only exception was Marr, who had chosen to curl up by himself on the hard stone floor a few feet away. I would be lying if I said that didn't hurt a little. But at the same time, I couldn't fault him. I would hate me too if I were him. I'm still surprised the others don't share his animosity toward me.

After a few minutes of trying to fall back to sleep—and failing miserably—I carefully climbed out of the nest and walked to the threshold of the cave to enjoy the view of the forest at

night. And now here I am, standing alone in the darkness, letting my naked body drink in the cool night air.

My skin is clean now. There's not a trace of the mess the alphas made all over me. I guess it all soaked in, just like Seraph said it did the first time.

A shiver runs through me, and it has nothing to do with the air temperature.

I know I should go back to the nest and try to sleep. After all, we have a long journey ahead of us tomorrow, and I'm sure as hell not going to let Seraph carry me the whole way.

Still, there's no way I can sleep now. My head is too cluttered with thoughts.

As I stand at the mouth of the cave and gaze out over the shadows of the forest, my mind keeps replaying all the things Seraph told me about my true nature and about how Dr. Toth betrayed me. Although I sometimes thought of Toth as my father, we didn't exactly have a close emotional bond. But I never thought he would sell me out like this, sending me on a damn suicide mission.

And that's not even the worst part. Dr. Toth told me we would be saving the alphas, but that was just a bunch of bullshit.

What he really wants is to wipe them out. Genocide. I know about that concept from movies and books. I never suspected I would be used as a tool to make that happen, that I was created especially for that purpose.

It makes me sick to think about.

Outside, a breeze stirs the forest, and the trees sway and whisper, almost seeming to beckon me. For a second, the rustling needles even sound a little bit like a real voice calling me, and I experience a momentary impulse to run, to just disappear into the shadows. I have no illusions that I would be able to survive out there on my own, but that's okay. It's not that I want to die exactly. Just... disappear.

What stops me is the last thing Seraph said at dinner.

He said I'm the only one who can save the Zone.

Whatever that means.

And I guess if I'm being completely honest, there's another reason for me to stay. Five reasons, actually. My alphas. It's weird, because I've only known them for about a day, but I already feel a connection to them that's more than just physical. I even feel that way about Marr.

They say people bond when they go through a traumatic experience together. Maybe that's what's going on with me? Or maybe it's something else entirely.

Suddenly, I sense a presence behind me. A slight change in the air temperature and a whiff of a now familiar scent. I don't even have to turn around to know who's behind me. I whisper his name.

“Aleph...”

He answers me by placing his big hands on my shoulders and stepping closer until his front is pressed against my back. It is not lost on me how well the contours of our bodies seem to fit

together, like two pieces of a puzzle. He is naked, and I can feel his big member touching my butt. It's not hard at the moment, but it isn't fully soft either. It seems to jump softly with his pulse. He nuzzles me, and his breath tickles my ear, making me shiver.

"Trouble sleeping?" he purrs.

"You could say that. I have a lot on my mind."

"What are you thinking about, little omega? How to make your escape?"

My body stiffens briefly at his mention of running away. How could he have known I was thinking about that? But after a second, I decide it must just be a coincidence. He's only teasing. He's not a mind reader, after all. At least, I don't think he is.

"I was thinking about it," I tease back. "But I don't know where I would go. It's not like I could run all the way back to the city hive."

"Do you wish you could?" Aleph asks, his voice growing serious.

I have to think about that for a moment. "It wasn't very nice back there, I guess. I didn't have much freedom. But... it was my home. And it was safe."

His hands slide away from my shoulders, and his strong arms coil around my middle, drawing me tighter against him.

"The Zone is your home now," he says. "My pack brethren and I will keep you safe."

What a crazy thing for Aleph to say. He barely knows me. But perhaps what's even crazier is the way my heart thrills at his whispered words. Maybe it's because I can tell he really means it. And I can't deny that I do feel safe in his arms.

Still...

"You heard what Seraph said," I whisper. "The Source is dying. And that means the Zone is dying too."

"He also said you can save it."

I sigh and lean back into Aleph's embrace. "I find that part a little harder to believe."

"Seraph is never wrong," he says. "Annoying, perhaps. But never wrong."

"Oh, come on, I don't think he's annoying," I say, stifling a giggle so I don't wake up the other alphas, who are still snoring inside the cave.

Aleph chuckles softly. "You haven't known him as long as I have. Just give it some time."

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howls in the night.

"Maybe Seraph's never been wrong before," I say, "but there's a first time for everything. I don't see how I could possibly save the Zone." My body stiffens again. "Especially considering it's all my fault the Source is dying in the first place."

"You're being too hard on yourself," Aleph says. "How could you have known what you were doing? You were raised in

isolation, and Toth kept you in the dark about the way the Zone really is. You thought you would be *helping* us by shutting down the Source.”

I feel an ache of tears returning behind my eyes, but I hold them in.

“You’re too nice,” I whisper. “I’ve ruined your whole world.” I glance back at the solitary shape sleeping alone in the corner of the cave, separate from the others in the nest. “You should hate me, like he does.”

“Marr? He doesn’t hate you.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No. You don’t know Marr like I do. He just has a short temper, that’s all. He’s always been like that. But I’ve seen the way he looks at you when you’re not paying attention. Marr never looks at other omegas that way.”

“What way? Like he wants to bite my head off?”

“He doesn’t. Trust me. He cares about you, Ophelia. We all do.”

Another shiver runs through me. I thought my fit—my *heat*—had been dealt with for the night, but apparently I was wrong. I can feel that deep, flickering need just below my belly, and Aleph’s presence—his touch and his scent—is only stoking it higher. Out in the forest, the wolf howls again, and this time a second wolf answers the call.

“You don’t... you don’t mind sharing me?” I whisper.

“Not at all. That is the way things are done here in the Zone. An omega is precious. She needs multiple alpha mates to protect her. And to satisfy her needs.”

There’s that word again. The same one Seraph used after dinner.

Mates.

I gasp as Aleph turns me around roughly and draws me close, crushing my soft breasts against his muscular torso. He fists my hair and tilts my head back so that I’m gazing up into his smoldering eyes.

“But tonight, little omega, I have you all to myself.”

He drops his face to mine, claiming my mouth in a dominating kiss, and my body seems to melt against him, even as his own male anatomy grows rigid with lust.

CHAPTER 20: ALEPH

Holy Source, Ophelia is delicious. Unlike any omega I've tasted before.

At first, she goes limp in my arms, ceding all control, surrendering her mouth to my domination. But in the next moment, she sparks back to life, lifting herself onto her toes and returning my kiss with a ferocity that takes me off guard. Her teeth bite my lip hard enough to sting, and she growls defiantly, like a little feral cat. I purr in response, a deeper, softer noise that is intended to soothe her, but also to serve as a warning. She needs to remember who's in charge here. I'm a hell of a lot bigger and stronger than she is, and I'm not afraid to bend her over my lap and spank her butt raw if that's what's required to put this little omega in her place.

Then again, a spanking would probably wake up the other alphas, and I don't want that. Oh, I don't mind sharing Ophelia with my pack brethren. In fact, I welcome it. Just not right now.

Tonight I'm feeling greedy.

My purring mellows her a little. Her teeth release from my lip, and she resumes kissing me. My cock swells with arousal until it is as rigid as a bone, and Ophelia gasps when she feels it pressing against her soft belly.

"Oh, God. Aleph, you're so hard."

“I’m hard for you, little omega. You’re the one who did that to me.”

Ophelia’s body responds with its own feminine brand of arousal. The scent of her need surrounds us like an invisible cloud.

I kiss my way down her body, starting with her tender throat, then moving lower, nipping at her bare shoulders, grazing her collarbones with my fangs, kissing my way down to the swell of her beautiful, full breasts. She rakes her fingers through my hair and whimpers.

“Aleph…”

Her nipples are as plump as ripe berries. I pleasure them both, moving back and forth between them, circling her areolas with my tongue before taking the erect buds between my lips and sucking them hard, making the little omega moan with pleasure.

I shift my eyes to check on the other alphas.

Still asleep. Good.

I slowly sink to my knees, kissing and licking my way as I go. I can’t help but imagine how sexy she would look all ripe and round with a litter of pups in her belly. That’s something I’ve never thought about with any other female before, but with her it’s becoming like an obsession.

Seraph was right. This omega is special.

My lips touch the soft nest of coiling fur at her apex. Down here, the aroma is even more intense. Between my own legs,

my cock jumps like an excited dog begging for a morsel of raw meat. But my cock will just have to be patient. The omega's needs come first.

“Widen your stance,” I growl softly.

Another surge of scent plumes from her center as she steps her feet apart, separating her thighs so I may properly service her.

I press my face into the gap and go to work, licking her slowly and methodically, running my tongue over every inch of her feminine parts, the ridge and bud of her clitoris, the pillowy mounds of her outer folds, and those fleshy inner petals between. Slick seeps from her like fragrant oil, mixing with my saliva and spilling down my chin as I eat her.

“Oh God,” she whispers. “Aleph, that feels so good.”

I slide two fingers inside her dripping hole and start to stroke, searching for her tender spot, finding it, then rubbing her there with unrelenting pressure. It doesn't take long before her hips are shaking uncontrollably, and she is forced to clap her hands over her mouth to stifle the cries of pleasure welling in her throat. Her legs give out and she starts to collapse, but I catch her before she hits the ground. Her body is feather-light in my arms.

“Careful,” I purr.

“You're the one who needs to be careful,” she whispers.

“What are you trying to do, kill me?”

“I'm trying to make you come.”

“In that case, you're succeeding.”

I grin. “Good. But I’m not done. If you’re not able to take it standing up, then you’ll just have to do it sitting down.” She gives me a quizzical look, so I clarify: “You’re going to ride my face, omega.”

Her eyes go wide in the darkness.

“Aleph, I don’t think I can handle another orgasm right now. I can’t even feel my toes.”

“It’s not an offer,” I growl. “It’s a demand. As your alpha, it is my sacred duty to tend to your needs. And based on your scent, I can tell those needs have not yet been adequately met. Now sit that pretty little pussy on my face and start riding.”

I lie back on the cavern floor and drag Ophelia on top of me. She straddles my face with her juicy thighs, and her slick drizzles over my lips like nectar. For a moment she just sits there, perfectly still.

“Aleph, I don’t know what to—*oh!*”

A flick of my tongue is all it takes to set her in motion. Her hips buck, and she begins to gyrate, slowly at first, then faster and harder, riding my face with wild abandon, smothering me with her pussy, drowning me with her flowing slick while my tongue writhes over her most sensitive places.

She shudders as she comes a second time, and her pussy gushes onto my face.

Just as I’m about to pass out from lack of oxygen, she slides back and straddles my midsection. She rocks her hips, rubbing

her wet pussy along the ridges of my abdominal muscles. Her eyes flash in the dark like the eyes of a wild forest creature.

“I want to fuck your whole body,” she whispers low. “I want to come all over every inch of you.”

Her words send a sudden rush of blood surging between my legs.

“That sounds nice, omega. But there’s one part I especially want you to ride.”

She has no trouble guessing my meaning. She leans back, and with one small and trembling hand, she inspects my hardened anatomy.

“Aleph, it’s too big. I don’t think it will fit.”

“Oh, I’m certain it won’t.” *Not yet.*

This situation is not uncommon. Many young omegas require some breaking in, which is exactly what my pack brothers and I have been doing with Ophelia. However, she isn’t ready to take an alpha cock yet. Her pussy is still far too tight. Tighter than any other omega I’ve ever encountered.

“Oh,” she says. Her tone is a mixture of relief and disappointment.

“Don’t worry, little omega. There are other ways you can pleasure yourself with my dick.”

I grab her hips and move her into position so she is straddling my member with the groove of her cunt cradling the underside of my shaft.

“Ride it like that,” I purr. “Let me see you come on my cock.”

She obeys me like a good little omega. With her tiny hands propped on my abdomen for support, she begins rolling her hips, dragging her wet pussy up and down the length of my shaft, slathering me with slippery arousal until my prick and balls are drenched with slick. She mewls softly as she rides me, and her perfect body seems to glow in the starlight filtering in through the mouth of the cave.

Source, she is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

A few minutes ago, I told her that Seraph is never wrong about anything. That isn’t completely true. Seraph has been wrong about at least one thing: *me*. He keeps telling me I’m different from the other alphas, that my body contains some magical power I haven’t learned how to tap into yet. I still think that’s wolfshit. The only thing unusual about me is the color of my hair and skin.

But Seraph isn’t wrong about Ophelia. She’s definitely special, and it’s not just because she’s an Outsider. She carries a power inside her that I can’t explain, but I know it’s there. Seraph says she can save the Zone, and I believe him. I will do everything in my power to serve and protect this precious omega.

Her riding takes on a frenzied pace, and her body trembles on the edge of release, but I sense that she is holding back.

“Aleph, are you going to come?”

“You first, omega.”

“Let’s do it together,” she whispers, “and I’ll pretend you’re coming inside me.”

Such an offer is too good to resist.

I stifle a roar as my knot expands at the base of my cock. Ophelia feels it, and she bears down hard on that swollen bulb, grinding it with her pussy. Her eyes roll over white, and her head snaps back as she climaxes for the third time, her hips still bucking and shaking on top of me. A second later, my own release explodes from my tip, painting my stomach with streaks of white. My seed pools in the lines between my abdominal muscles.

As we both finish, Ophelia drops her face to my body and starts licking me, cleaning up my sticky mess with her tongue as I watch in astonishment. Fuck, the sight of her lapping up the cum from my skin is so hot I almost bust a second time.

Before she has a chance to finish cleaning me, I roll her over onto her back and climb on top of her like I’m going to mount her.

“Aleph?” she whispers. “What are you doing?”

I don’t answer. In fact, I barely even hear her question. My brain is too obsessed with the single-minded desire to put my seed inside her. If I attempted to do that in the traditional way, it would break her, so I use my fingers instead. I swipe the seed from the tip of my cock and bring my fingertips to her wet slit.

“Aleph, wait,” she murmurs. “You can’t do that.”

But I can.

And I do.

I shove my fingers inside her as deep as they can go, spreading my thick seed all over her inner walls. Despite Ophelia's protests, she doesn't try to stop me. In fact, she spreads her legs even wider. I repeat the process several more times, mopping up the remaining residue from my body and placing it where it belongs—deep inside Ophelia's perfect little cunt. As I deposit the last of the seed inside her, I rub it into her special spot, making her come one final time. Her body quakes, and she starts to cry out, but I silence her with a kiss.

When her body finally stills beneath me, I pull back and stare down at her pretty face glowing in the starlight amid a halo of silvery white hair. My fingers are still inside her.

“Aleph, you could make me pregnant,” she whispers.

“I know.”

“But we hardly know each other.”

“I don't care.”

“But...” Her brow knits. “But what about all that stuff Seraph said? He told us the Zone is dying. How can we bring a child into a world like that?”

“Then we'll just have to make sure the Zone doesn't die, now won't we?”

After a moment, her brow smooths again, and a smile brightens her face.

“So you really believe what Seraph said. You really think I can help save the Zone.”

“I’m sure of it.”

I kiss her again, gently this time. Her lips are salty with my seed. She purrs and writhes beneath me, then giggles softly. I feel her tiny hand stroking my cock.

“Aleph?” she whispers.

“Yes, Ophelia?”

“Can we make each other come again?”

I grin at my needy little omega. “Woman, it is my duty and my honor.”

CHAPTER 21: OPHELIA

Early the next morning, before the sun has even had a chance to climb over the horizon, we bid farewell to Embla and her family and set out on our journey. Before we leave, Embla gives me a big, bone-crushing hug, even though we know we'll be seeing each other again soon. She and her family will be coming to the Central Ruins tomorrow, and I'm already looking forward to that.

Today, Seraph does not carry me, but a part of me almost wishes that he would. The problem isn't the forest. The terrain is not too bad, and Dalia gifted me a pair of simple moccasins to protect my feet from the roots and twigs of the forest. The issue is with me. My head is swimming from a lack of sleep, and my bleary eyes keep trying to slide shut while I'm walking. More than once, I find myself grabbing hold of the closest alpha to keep myself steady.

I should have gotten more sleep last night.

However, between my troubled thoughts and Aleph's skillful fingers and tongue, that was pretty much a lost cause.

I experience a surge of panic as I remember what he did to me last night on the hard stone floor of the cave. He came inside me, between my legs, and I didn't even try to stop him. The second time, I even begged for it. His penis was way too big to fit in my vagina, so he just pressed his tip into my entrance,

and I stroked his long shaft until his hot, thick load spurting into my hole.

God, what were we even thinking?

If what Seraph said about omegas is true, then I was in heat yesterday, and I'm still in heat today too. Based on what little I know about animal reproduction, heat happens when a female is ovulating, when she's at her most fertile, when her body is most receptive to a male's seed. A quick mental review of the past weeks tells me it's been about two weeks since my last period. Which would mean I'm probably ovulating now. Right? Shit, I wish I had paid more attention during my biology lessons.

Seraph probably knows, but there's no way in hell I'm going to ask him.

I'll just have to wait and see what happens. There's a part of me that's totally terrified by the thought that I could be pregnant. But there's another part of me that hopes I am, and that's even more disturbing. God, I barely know any of these guys. I shouldn't be fantasizing about getting knocked up by them.

At least that little jolt of adrenaline did the trick. I'm totally awake now, and better equipped to take in my surroundings. Plus, the sun is finally coming up, so there's actually something to look at. The golden rays spear through the trees at an almost horizontal angle, illuminating the forest around us, and for the first time I realize just how beautiful this place actually is. The trees are huge, and closely packed, their dark

trunks speckled with lichen and furred with patches of green moss. The intervening spaces are filled with a dense undergrowth of ferns, their tender fronds still glistening with the dew of the recently departed night. Somewhere just out of sight, I can hear what sounds like a big river rushing past.

There's nothing like this back in the city hive. Sure, there are a lot of modern conveniences. Cars. Electricity. Food that you don't have to catch and kill. But all those human inventions pale in comparison to the natural beauty of the Zone. I bet the entire city hive with all its many layers of streets and utilities isn't as complex as a single one of those ferns. I find myself getting the same feeling I had last night during dinner with Embla and her unusual but happy family.

"What are you thinking about?" a now familiar, monotone voice asks.

I turn to see Seraph's holographic face watching me with an expression that could almost be described as curious. I hesitate, unsure how I should answer. Everything feels like a test with Seraph. But after a moment, I decide just to answer him honestly.

"I was thinking that the Zone is not at all how Dr. Toth described it to me. It's primitive compared to the city hive, but it's not as horrible as I was led to believe. As a matter of fact, it's really beautiful." I pause for a beat, then I add, "I was thinking maybe it isn't such a bad place to live."

Seraph's face glitches briefly. I'm not sure if that was an actual emotion bubbling to the surface, or just a problem with the

holographic projectors embedded around his neck. He nods wordlessly and strides ahead, following the trail of the twins, who are leading the way.

A moment later, another voice comes from the other side of me, so deep and rumbling I can feel it jiggling my inner places. Boreg.

“Wow. I can hardly believe my ears.”

“Are you talking about my answer to Seraph? Because I really meant it.”

“Your answer makes me very happy,” Boreg says, smiling through his thick beard. God, he is so handsome, and his massive presence makes me feel so safe and protected. “But that’s not what I was talking about. It was Seraph’s question that surprised me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never heard Seraph *ask* somebody what they were thinking before. It’s not that he doesn’t care. It’s just that he doesn’t have to ask. He has the ability to enter the mind of anyone in the Zone. He can even do it with animals. But for some reason he chooses not to do it with you.”

“Or maybe he can’t,” says Aleph, who has sauntered up beside us.

The pale alpha gives me a knowing smirk, which is no doubt intended as a reminder of our clandestine nocturnal activities. A hot blush fills my cheeks, and something tickles inside me, lower down than my belly.

I quickly look away and fix my eyes on Seraph, who is not many paces ahead, and it suddenly occurs to me to ask the question that has been on my mind for a while now.

“So, um... what *is* Seraph, exactly?”

Aleph and Boreg both chuckle quietly.

“Yeah, that’s a good question,” Aleph says. “If you find out the answer, please be sure to tell us.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

Boreg shrugs. “Only a little. We know he is intimately connected to the Source. Some alphas say he was summoned a long time ago by human shamans before the time of the Great Change. But really, he was created by scientists working for Synergen. A long time ago, when I was too little to really remember, Seraph didn’t even have a body. He just lived inside the Source itself. Then, about twenty years ago, he took over the body of a beta which the Outsiders had augmented with an electric brain.”

While Boreg is talking, I let my eyes wander all over Seraph’s back. His only clothing is that metal codpiece covering his junk, so from behind he looks completely naked. Aside from his gray skin, there’s nothing beta-like about him. He’s built like a god, with broad shoulders tapering down to a trim waist and one of the most perfect, muscular butts I’ve ever seen. As I watch him walking, I can’t help but think about digging my nails into that sexy backside while he thrusts into my—

No.

Stop it, I tell myself. If I give in to such thoughts, I'm liable to have another one of my fits. Or heat. It really doesn't matter what it's called. I just know I don't want it to happen out here in the middle of the woods.

"Seraph doesn't look like a beta," I say, trying to get my mind back on track.

He's transformed himself a lot over the past twenty years," Boreg says. "When I was very young, he looked more like a normal beta. The first thing he changed was his head. He moved his machine brain into his chest so he could have a more expressive holographic face."

"More expressive?" I say incredulously.

Boreg smirks behind his beard. "Later, he started to bulk up his skinny beta body. That was around the time he formed this pack and started bringing us out here into the wilderness for training. We were just barely teenagers then, and I guess he wanted to be able to protect us." He shrugs. "He's our leader, but he's still a mystery to us. Maybe my mom can tell you more about him. She probably knows Seraph better than anyone."

"Your mom?"

"She used to be an Outsider, like you. She's a scientist."

Boreg's big hairy chest puffs with pride as he talks about his mother, and I smile inside. This gentle giant is a real momma's boy.

"I didn't realize your mother was an Outsider," I say.

“So is Aleph’s mother. And Marr’s too.” He gestures at the grumpy, scarred alpha bringing up the rear of our expedition, who grunts in acknowledgement.

That’s surprising. I remember Seraph mentioning that Marr’s mother used to be an Outsider, but didn’t realize Aleph and Boreg’s mothers were too. Is that a common occurrence, I wonder, or is it perhaps the reason why these alphas have joined together in a pack? I’m just about to ask, when I feel that old, familiar tickle deep inside my core, and this time it’s accompanied by a flush of warmth across my skin.

Yeah, my heat is definitely coming back.

Damn. I thought it would have been taken care of by Aleph’s extra attention last night, but apparently not. I guess being in close proximity to six hyper-masculine guys has put my omega libido into overdrive. If I don’t do something about it soon, I’m going to be down on all fours begging for these alphas to make me come again. God, I might even beg Seraph to join in.

I can’t let that happen. It’s not that I don’t want it. But after what happened between me and Aleph last night, I’m afraid we’ll go too far again. If I keep giving in to my urges, sooner or later one of these alphas really is going to make a baby inside me, and I’m not ready for that.

Right now, my heat is still pretty mild. I could probably take care of it on my own, if I could just get some alone time, but I need to act fast.

My eyes dart around the forest, and my mind races, trying to come up with an excuse to get away for a couple minutes.

Boreg notices my worried expression and gives me a quizzical look.

“Ophelia? What’s the matter?”

I just say the first thing that pops into my head...

CHAPTER 22: OPHELIA

“I have to pee!” I blurt a little too loudly.

Boreg and Aleph both look at me like I just said something crazy. “You need to *what?*”

“You know...” I glance downward at the loincloth covering my lady parts.

“You need us to pleasure your pussy?” Boreg offers.

“No!” I shout, even though the little omega voice inside me is screaming *yes!* “I just need to, you know... go to the bathroom.”

“Bathroom?” Boreg furrows his brow. “Do you need to bathe your pussy? Has it gotten dirty?”

Oh. My. God.

My face flames with a combination of embarrassment and frustration. I guess the alphas aren't familiar with the concept of a bathroom. Still, I thought these guys' moms were supposed to be from the city hive like me. You'd think they would have picked up the phrase from them, but apparently not. I'm just about to think of another way to explain it, when a placid, artificial voice helps me out.

“I believe what Ophelia is trying to express is that she needs to urinate.”

Seraph. He must have noticed we had stopped walking, so now he's coming back toward us with the twins right behind

him. Soon, I'm surrounded by six muscular, half naked males, all of them staring at me intensely. The masculine scent of their sweating bodies fills my lungs, and my arousal notches higher, getting precariously close to the danger zone. I'm just glad that today I have this primitive two-piece outfit to hide the signs of my shameful arousal.

"Oh, so you just need to piss?" Aleph asks.

I nod, lying.

Seraph folds his arms across his chest and fixes me with his unrelenting stare.

"Very well," he says. "You may proceed with your urination."

Under other circumstances, I might laugh at such a statement. But right now, standing in the middle of a forest surrounded by six brutal males with my heat level rising by the second, I'm not exactly in a laughing mood.

I head toward the bushes on the left side of the trail. That's the direction of the river. I'm hoping the sound of the water rushing by will provide enough white noise to mask any noises I might make while I'm doing my thing. I want the guys to think I'm peeing. I don't want them to know that I'm actually going to make myself come.

But before I've taken two steps, Seraph speaks again, his voice slightly sterner.

"Ophelia, where are you going?"

I pause mid stride and look back at him. "I'm, uh, you know... proceeding with my urination."

“You do not need to go behind the bushes to do that.”

“Well, I’m not going to do it in front of you.”

“Why not? We have all seen your anatomy, Ophelia. There is no reason for you to be ashamed.”

My blush deepens.

“That’s not the point,” I say hotly. “Maybe you don’t understand because you’re a cyborg, or whatever you are, but some people just can’t pee with an audience.”

What I don’t mention is that I’m not one of those people. However, I definitely don’t want an audience for what I’m really about to do. God, I hope what Boreg said earlier is true—I hope Seraph really can’t read my mind.

Seraph computes for a moment, then he says, “Very well. You may go behind the bushes to urinate. But these woods are dangerous. At least one of us must accompany you. I appoint Marr for this task.”

“*What?*” Marr and I both shout in unison.

“Don’t question me, Marr,” Seraph says. “Your parents put you under my command. You will obey my orders. And as for you, Ophelia—you have a choice. You can urinate here in front of all of us, or you can go with Marr.”

Marr sighs and curses under his breath. “Come on, Outsider. Let’s get this over with.”

Well shit. I would say my plan just backfired big time.

I have no choice now but to go with Marr. Still grumbling, he pushes aside the foliage for me and I step through to the other side.

The sound of rushing water fills my ears. Just as I suspected, the river is only a few yards beyond the screen of bushes. What I didn't realize, however, was that there is also a huge cliff here. A deep gorge carved into the stone by millennia of moving water. That's why I only heard the river before but didn't see it.

Cautiously, I move to the edge and peer over. Perhaps sixty feet below, white water churns and boils. A cool breeze rises from the depths, stirring my hair and kissing my face with mist. The smell of wild water fills my nose. I've never smelled anything quite like it before in my life.

"Careful!" Marr growls.

I gasp as a pair of huge, callused hands grab my arms and yank me back from the edge.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Ophelia?" Marr hisses, his face tight with concern. "That's dangerous. You could fall."

"I'm not going to fall," I scoff. "If I didn't know any better, I would say you actually care about me."

Marr scowls and pulls his hands away from me as if burned.

"Yeah, right. I'm only worried about how angry Seraph would be if I let your stupid Outsider ass fall in and drown. Otherwise... you could jump in for all I care."

I crumple a little, as if punched, and tears moisten my eyes. Marr's words hurt. But I deserved that. The scarred alpha has every right to be angry with me, and if I were in his position, I would probably be just as mean.

"Well?" he says, folding his arms. "Are you going to piss or what?"

"I can't do it while you're watching."

Marr grunts. "So modest. Very well. Just try not to fall off the cliff while you're pissing, okay? If you do, I'll never hear the end of it from Seraph."

He turns his back to me.

I quickly move toward the nearest bush, squat, and pull my loincloth aside. Everything between my legs is hypersensitive from my heat, and the cool morning air on my wet lady parts almost makes me gasp out loud.

This is bad. This is really, really bad. If I were alone right now, I'm certain I could rub myself to a climax in a couple of minutes. But there's no way I can do it while Marr is standing right there. All it would take would be one backward glance from the scarred alpha, and I'd be busted. Plus, considering his heightened senses, he'd probably be able to hear me. Hell, he'd probably be able to *smell* it.

God knows, I can certainly smell him, and it's only serving to make my predicament even worse.

I decide to put the kibosh on my ill-conceived little plan. I don't know what I'm going to do about my heat. Maybe if I

just spend the rest of the day keeping my eyes on the ground and my thoughts pure, I'll be okay.

Yeah, fat chance of that happening.

“What’s taking so long?” Marr growls. “I don’t hear any pissing.”

“I’m trying.”

“Well, hurry up.”

I need to pee at least a little, just so I don’t raise Marr’s suspicions. The problem is, my bladder feels empty. I should have drunk more water before setting out from Embla’s place this morning. Still, I need to try and squeeze out at least a few drops to satisfy the alpha.

Maybe the river can help. I turn my attention to the sound of the water flowing through the gorge in the hopes that it will get my own flow going. But after a couple of seconds, I notice something strange.

A voice.

It’s just like last night, when I was listening to the wind in the trees and I thought I could hear a voice urging me to run away. Only this time, the voice from the river is louder and more distinct, and it quickly transforms into a voice I know all too well.

Dr. Toth.

It’s my creator’s voice, but it’s speaking to me through the sound of the river.

“Come closer, Ophelia,” the voice coaxes. “Come closer to the edge.”

What the hell? Is this some kind of hallucination or something? A side effect of sleep deprivation after not getting enough sack time last night? I don't think that's the case. Actually, I feel more awake now than I have all morning, thanks to the dose of adrenaline coursing through me.

“Closer, Ophelia. Come to the edge. Look into the water. *Jump* into the water.”

The voice is getting louder and louder. Sometimes it seems to break apart into several voices, then it melds back into a single one. At the same time, I feel a kind of magnetic attraction drawing me toward the cliff. My legs twitch, and I have to actively focus on keeping myself from rushing toward the edge of the ravine and throwing myself over.

What's happening to me? Am I going insane? I feel guilty about the trouble I've caused for the Zone, but not to the point of killing myself, which is what would probably happen if I jumped off that cliff. Besides, Seraph said I held the key to saving the Zone.

“He's lying!”

“It's a trick!”

“Get it over with!”

“Jump!”

Now the voices are swarming my brain. A hundred Dr. Toths all screeching at me to fling myself into the river. I clamp my

hands over my ears to block out the sound, but it doesn't help.

I glance up at Marr's scarred back. A moment ago, I was afraid he would turn around. Now I *wish* he would. I need him to save me from whatever is happening to me. I try to call out to him, but something chokes off my words. The voices continue.

"Do it!"

"Jump, Ophelia!"

"Over the edge!"

"Do it now!"

My legs twitch again.

CHAPTER 23: MARR

Great Source, what's taking the Outsider so long? I've been standing with my back turned long enough to count fifty heartbeats, and the female still hasn't started to piss. If she had, I would hear it. But so far, the only sounds are the leaves whispering overhead and the roar of the river rushing past at the bottom of the gorge.

I'm starting to lose my Source-damned patience here.

Why the hell does Seraph keep putting me in charge of the Outsider, anyway? This is the second time he's done it. The first time was down in the cave, when he put me in charge of tending to her heat. And now here I am playing babysitter while the brat makes water. It really is too much.

And what makes it even worse is the delicious way she smells. I've been forced to endure that aroma all morning, and now the air is positively loaded with it. She must have her loincloth pulled aside to expose her pretty little cunt.

Fuck.

I quickly shove those thoughts out of my brain. The last thing I need is to be getting turned on while I'm alone with Ophelia. The Outsider, I mean. No matter how much my body wants her, I can't let myself forget what she is: an enemy of my people.

Nevertheless, I feel bad about what I said a minute ago—that I wouldn't care if she jumped in the river. That's not true, and I wish I hadn't said it.

Still no sound from behind me.

Damn, she really is shy about peeing, isn't she? Well, maybe I can help speed things up.

I pull my own loincloth aside and whip my cock out. It's partially engorged thanks to the Outsider's heat-scent, but it isn't completely hard, so I'm still able to piss. I let out a groan of satisfaction as my bladder starts to drain, and my powerful stream of urine rustles the fallen leaves covering the ground in front of me.

"See, Outsider, it's no big deal," I call back over my shoulder. "I'm peeing in front of you, so now you have nothing to be—"

From behind me, I hear the patter of small feet, followed by a desperate, strangled cry.

"Marr! Help me!"

I turn just in time to see Ophelia's feet—clad in a pair of leather moccasins given to her by Dalia—disappear over the edge of the cliff. My heart stops.

I don't think; I just act.

My feet carry me to the edge of the cliff, and I dive without hesitation. For a moment, my body seems to hang in the air, and I take the opportunity to unleash the loudest howl my lungs can produce, a signal to Seraph and my pack brethren that something is wrong. Then gravity kicks in, and I'm

dropping, my body plummeting toward the churning whitewater below.

My vision focuses on Ophelia. She is already many feet below me, her arms and legs flailing as she falls. For a fraction of a moment, our eyes lock, and I see the look of intense fear written on her face.

Then she breaks through the surface with a splash, and the river takes her.

In dangerous situations, time always seems to slow down. I've experienced it on many occasions during fights with other alphas. It happens now, too. My fall to the bottom of the gorge seems to last forever, and I have plenty of time to think about what I've done.

I have killed Ophelia. I've killed her just as surely as if I tossed her off that cliff myself. I told her I wouldn't care if she jumped, and she took me seriously.

Of course she did. Over the past days, I've been sending her signals that I hate her. Hell, I almost had myself convinced that was true. But now that her life is in peril, my true feelings are impossible to deny. Even though I've only known her a short time, I already feel a connection to her that I've never felt with anyone else before. Even my bond with my pack brothers is not as intense.

And now, short-tempered fool that I am, I've gone and destroyed it.

But maybe there's still a chance to save her.

With my arms outstretched, my body pierces the surface of the river like a blade, and I sink deep into the cold water. The current is strong, and it pushes me along like a leaf on the wind.

I don't try to fight it. Even I'm not that stubborn. Instead, I let the flow carry me along while my eyes scan through the water, searching for any sign of Ophelia.

Can't see a damned thing, though.

I stay under until my lungs start to burn, then I swim to the surface and gulp the air. I holler Ophelia's name and rake my eyes over the surface of the water, but the rapids make it difficult to see more than a few yards in front of me.

I dive again and keep searching.

After a few minutes of swimming downriver, the canyon levels out, and the sheer cliffs on both sides of the river transition into flat, rocky banks. Unfortunately, I see no sign of Ophelia on either side.

Then something in the middle of the river catches my eye.

A cluster of big boulders forms a miniature island in the center of the foaming rapids, and a huge dead tree trunk has gotten lodged against these stones. One crooked branch protrudes out over the eddying water, and from the tip, a piece of animal hide flaps like a tattered banner.

I swim toward the downed tree and fetch the piece of hide. I recognize it immediately. It's the top that Ophelia borrowed from Dalia.

A pained roar bursts from my throat.

I sense a presence beside me, a flash of ivory in my peripheral vision, and my heart jumps. But it isn't Ophelia; it's Aleph. He must have dove into the water right after me when he heard my howl. He swims over and braces himself against the tree next to me, and his eyes fall on the torn garment in my hand.

"Marr, what happened to Ophelia?"

"I killed her," I cry.

Aleph's face tenses. "Killed her? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I told her I wouldn't care if she threw herself off the cliff. I didn't really mean it, but I guess she thought I did. When my back was turned, she jumped."

I remember the way she cried out for me to help her. That seems like a strange thing for her to do if she were really trying to kill herself. Still, I can't help but feel that I'm the one responsible for this. I was supposed to protect Ophelia, and now she's gone. Our omega is gone.

"It's all my fault," I mutter.

Aleph's face softens when he sees the agony I'm going through. "We can worry about whose fault it is later," he says. "Right now, we have to keep looking for Ophelia. There's still a chance she's alive. Come on, let's get to shore. It will be easier to search from land. The others are coming behind us to help."

I nod, and together we head for the riverbank. It takes every bit of my strength to keep from getting swept away by the rapids.

Aleph is right. We can't give up looking for Ophelia. But my hopes are low. This river current might be swimmable for an alpha, but for a small omega like Ophelia, it would be almost impossible. And even if she does manage to keep from drowning, there's another problem—the direction the river is flowing, the direction it would carry her body.

This river leads away from the center of the Zone, toward the outer reaches beyond the control of the Central Tribes. My gut clenches as I think about what lies in that direction.

The Farlands.

CHAPTER 24: OPHELIA

Water swirls around me, cold as ice and stronger than anything I've ever experienced. I'm completely naked now. The moccasins were the first to go, ripped from my feet as soon as I hit the water. The top was next, torn away by the current, and my loincloth followed shortly after. The churning water spins me around and tumbles me head over heels until I can't tell which way is up. I open my eyes, hoping I can see the surface, but my vision is only filled with a confusing maelstrom of bubbles. My lungs burn like fire.

Meanwhile, Dr. Toth's voice is still shouting inside my head, multiplied a dozen times over into a chorus of angry voices.

"Give in, Ophelia!"

"Open your lungs to the river!"

"Drown!"

"Die!"

I try my best not to listen. I don't want to die. Not like this. But if I don't get air soon, I'll have no choice in the matter.

Suddenly, I'm swept upward by the current, and my head breaks through to the air. After the muffled underwater sounds, the noise of the world above the surface is almost deafening, and it temporarily drowns out the voices in my head. The sound of splashing water fills my ears, and somewhere off in the distance I hear an alpha howling. Marr?

I gasp deeply, pulling in as much air as my lungs can hold. But before I have a chance to cry for help, the current pulls me under again.

This situation repeats itself more times than I can count. Again and again, I'm dragged below the surface of the water and spun around like a load of laundry in one of the washing machines back at the facility. Each time, just before I think my lungs are going to give out on me, I'm miraculously pushed to the surface—but only long enough to gather another lungful of air before being yanked under again. Sometimes my body slams against hard boulders, sending jolts of pain shooting through my muscles and bones.

And through it all, I'm forced to endure the mental onslaught of the voices in my head.

“Don't fight it, Ophelia.”

“Stop struggling.”

“Let the water in.”

“It will be so easy, so *peaceful*.”

And the voices aren't the only problem. It feels like some malevolent entity is trying to take control of my body and force me to drown myself. It already got the better of me once, when it made me jump off the cliff against my will. I refuse to let that happen again.

I clamp my fingers over my nose and squeeze my lips shut hard.

Spinning, spinning, spinning.

My hip rams into a boulder. I want to scream in pain, but I can't. Another blow strikes my shoulder hard. A little higher, and it would have hit my head and knocked me out. That would have been the end of me.

Suddenly, the river spits me out, and I greedily gulp the air. The world whirls around me.

I'm not in the forest anymore. Smaller vegetation lines the banks of the river. Beyond that, rolling plains sparsely dotted with trees.

I go under again before I can cry for help.

And still those voices keep pestering me. A hundred Dr. Toths, all shouting, whispering, snarling, coaxing me to give up.

"You're a bad person."

"You have destroyed the Zone."

"You deserve to die."

For a moment, I almost give in. But then another voice deep inside tells me to hold on. A primal, instinctual voice that tells me it doesn't matter what I've done. My life matters, and I must do everything I can to survive.

Plus, this isn't just about *my* life anymore.

I think about what Seraph told me last night. He said I might be able to save the Zone. I still don't know what the hell he meant by that, and I'm not entirely sure I even believe him, but as long as there's a chance that I can right the wrong I've committed, then I have a duty to keep myself alive.

And there's something else. The thing Aleph did to me last night. The thing we did together. He put his seed inside me, and I let him do it. I don't know if I got pregnant from that. Hell, I don't even know if there has been enough time for it to even happen yet. But if the crazy maternal instinct welling up inside me is going to help me get through this ordeal alive, I'm not going to question it.

But perhaps more than anything else, I just want to see my alphas again. It's crazy. I barely know them, but I already feel a bond with them. Even with Seraph. Even with Marr.

Marr.

He tried to save me. The vision of the scarred alpha diving after me is the final straw that gives me the strength I need to resist the voices in my head.

Those evil voices only grow louder in response.

"Give up! Drown! Die!"

But now that other tiny voice deep inside—the one that sounds like my own voice—that voice is getting louder too.

"Live! Live! Live!"

It feels like a war is going on inside my head, like my psyche is getting pulled in two different directions. Molten pain courses through my nervous system. Something explodes, like a bomb detonating in the center of my brain, and then...

Rage. Pure, all-consuming rage.

The world starts to disappear in a red haze. The last thing I feel before losing awareness is the sudden, gut-wrenching sensation of falling from a great height.

Falling, falling, falling...

CHAPTER 25: SLAAR

Splash!

I watch the tossed bone disappear into the water amid rings of ripples, then I turn back to the dead beta roasting on the spit and tear off another piece of meat, an arm this time.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the smoldering fire, Dreggu and Nurbag are fighting over a leg, snarling like dogs as they play tug-of-war with the charred and severed limb. Fucking assholes.

“Knock it off!” I bark.

The other two alphas stop fighting and look at me in silence. I scowl at them menacingly. I’m the leader of our little gang, but I need to continually remind the bastards of that fact, lest they get the bright idea to challenge me for that position. I have to constantly put them in their place.

“It’s impossible to enjoy my meal with the two of you bickering,” I growl. “Dreggu gets the thigh. Nurbag gets the shin.”

“Aw, boss,” Nurbag complains like a whining child. “How come Dreggu gets the big piece?”

I bare my fangs in a snarl.

“Don’t fucking question me or I’ll come over there and kick your ass. Maybe I’ll even fuck it too. Is that what you want?”

Nurbag drops his gaze and shakes his head. “No, boss.”

“Then shut up and do as I say. Besides, shin’s good eating. You should be grateful you have anything to eat at all.”

“Yeah, boss.”

The two alphas set to work chopping the leg apart at the knee, and I turn my attention back to my meal of roasted beta-meat.

We have made our camp on the bank of a large pool, which is actually a part of the Western River. The pool is fed on one side by a huge waterfall which spills over the edge of a stony outcropping, and the incessant roar of the falling water fills the air with constant noise.

I take another bite of beta-meat. It’s tough and bland, but it provides my weary body with some much needed energy.

These days, betas are all but extinct in the wild. And for good reason. All the brainless things can do is wander around aimlessly like an alpha who’s drunk too much wine. Betas’ll walk straight off a cliff without a second thought. However, some of the bigger Farlander tribes keep betas in paddocks where they breed and raise them for food. That’s where we got the beta we are currently devouring. We stole it last night, and we ran until daylight before settling down to enjoy the prize.

As usual, I’m the one who did all the work of preparing it. I swear, Dreggu and Norbag are worthless. I really need to get a new gang.

I rip another chunk of meat from the cooking beta and feed.

The alphas of the Central Tribes shun the practice of eating betas. They say it’s dishonorable because the betas are

humans. But what the hell do those stuck-up alphas know? They wouldn't survive two days out here in the Farlands. They've got it easy living in the ruins at the heart of the Zone, close to the Source.

Then again, I've noticed that the Source energy seems weaker today. Maybe the Source is dying? If that happens, I bet those pampered Central Tribers will be out here begging for some beta-meat. Worthless fuckers.

Once my stomach is full, I sit back and release a loud belch, followed immediately by an even louder fart. The two sounds echo across the water. Dreggu and Norbag grin in appreciation.

"You two bastards can finish the rest of that," I say magnanimously, pointing to the mostly picked over skeleton smoking on the spit over the embers. "I'm fucking stuffed. I'll tell you, nothing beats having a belly full of meat."

Dreggu and Norbag nod in agreement.

"That's true, boss," Dreggu says. "But I can think of one thing that would make it even better."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

Dreggu takes a final bite of thigh meat, then he tosses the stripped femur out into the pool, where it lands with a splash. When he speaks, his words are garbled by his full mouth, but I can still understand him.

"A nice, wet omega cunt to fuck."

Norbag nods and grunts enthusiastically.

Damn. That stupid ass Dreggu is actually right for once. It's been a long time since my cock has tasted the pleasure of an omega. There are fewer and fewer in the Farlands these days. Most of them flee to the Central Ruins the first chance they get. They say the Central Tribers treat their females better, don't keep them locked up in cages and beat them. Basically, they just let their women walk all over them. Well, that ain't the way we do things out here in the Farlands.

Still, a piece of omega ass sure would be nice. I'm contemplating ways to make that happen, when all of a sudden, a loud noise comes from the direction of the water.

KER—*SPLOOSH!*

I abruptly sit up, my muscles hard with tension, and my two gang partners do the same.

“What the hell was that?” I growl.

“I dunno, boss,” Dreggu says.

“Sounded like something went over the waterfall,” adds Norbag.

“Yeah, no shit. But what?”

My first thought is that some of the alphas from the camp we robbed last night have come seeking retribution. That idea scares the hell out of me, but I don't let my two underlings see it. I stand up slowly and gaze out over the pool, but I see no signs of life. I listen, but if there are any sounds coming from that direction, they are drowned out by the rushing of the waterfall.

Then my eyes catch a sign of movement close to shore. A cluster of bubbles, some ripples.

“Boss, look!”

“I see it, you idiot. I see it.”

My muscles tense as the ripples grow larger. Whatever is out there, it’s too damn big to be a fish. My hands instinctively ball themselves into fists, expecting an angry Farlander alpha to break the surface. But I could never have expected what actually emerges from the water. A head covered in long white hair, followed by a small but curvaceous female body.

Omega.

Female omega.

And the best part: she’s in heat.

As soon as her scent hits me, my cock goes rigid under my loincloth. Fuck me, this little bitch smells *good*. But who the hell is she? And where did she come from?

Whoever she is, she’s not much of a swimmer, and she struggles to get to shore. I suppose I could go and help her, but part of me thinks this could be some kind of trap, so I hold back.

Eventually, the omega manages to drag herself onto shore, and she crawls out of the water on all fours. Her dripping hair hangs down like a mask, hiding her face. But it’s not her face I’m interested in. I’m far more fascinated by her succulent female body, which is on full display. She’s completely naked, which is kind of a shame, because I think I would have

enjoyed ripping her clothes off. Oh well, that's okay. There are still plenty of other ways I can torment this little omega.

I glance around to make sure there are no other alphas lurking nearby.

Nothing.

I'm fairly certain the omega isn't bait, so I move closer to where she is still crouching on all fours on the riverbank, catching her breath. Her scent grows stronger in my nostrils, and it's all I can do to keep from busting a nut inside my loincloth.

But something about her scent is strange.

She's not a Farlander. That's for damn sure. Yet she doesn't smell like she's from the Central Tribe either. And then there's her unusual appearance. I've never seen that color hair on an omega before, at least not one as obviously young as she is. Still, none of that changes the fact that she looks and smells fucking delicious. Especially to a cunt-starved alpha like myself.

Dreggu and Norbag are both on their feet now, too. They try to charge past me toward the omega, but my growl stops them.

"Not so fast," I snap. "I get first go at her."

For a moment, I think they might actually try to fight me over her, but eventually they both back down, and I smile.

"Don't worry," I tell them. "There will be plenty to go around."

I turn my attention back to the weird little omega, who so far hasn't made a sound. She's still down on all fours, and her whole body is shaking, probably from the cold water.

I guess I'd better warm the poor thing up, I think with a wicked grin.

Oh yeah, I'm definitely going to enjoy raping her. Repeatedly. Hell, I'll even let those assholes Dreggu and Nurbag have a few turns while I'm recovering between sessions. And afterward, once the female is good and tenderized by our fucking, I'm going to enjoy killing her and cooking her over an open fire. There is no greater delicacy than an omega's roasted rump. Far more toothsome than the stringy beta-meat we've been eating.

My mouth waters at the thought.

But first, I do want to get a look at her face, just out of curiosity. I'm not a fucking savage, after all. I want to at least know who I'm raping.

I kneel down on the silty ground in front of her, my loincloth jutting with my arousal.

"Hey, omega," I say. "Who are you?"

She answers with a small, feral growl. Is that shit supposed to scare me or something? Doesn't this bitch know who the fuck she's dealing with?

I reach out to push aside the veil of wet hair covering her face. Her growling gets louder, and her body starts trembling even

more violently. It's not a fearful trembling, though. More like a barely restrained rage.

“What's wrong with her?” Dreggu asks. “Never seen an omega act like that before.”

“Maybe you should be careful, boss,” Norbag adds.

Fuck that. What do they think I am, some kind of coward? If I let them see me back down from a little growling omega, they'll never respect me as their leader again. No, I need to show them why I'm the boss. And I need to show this little omega too.

I sweep aside the curtain of hair and uncover her face.

As soon as I see the look in her eyes, I know I've made a mistake. Perhaps the biggest mistake in my life. Those yellow eyes don't just look wild; they look downright demonic.

The omega shrieks like an angry forest cat. Before I have a chance to pull my hand back, her face shoots forward, and her teeth open and close with a snap. It happens so quick, I don't even realize what she has done to me at first. Then I see the bright red blood shooting from the stumps of my severed fingers, followed by the intense pain shooting up the nerves of my arm. Tears fill my eyes, blurring my vision.

“She bit off my fingers!”

She spits them out onto the dirt.

I tumble backward onto the wet ground, and the omega pounces on me, pummeling me with her fists, raking me with her claws, biting me with her fangs. Even though she is tiny,

she is stronger than any alpha I've ever fought. She's literally tearing me apart, and there's nothing I can do to stop her.

I shout for Dreggu and Norbag to help me, but I can already hear those bastards screaming and running for their lives, abandoning me to the demon omega.

A moment later, her jaws clamp on my throat, silencing my cries.

CHAPTER 26: ROMULUS & REMUS

Sunlight strobos through the trees as we run, searching for our lost omega. We follow the river, Romulus on the north side and Remus on the south, our keen eyes searching the muddy banks for any signs of Ophelia. So far, we have found nothing. Not even a whiff of her scent.

We pray to the Source that she is alive. But the Source is dying. We do not know if it can still hear our prayers.

Ophelia is more important to us than the Source. She is more important than the entire Zone. It doesn't matter what Seraph said about her being a savior. Even if that weren't the case, we would still need to find her. She is our mate. Maybe she doesn't realize that yet, but it's true. When we find her, we will make sure she knows.

We *must* find her.

Yet with each passing mile and still no sign of Ophelia, our hope for success grows dimmer and dimmer. But we cannot let such negative thoughts intrude. We must keep our minds and senses focused on our task.

After a long time running, we reach the place where the river breaks free from the confines of the forest and winds its way across a region of rolling grasslands. In a way, this is a good thing. Now we can see farther without the trees blocking our

line of sight. The view here is so expansive, we can even see the dark line of the Quarantine Wall way off in the distance. The final boundary of the Zone.

But there's also a problem.

We are in the Farlands now.

It's the smell that gives it away. The scent of Farlanders is everywhere out here. We can't see any of them, but the ugly bastards have made sure their territory is well-marked with the acrid stench of their urine. Source, those nasty beasts must have pissed all over every inch of this border region.

The Farlanders are technically alphas, but they are not like us, not like the alphas of the Central Tribe. The Farlanders have lived too long out here in the distant reaches of the Zone, where the life-giving energy of the Source is not as strong. As a result, after many generations, their minds and bodies have become warped. They have no sense of honor, and they engage in all manner of atrocities—rape, murder, cannibalism.

It chills our blood to think about what might have happened to Ophelia if she encountered any of those monsters.

No.

We can't think like that.

We must keep going. We must keep searching.

We continue following the course of the rolling river, moving at a dead run over the open ground. The sun is already high in the sky, and with no trees for shade, its hot rays beat down on us like a physical pressure. A soft breeze rustles the high grass.

Wait! What's that...?

At precisely the same moment, we both pause in our tracks and tilt our heads back, snuffling the air. Our hearts jump in unison.

It's her. It's Ophelia. She is near.

Our spirits lift, and we start to run even faster than before. After another minute of running, we see something ahead. The river seems to end abruptly in a rising wall of mist.

Waterfall.

We sprint to the edge and look over. Far below is a broad pool of still water. On the northern shore, plumes of smoke rise from the coals of a dying fire. A few yards away on the bank, partially submerged in the water, lies a bloody corpse. For half a heartbeat we panic, thinking it is Ophelia, but the carcass is far too big to be her. Indeed, it looks like a dead alpha.

What the hell?

There's no sign of the omega we seek. But she must have passed this way. The air is still strong with her scent.

The water in the pool is clear enough to see the bottom, and it is deep enough for diving. We share a glance across the river, followed by a nod, and then in perfect synchrony we jump from the top of the cliff and drop arms-first into the surface of the pool. After that, we swim to the water's edge and emerge dripping on the silty shore.

The waterfall roars behind us. The air is freighted with the scent of charred wood, and some kind of unfamiliar cooked

meat, burnt to a crisp.

Something about this whole situation is off.

Is it a trap?

While Romulus keeps his eyes on the grasslands to the north, Remus inspects the mangled corpse. Indeed, it is a dead alpha. A Farlander from the looks of it, though it's been so brutalized it's hard to tell at first. The throat has been ripped out, and the eyes are frozen open in a look of total fear.

“Hey Rom, you'd better look at this.”

“Bloody hell.”

“I know, right? Looks like the poor bastard went toe-to-toe with a grizzly bear.”

“Yeah, but... these claw marks are too small.”

“And nothing has been eaten.”

“True. Hey! Did you see these tracks?”

A set of tiny footprints leads away from the body. Human footprints. Too small to be an alpha. We both turn around to see where they lead, and we shout in surprise.

“Ophelia!”

Our little omega is only a few yards away, crouching on all fours with her head down and her damp hair hanging around her face like a platinum shroud. We can't see her features, but there's no doubt it is her. She wasn't there just a second ago. We definitely would have seen her. She must have been hiding, and she came out when she saw it was us.

But something is wrong.

Our omega does not respond to our call. Instead, she just crouches there shivering violently, even though it is a warm and sunny day.

She must be in shock.

We move toward her slowly, so as not to frighten her. She is growling softly, and with each step we take toward her, the growling increases in volume.

“Ophelia, don’t be afraid...”

“It’s just us...”

“Romulus...”

“And Remus...”

When we are just a few steps away, she suddenly raises her head with a snarl, and we can see her face half-hidden behind the strands of her wild hair. Her features are warped with rage, and her mouth and chin are bright red with blood.

She has been wounded.

Maybe she hit her mouth on a rock in the river. Or maybe a Farlander did this to her. If it’s the latter situation, we will find the fucker and make him pay with his life. Nobody lays a finger on our omega. But first we need to see to her injuries.

As we start to move forward to help her, however, Seraph’s voice booms in our heads.

“Keep back. Do not touch her,” he says. *“I want you to stay there and keep an eye on her until the other alphas and I can*

catch up to you. If she tries to run away, follow her, but whatever you do, do not get any closer.”

“But Seraph, she needs our help. Can’t you see she’s bleeding?”

“The first part of your statement is correct,” Seraph says. “She is in desperate need of assistance, and we are going to provide it for her. But you are wrong about the second point. She is not bleeding.”

It takes a moment for that statement to sink in, but when it does, it sends a shiver up both our spines.

The blood on Ophelia’s face is not her own.

But if it’s not her blood, then whose is it? We share a worried glance, then we turn to look at the mangled Farlander with the bitten-out throat.

CHAPTER 27: SERAPH

When we arrive a few minutes later, Ophelia is still more or less where the twins found her, crouching on the ground near the water. She is naked, and her skin bears many dark bruises, presumably acquired during her rough trip down the river. Otherwise, she appears to be physically intact.

Whether or not she is mentally intact remains to be seen.

She is trembling like a distressed animal, and my sensors can detect the sound of her soft, feral growling, barely audible beneath the louder roar of the waterfall nearby.

All the alphas are overjoyed to see Ophelia, but Marr is especially excited. He lets out an almost pained howl and rushes forward to embrace her. But as soon as he gets close, the omega turns on him with a vicious snarl and bares her teeth.

Marr halts in his tracks.

“Holy Source,” he says under his breath. “I expected you to be angry at me after the way I treated you, but I didn’t expect *this*.” He drops his head. “Not that I don’t deserve it. Ophelia, please forgive me. I just want to help you.”

I move forward and place one hand on Marr’s shoulder. After many years of observing the alphas, I have come to understand that this is a gesture of reassurance.

“This is not your fault,” I tell him. “Ophelia’s aggression has nothing to do with your treatment of her. In fact, I do not think she recognizes you. I do not think she recognizes any of us.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Boreg asks, inspecting her from a safe distance. “Did she hit her head in the river?”

I circle the omega and do a quick visual scan of her cranium.

“That does not appear to be the case. At least she does not seem to have hit her head hard enough to cause brain damage. She is exceedingly resilient. But then, we already knew that from the way she weathered the underground explosion practically unscathed. Her trip down the river should have been relatively easy by comparison.”

“Well, then what’s the matter with her?” Aleph asks, his voice almost breaking with concern. “And more importantly, what can we do to help?”

I study the shaking omega for a moment.

“I have a theory.”

“Please enlighten us, Seraph.” Aleph’s tone is bitter, but I suspect his emotion is borne more from concern than annoyance.

I turn back to Marr, who appears to be almost on the verge of tears. “Marr, you said that before Ophelia leapt off the cliff and fell into the river, she called out to you for help, correct?”

Marr nods silently.

“In that case, we can deduce that it was not actually Ophelia’s intention to kill herself.”

“Then why did she jump?”

“She didn’t jump,” I explain. “She was pushed.”

“Pushed?” Marr’s expression quickly transitions from shock to rage. “Are you saying *I* pushed her?”

“No, of course not.”

“But there was no one else there. Seraph, what are you talking about?”

I do my best to explain it to them.

Based on the data I acquired during my visit to the city hive twenty years ago, I have a thorough understanding of the nanotechnology that has been built into Ophelia’s very cells. It is based on the same technology as the Source, only tweaked slightly to serve the purposes of Ophelia’s masters. Embedded within this nanotechnology is a control mechanism that allows her creator, Dr. Toth, to send her messages and even control her body against her will from afar. Until today, Ophelia probably wasn’t even aware that Toth had this power over her.

Of course, for the alphas’ benefit, I translate all of this into concepts their primitive minds can more easily understand. I tell them that when Dr. Toth created Ophelia, he placed a curse on her. A curse which allows him to possess her body with his spirit, like a ghost.

“So it was Toth who made her jump?” Marr asks. His voice carries a hint of relief, but it quickly changes to rage. “That

fucking bastard. If I ever get my hands on him, I'll tear him to shreds."

"But why did he want her dead?" Aleph asks.

"Ophelia is extremely valuable," I answer. "Toth did not want her to fall into our hands. He probably assumed the explosion would have killed her along with the rest of her Outsider teammates. When that didn't work, Toth resorted to the use of the control mechanism. He just had to wait for the right time to strike. The river presented a good opportunity."

"That bastard!" Marr roars and slams his fist into his open palm.

The outburst gets Ophelia's attention. She whirls around to face Marr, and her lips peel back from her teeth in a threatening snarl. Marr raises both hands in a peaceful gesture, letting the omega know he means no harm, at least not to her.

"So is Toth the one making her act like this?" asks Boreg.

"No. I don't think so. It appears Ophelia has suffered some kind of psychotic break. I presume, after forcing her to jump into the water, Toth tried to make Ophelia stay underwater so she would drown. But her survival instincts were too strong, and she managed to resist his control."

"She's certainly stubborn," Aleph says.

"This is more than stubbornness. To resist that level of mind control requires more than mere willpower. She must have tapped into her most primal omega instincts. She had already started to form the mating bond with all of you. That most

certainly helped. Additionally, she may have had reason to believe she had become pregnant from your joinings.”

“Pregnant?” Boreg asks. “But none of us have put our seed *inside* her.”

Aleph quickly looks away.

I go on. “At any rate, her omega instincts are what saved her. If she had been a mere alpha, she most likely would not have survived. But an omega’s instincts are much stronger than an alpha’s. The problem is that Ophelia’s instincts are *so* strong, they have now completely taken over her psyche, resulting in her present feral state.”

As if on cue, the omega hisses at me like an enraged cat.

“Maybe I can help her,” Boreg says, unshipping his pack of supplies and opening it. “I’ve got some herbs here that have a tranquilizing effect when eaten or drunk in a tea. Maybe that will calm her down and get her under control.”

“Good luck getting her to eat or drink anything,” Romulus says.

“Yeah, just look what she did to that Farlander,” adds Remus.

Both twins gesture toward the deceased alpha sprawled face up on the ground several yards away by the water’s edge.

Aleph, Boreg, and Marr go to inspect the mangled corpse.

“Holy Source!” Aleph says. “You’re telling me Ophelia did this? I assumed the two of you killed him when you showed up to save Ophelia.”

“She didn’t need saving,” Remus says. “He was like that when we got here.”

“While we were waiting, we found some other tracks,” says Romulus. “That asshole had two companions who fled. Ran for their lives, from the looks of it.”

“Left all their stuff behind.”

“One of them even pissed himself.”

The alphas grow quiet as they process this information. The white noise of the waterfall fills the ensuing silence, and the sunlight beats down on the dead alpha. Marr is the first one to finally speak again.

“Impressive,” he says. “I’m proud of our omega for killing that bastard. But how do we get her back to normal? There must be something we can do for her.”

“There is,” I answer. “The Ophelia you all have come to know is still in there somewhere, but her personality is being dominated by her instinctual, animalistic side. I will need to enter her mind to help her regain control.”

“How are you going to do that?” Aleph asks. “I thought you said her mind was blocking you.”

“Yes. I will have to interface with her.”

“Uh, how will you do that exactly?”

“I don’t have time to explain it now. You’ll find out soon enough. But first, I’m afraid it will be necessary to restrain Ophelia.”

“Restrain her?” Marr says. “How? You can see what she did to that Farlander. How are we supposed to hold her down without her taking chunks out of us?”

I shift my eyes to the edge of the crude campsite. As the twins mentioned a moment ago, the fleeing Farlanders left their belongings behind, apparently valuing their lives more than their material possessions. Lying on the ground beside the smoldering remains of the campfire are three primitive animal hide packs.

“These Farlanders appear to have been a small, roving gang,” I say. “They probably survived by raiding larger Farlander encampments to steal supplies, including live betas such as the one they were cooking when Ophelia arrived.”

I gesture toward the charred bones scattered around the fire.

“Shit, is that what that is?” Boreg growls. “Disgusting.”

“Indeed. But if my conjecture is correct, and these Farlanders were beta thieves, then their packs probably contain ropes and nets.”

“Ropes and nets?” Aleph says. “Seraph, please tell me you’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

I incline my head slightly. “I’m afraid so, young alpha.”

CHAPTER 28: BOREG

By the time my pack brothers and I have completed our task, the sun is already sinking low in the western sky, and our bodies are covered collectively with over a hundred wounds—claw marks, bite marks, bruises—all of them inflicted upon us by Ophelia. Romulus' left eye is swollen shut where she kicked him, Marr lost one of his teeth, and Aleph suffered a dislocated shoulder, which I had to pop back into place. The only one who made it through the ordeal unscathed is Seraph, who chose to watch the proceedings from a distance, only offering occasional advice. I can't say I blame him.

As for the omega, she is now lying on the ground with her arms and legs spread out in an X configuration. Her wrists and ankles are bound tightly with ropes which we have anchored into the earth with sturdy wooden pegs. She snarls like a wild animal and struggles against her restraints, but the ropes hold her fast.

Source, it pains me to see her like this.

But then, we really had no other choice. In her feral state, Ophelia is brutally strong and ferociously uncooperative. It took the five of us several hours of chasing and wrestling just to get her tied down. At least we managed to subdue her without hurting her too badly.

The sun sinks lower in the sky like a sphere of molten iron, and darkness creeps in around the edges of the world. The

twins gather up some dry driftwood lining the banks of the waterfall pool, and they add it to coals left over from the Farlanders' fire. After a few minutes, they've got a good blaze going. Ophelia stares at the flames while she twists and growls on the ground.

"All right, Seraph," Aleph says. "We've caught her. Now what?"

Our teacher paces in a circle around Ophelia, inspecting our handiwork. The omega's eyes follow him like the eyes of a trapped animal.

"Now," Seraph says, "You are going to pleasure her."

"*What?*" five alpha voices shout in unison.

Our teacher's ghostly face looks at us impassively. "I said you are going to *pleasure* her."

"Seraph, you can't be serious," Marr yells. "Just look at her! Look at the state she's in."

"I am well aware of the omega's state," Seraph answers coldly.

Marr's body quakes with rage. Sparks flash behind his eyes, and the very air seems to darken around him. I have seen him get angry at our teacher before, but never like this. For a second, I actually think he might take a swing at Seraph, and I prepare to step between them if necessary. Luckily, I don't have to.

"You can't expect us to do this," Marr says. "She's like an animal right now."

“You don’t need to worry about her attacking you,” Seraph answers. “I’m certain her restraints will hold her.”

“It’s not *me* I’m worried about. It’s Ophelia. She clearly doesn’t want to be *pleasured*, as you put it. We would be doing it to her against her will. It’s not right.”

Seraph sighs.

Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever heard him do that before.

“Listen,” he says. “You must not confuse this feral creature with Ophelia. They are two separate entities. Or, more precisely, this feral omega is merely one aspect of Ophelia’s personality that has become inflated to oversized proportions. The real Ophelia is trapped inside there somewhere, and I can assure you, she very much desires to be set free.”

Slowly, Marr’s tension ebbs.

“I... I want to help her,” he says. “I feel like I owe it to her. After all, I’m the one who got her into this mess. But I don’t understand. Why do we have to do it like *that*?”

“I shall try to explain,” Seraph says. “In order to return Ophelia to her normal self, I must interface with her. Unfortunately, I fear that will not be possible in her present state. Currently, Ophelia is operating on a purely instinctual level. There are two evolutionary directives that lie behind every instinct: survival and procreation. At the moment, the former is dominant. Ophelia is in survival mode. However, with a little skill and patience, I am certain you alphas can coax her toward another, more *receptive* instinct.”

“So let me get this straight,” Aleph says. “You’re saying we need to make her horny so you can interface with her?”

“Precisely.”

For a long moment, we all just stand there and look at one another in astonished silence. What Seraph is proposing sounds crazy, but we all know he’s not just making it up. Seraph wouldn’t do that.

“Fuck,” Marr says at last. “If it’s the only way to save Ophelia, then we have to do it, I guess. But who’s going to do the honors?” He glances at Aleph. “You’re the most experienced when it comes to pleasing an omega.”

“Are you nominating me for the task?” Aleph asks.

Marr nods silently.

Aleph looks around at the rest of us. When nobody says anything, he sighs and starts to move toward Ophelia. But then he hesitates.

“Marr is right,” he says. “I do have the most experience with females. But maybe that’s not what Ophelia needs now. Maybe what she needs is the gentle touch of a healer.” He turns and looks in my direction.

“Me?” I ask, taken aback.

Aleph’s face grows serious. “I won’t force the responsibility on you, brother,” he says. “If you do not want to do it, then I will. But I have a feeling that right now, the omega could benefit the most from your attention and skills.”

Now it's my turn to hesitate.

I do not want to do this. It's not because I find Ophelia unattractive. On the contrary, even in her current feral state, she is the most beautiful omega I have ever seen or smelled. And in truth, seeing her tied down and helpless like this actually stirs dark desires within my alpha heart.

It just feels so wrong.

Nevertheless, one of us must do this. It might as well be me.

"Very well," I grunt.

"Thank you, brother," Aleph says, and moves back.

I take his place in front of the tied-down omega, and I walk forward until my feet are planted between her open thighs. Her snarling becomes even more vicious as I approach, and her body twists violently, her straining muscles stark in the firelight. It's hard to believe the sweet and courageous woman I have grown to love is in there somewhere, but Seraph says that she is. I wonder if she can hear me.

"I apologize, Ophelia," I whisper. "But I must do this to you. It's for your own good."

Ophelia just growls and bares her fangs.

With a sigh, I settle to my knees and hunch over, bringing my face close to the center of her open legs. The scent of her sex hits me like a punch, and my cock jumps beneath my loincloth. She is still in heat, that much is clear. If Seraph's theory is correct, then maybe it won't be too difficult to shift her focus from survival to sex.

“Good omega,” I purr gently. “Don’t worry. I just want to make you feel good.”

I brush the ball of my thumb over her clitoris, and her body spasms violently, but not with pleasure. She yowls like an angry cat and struggles to free herself from her bindings.

Shit. Okay, maybe this won’t be so easy after all.

I gently stroke her slit. She is certainly not dry down there, but at the same time, she’s nowhere near as wet as she has been during our previous encounters. Maybe I can rectify that.

I lower my face to her center and begin licking her, first by running my tongue tip through her cleft, and then by lapping at the swollen pink bud of her clit. She doesn’t seem to care for it. Her hips move beneath me, but it’s not like the pleasurable gyrations I’ve seen her make before. This time, it seems more like she is trying to shove me away.

Damn. This really isn’t working.

I try yet another approach and slide my middle finger inside her hole. She is slick enough that my finger enters her with ease. But this tactic gets the worst response of all. Ophelia shrieks as if she’s in pain, and I quickly pull my finger out of her.

Maybe Aleph was wrong to nominate me for this role.

But I’m not ready to give up just yet.

I push myself up into a kneeling position, wondering what I should do. The sun has now descended past the horizon, leaving a pinkish haze in its wake. Overhead, stars are dotting

the sky. Beside us, the fire burns and crackles, casting its warm orange glow over Ophelia's naked form. Her skin glistens with sweat, and her breasts jiggle deliciously as she struggles against the ropes. Once again, my cock leaps at the sight of her, and I instantly feel ashamed for getting turned on by seeing her like this.

But then, in the next instant, a realization strikes me.

Instinct.

I have no control over the way my cock responds to Ophelia's wild beauty. It's pure instinct that does that, just as it is instinct that's making her behave so crazily. She is a creature of pure instinct now, and if I'm going to connect with her, it cannot be through soft kisses and gentle caresses.

I must meet Ophelia's instinct with my own.

I must give in to my alpha urges.

With a roar, I tear away my loincloth, allowing my hard cock to rise proudly between my legs. The omega goes silent at the sight of it, and her pupils dilate wide in the firelight.

CHAPTER 29: BOREG

“**B**oreg, what the hell are you doing?” Marr asks.

“What does it look like?” I growl. “I’m giving this stubborn little omega what she wants.”

On the ground in front of me, Ophelia shifts and squirms in the firelight. Her growling takes on a different, almost plaintive tone, and the hot, animalistic scent of her estrus grows stronger in the air. I swivel my hips, causing my cock to wag back and forth over her pussy. Her eyes track its movements perfectly.

“Is this what you want, omega?” I purr. “A nice hard alpha cock?”

I grip my shaft at the base and move my cock like a hammer, slamming my tip one, two, three times against Ophelia’s erect clit.

“*Smack—Smack—Smack!*”

Her growls turn aggressive again in response to this attack. But at the same time, her slick starts to flow out of her in greater abundance, as if my hammering broke something loose inside. The fragrant wetness trickles down her taint and pools on the ground beneath her ass.

“Growl all you want,” I tell her. “You can’t fool me. I know exactly what your hot little omega pussy needs.”

I rub the tip of my dick against her clit, grinding it hard until her whole body is fluttering and shuddering with her impending release. But just before her climax hits, I quickly pull my cock away, and she growls in frustration.

“Not yet, little omega.”

Her heat scent fills me, sending molten lust blasting through my veins. My cock throbs so hard it feels like it will explode. I angle my shaft lower and work my sensitive tip up and down between Ophelia’s dripping folds. But the way she’s tied down puts her legs in an inconvenient position for what I have in mind. I lift my head and glance around at my pack brethren, who are looking on in astonishment.

“Cut her legs free.”

“She’ll be able to kick you,” Romulus points out.

“And she kicks hard,” Remus adds, as he gingerly rubs the bruise around his eye.

“Then let her kick me,” I growled. “I can take it. But I need her legs free for what I have in mind. Now do it!”

The twins shrug and move into position, one at each of Ophelia’s ankles. With perfectly synchronized movements, they pull out their flint knives and slice through the ropes. Immediately, Ophelia tries to flail her legs, but the twins hold the ends of the cut ropes, which probably spares me a few hard kicks to the head.

“Thanks,” I say. “Now pull her legs up for me. Spread her out. Yeah, just like that.”

With Ophelia's legs pulled back, her pussy is more accessible. I move into position, laying my hard shaft lengthwise along her vulva, and I begin to hump her, sliding my dick back and forth along her wet slit. Ophelia fixes me with a dangerous glare as she alternates between growling angrily and mewling with pleasure.

“That's right, you want this dick, don't you?” I purr. “You *need* this big alpha dick.”

Soon my shaft is slathered with her warm, oozing slick. I work my cockhead between her pink folds and align my tip with her entrance.

“Are you ready, omega? Are you ready to take this alpha dick?”

Ophelia purrs in response.

I start to push into her slowly, making sure she can take it. Her lips part around my tip, and her entrance stretches to accept the blunt bulb of my cockhead.

Yesterday, this would not have been possible. My cock would have torn her apart. But now, she has been seasoned several times by our alpha seed, and her body has adjusted to accommodate me. I slide deeper inside her, and she groans with mingled pain and pleasure. Part of me wants to stop and comfort her, but I know that's not what she needs right now. She needs domination, so that's what I give her.

“Take it,” I growl. “Take my cock like a good little omega.”

I push into her until my tip bumps her back wall. For a moment, I just hold myself there, enjoying the wet pressure of her tight walls squeezing around my shaft. Then I pull back and thrust into her again, a little more forcefully this time. Then again, even harder still. Soon I'm pumping her with fast, deep strokes while she moans and undulates beneath me.

I am fucking her. I am fucking my omega mate.

Our omega mate.

I can sense my pack brothers' arousal as they watch our coupling. The air around the campsite fills with their heavy rut-scent. Ophelia's eyes drift away from mine as she glances around at our little audience. I raise my eyes and glance around at them too.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" I ask. "You know she wants to see them, so whip them out."

The other males remove their loincloths, exposing their own hardened cocks. They close in around us, jerking themselves while they watch me mate with Ophelia.

The little omega licks her lips and moans at the sight. Her inner walls clench around me, and I sense that she is once again on the verge of a climax. There's a part of me that wants to give it to her, to bury myself balls deep in her pussy and knot her.

But there are two problems with that.

First, she's not prepared to take my knot. My cock is already stretching her tight little pussy to the limit. If I knotted her

right now, it would destroy her.

Second, Seraph doesn't want Ophelia to get off. He wants her *horny*. That means I need to bring her right up to the brink and leave her wanting more.

Though it pains me to do so, I slide my cock out of her at the last second. She whines like a hungry dog begging for food.

“Damn, you really do need this dick, don't you, omega?”

I climb forward until I'm straddling her upper body with my thighs and my cock is mere inches from her face, just out of reach of her mouth.

“Source!” Aleph shouts. “Boreg, be careful!”

“Are you crazy?” says Marr. “She'll bite your fucking cock off, man!”

The twins are both shouting at me too.

Only Seraph remains silent.

Maybe they're right. Maybe I am crazy. I've certainly seen the damage her jaws can do. But then again, maybe it's natural for an alpha to act crazy when his omega is in trouble.

Ophelia is worth the risk.

Her head is lifted, straining toward my penis. I inch closer until my tip is touching her mouth. I rub my tip back and forth against her lips, glazing them with precum.

“Is this what you need, omega? Show me how bad you need it.”

Ophelia parts her lips and takes my cock inside her mouth, first the head, then the shaft. I flinch as I feel her hard little teeth graze me, but in the next moment the threat disappears and all I can feel is the warmth and wetness of her lips and tongue. She sucks me eagerly, moaning softly through her full mouth, needy, submissive, and tamed.

I stare into her eyes for a moment, then I lift my gaze and find Seraph.

“What do you think, teacher? Is the omega ready?”

The corners of his glowing mouth curve upward into the biggest smile I have ever seen Seraph make.

“Well done, young alpha. You have prepared her thoroughly. She is ready for my interface. You may remove yourself from the omega.”

When I don't move immediately, Seraph's smile disappears.

“Allow me to rephrase that,” he says. “You *must* remove yourself from the omega.”

Damn.

With a reluctant sigh, I withdraw my cock from Ophelia's mouth and stand up. Ophelia whines again at this deprivation.

“Don't worry, little omega,” I tell her. “This cock's not going anywhere. It belongs to you now. I'll give it to you later, when you are well again.”

I step back and let Seraph do his thing.

As much as I am feeling frustrated by my denied release, I'm feeling even more curious to see exactly what Seraph has planned.

He walks around Ophelia's body and positions himself between her legs, which are still being held open by the twins. His right hand moves down to his codpiece, and with a touch, the metal panel drops away, exposing his anatomy.

The inhabitants of the Central Tribe, especially the omegas, have often speculated as to what exactly sort of equipment Seraph has been keeping hidden under there all these years. But I don't think any of them could have guessed *this*. Even Ophelia gasps in surprise.

"I am going to interface with the omega now," Seraph says. "I am not sure how long this will take, so I need you all to remain vigilant."

He kneels between Ophelia's spread legs and lowers his pelvis into the cradle of her naked thighs.

CHAPTER 30: OPHELIA

I don't know where I am, but it's someplace dark, and the air is alive with the sound of growling.

For a second, I think I must be back in that cave after the explosion hit. Everything I've been through with Seraph and the alphas was just a dream, a fantasy conjured up by my concussed brain. Now I've woken up for real to find myself back in that lightless tunnel surrounded by a different pack of less hospitable alphas.

But I quickly realize that can't be the case. For one thing, if I were surrounded by alphas, I would smell them. But at the moment, I can't smell anything. Nothing at all. The total absence of any scent is actually pretty disconcerting.

And for another thing, those growling voices don't sound like alphas to me. They're not deep enough. They actually sound almost... feminine? That's weird. I never thought something could be both feminine and aggressive at the same time, but obviously it *is* possible.

That's not the strangest part, though.

I know I'm not in a cave because my body feels like it's floating. I don't mean I'm just floating in water. It feels like there's no gravity at all, like I'm drifting through an endless black void. Like space, but without all those stars I saw last night.

Shit. Am I dead?

The last thing I can remember is struggling underwater, the cold current of the river dragging me along, my lungs burning with the desperate need for oxygen. I remember my brain felt like it was splitting in two. And then there was a sensation of falling...

Maybe this is hell? If so, it's not so bad. At least, not yet. There's no pain, no horrific sights. Those growling voices are pretty scary, but that's all.

Still, the prospect of spending eternity like this is downright terrifying.

I start to cry.

It's not so much for myself as for my alphas. And for Seraph too. I'm going to miss them. I know it's crazy because I only knew them for a few days. Yet in that short time, I developed a bond with all of them that was stronger than anything I'd ever had back in the facility where I was born and raised.

I even feel that way about Marr. I remember the look on his face as he dove off the cliff after me, trying to save me, and that only makes me cry harder.

"Ophelia..."

The voice startles me. It's soft and distant, barely audible over the storm of growling that surrounds me. I hold back my sobs and listen. For a minute there is nothing, then I hear it again, a little closer and louder this time.

"Ophelia..."

I hesitate, uncertain whether or not I should respond. I probably ought to be scared of whatever entity is looking for me in a place like this, but there is something about that voice that's familiar and comforting. I decide to answer the call.

"Who's there?" I shout.

"Ophelia, it is me, Seraph."

My heart beats faster. "Seraph? Is it really you?"

"Yes."

That last word is spoken so close to my face it makes me jerk back in surprise, but I quickly calm down again. Sure enough, the voice definitely belongs to Seraph, only now it doesn't have the same artificial quality as when I've heard him speak before. My heart swells with happiness until it seems like it will explode, and the tears return to my eyes. But this time, they are tears of joy.

"Seraph, you came for me."

"Indeed."

I still can't see a damned thing in all this darkness, but I can feel it when Seraph's powerful arms encircle my body and pull me close. His skin is surprisingly cool to the touch, almost cold, but I don't mind one bit. I rest my head on his broad chest and soak up the feeling of protection his hug provides. His skin smells strange, simultaneously sweet and harsh, like flowers budding through cracked asphalt.

"How did you find me here?" I murmur. "And for that matter, where is *here* anyway?"

“We are inside your mind, Ophelia.”

“So this is all just happening in my head? Like a dream or something?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“But how did you get here?” I ask. “The alphas told me you’re able to get inside their heads, but they said you weren’t able to do that with me for some reason.”

“They are correct. Normally, I am able to access other minds within the Zone. The machine which the alphas call the Source actually emits a field of microscopic nanite devices which are responsible for the Zone mutations. As the AI responsible for controlling the Source, I have been able to use these nanites to interface directly with the minds of all the alphas and omegas in the Zone. Unfortunately, that power is waning now that the Source is fading out.

“But you are different, Ophelia. Your cells have been engineered to produce another type of nanite which blocks the Source, effectively barring me from entering your mind in the usual way. As a result, I’ve been forced to employ a different method for interfacing with you. I had assumed it would be necessary to do so sooner or later, but I had hoped it could wait until we were back in the safety and comfort of the Central Ruins. Unfortunately, circumstances have demanded that I act sooner.”

“Interface with me? What does that mean?”

“Let us save the physical details for later, Ophelia. Right now, what matters is saving you from your current predicament. You managed to resist Dr. Toth’s mind control through sheer force of will. But it has caused a break in your omega programming. While your conscious personality is trapped here in this psychic space, the primal side of your mind has taken control of your body. And it has been causing no small amount of mischief in the real world.”

“What?” I gasp. “You mean I’m not just passed out or something? My body is awake and moving around out there? What have I been doing?”

Seraph holds me tightly.

“Again, I would suggest that we set that discussion aside for later. There will be plenty of time to discuss your instinctual escapades after we have restored the proper balance to your mental faculties.”

“Fine. But how do we do that?”

“I will need to reprogram you.”

“Reprogram me?” I almost shout.

“Don’t worry. Your personality will remain the same, Ophelia. Only your nanotech programming will be altered.”

“And I don’t get any say in this?” I ask.

“No,” Seraph answers sternly. “The only alternative would be to leave you trapped here within the dark recesses of your psyche, and I refuse to do that.”

“Fair enough. So, um... what does this reprogramming entail?”

I’m expecting Seraph to hit me with some techno-jargon that I can’t understand. I’m totally unprepared for what actually happens. I sense his face bare inches away from mine. Then he closes the distance, and our lips meet in a kiss. It is surprisingly soft and gentle, but it still sends a jolt of electricity writhing through me.

“You’re going to reprogram me with a kiss?” I ask.

“Our minds need to be aligned in order for me to lead you back to the surface, Ophelia.”

He gently brushes his lips against mine as our intertwined bodies twirl through the void. His strong hands glide over my naked back, raising goosebumps in their wake. My nipples stiffen with arousal, and warmth spreads through my center in rippling waves.

“I’m already starting to feel pretty aligned,” I whisper.

“Ophelia, I’m afraid it is going to take more than a single kiss to bring our minds into alignment.”

“That’s okay,” I tell him. “Do what you must.”

CHAPTER 31: OPHELIA

Seraph kisses me again, claiming my mouth in a dominating kiss that sends shivers running up and down my spine. I know this is all just happening in my head, but this kiss certainly feels real. So does his body. And so does that long, hard appendage rising from between his legs and prodding against my belly. I moan into his hungry mouth, and my pussy throbs with wetness and desire. When Seraph finally releases me, I'm left gasping for air. I suppose I don't really need oxygen in this imaginary realm, but Seraph's kiss takes my breath away just the same.

He directs his attention to other parts of my body, nipping at my earlobe, grazing his teeth against my vulnerable throat. He moves down my body, lingering over my chest, suckling at each of my breasts until both of my nipples are aching hard and dripping with his saliva. He goes lower still, stitching a line of hot kisses down my trembling belly, until at last he arrives at the throbbing wet hunger between my thighs.

“Ophelia...”

His breath stirs my pubic hair and cools the wetness coating my need-swollen labia. I shudder in anticipation. When his mouth finally makes contact with my tender flesh, I let loose a howl that momentarily drowns out the feral growls filling the void around us.

“Yes!” I gasp. “Oh God, Seraph, that feels so good...”

My hands slide over the smooth dome of the head that is wedged between my legs. In the real world, that head is just a holographic mirage. But here, in this imaginary realm, it is quite solid, and surprisingly sexy.

Seraph's tongue is solid too, and it does things to my pussy that I've never felt before. The high-tech toys Dr. Toth used to supply me with could never compete. Even the five alphas are not quite *this* skillful. Seraph brings me to climax again and again, driving me up the crest of each wave of pleasure before gently guiding me through the comedown. I quake and gasp and scream his name into the emptiness surrounding us as he steers me through one heart-stopping orgasm after another until it feels like I can't take anymore.

“Seraph!”

At last, he decides I've had enough of this delicious torment, and his mouth makes a return trip up my belly, over my breasts, and finally back to my mouth. I taste my own juices on his lips and tongue, a flavor more intense than anything I've ever experienced in the so-called real world. God, maybe this realm of the mind isn't so bad after all. Especially when one has such a skillful AI to keep them company.

“You're good at this,” I purr against his lips. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

“For many decades, I have observed the mating behaviors of the alphas and omegas of the Zone. And I have picked up a few techniques along the way.”

“Yeah, I'll say. So, um... how is the reprogramming going?”

“Do you feel different, Ophelia?”

I burst out laughing. “I feel like I just came a million times over. Does that count?”

Seraph does not smile at my little joke. I know because I can feel his lips on mine.

“No, it does not count, Ophelia. When our astral bodies come into alignment, you will know it. Now please, this is very important. I must ask that you take this process seriously.”

Well, at least he *understood* I was making a joke.

“Okay,” I say and kiss him again. “Completely serious over here. So, um, what’s next?”

Seraph answers me not with words, but with his body. His strong hands grip my butt and pull me close, and I feel the hard, hot prong of his penis sliding against the wet mess of my vulva.

“Oh...”

He glides his long shaft along my cleft, anointing his member with my flowing arousal and his own slippery saliva. I moan and shiver with pleasure and the sensation of that hard, smooth member.

“Is my penis too large for you, Ophelia?” Seraph asks. “If so, I can adjust the size to better accommodate your needs.”

I suppress a laugh. I told Seraph I would be serious, after all. But the idea of an adjustable cock makes me grin inwardly. It

makes sense, though. Here in imagination land, anything is possible. However, no adjustment is necessary.

“It feels perfect,” I whisper, as I experience chills of excitement at the thought of having him inside me.

“Are you ready for me to enter you, Ophelia?”

“Mm-hm.”

I reach down and help bring his cock into a different kind of alignment. Slowly, he thrusts into me, and my opening spreads around his girth. He stretches me a little, but not painfully so, and I’m so wet with saliva and slick that he enters me with ease. He pushes himself deep inside me, as deep as he can go, and I feel his blunt tip brushing ever so softly against my furthest epicenter. I whimper and clutch at his back and butt as he fills me.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp. “Seraph...”

“Are you in pain, Ophelia? Am I hurting you?”

“No.” I kiss his neck, his face. “It feels good. Oh God, you feel so good and hard inside me. Fuck me, Seraph. Please make me come with your cock.”

Seraph sets to work granting my wish. He moves inside me, slow and gentle at first, then fast and hard, making me moan into his hungry mouth. My whole body jolts with every rough impact of his perfect cock, and dirty squelching sounds escape from between my legs as that hard member slides in and out of my dripping pussy. He feels so perfect inside me, like we were made to fit together.

“Does my cock please you, Ophelia?”

I moan a wordless response, but I’m pretty sure the tone of my voice still gets the message across—the answer is a resounding yes.

Seraph clutches a fistful of my hair and thrusts into me even harder. I hook my legs around his hips and hold on to him for dear life.

“Right there,” I whimper. “You make me feel so good.”

Just a minute ago, Seraph made me come multiple times with his tongue, but now I can already feel another orgasm welling up in the depths of my core, and this one feels even bigger than any of the ones that came before.

My release crashes through me like a wave, rocking my body in convulsions of pleasure. Then I’m coasting, coming down slowly with Seraph’s cock still inside me. I cover his face in kisses, but I stop when I realize something seems to be bothering him.

“Seraph, what’s the matter?” I ask.

“You still have not become aligned.”

“I guess not. I’m still not totally sure what I’m supposed to feel.”

“You will know when it happens, Ophelia. Trust me.”

“I do trust you, Seraph,” I say honestly. “I’m in your hands.”

“Good. I will attempt to pleasure you harder, Ophelia. Get ready.”

“Wait.” I lay my hands on his strong chest and lean my face toward him until our foreheads are touching.

“What is the matter, Ophelia?”

“I don’t think my pleasure is the problem here,” I tell him.

“You just gave me the biggest orgasm I’ve ever had in my life. If you pleasure me any harder than that, I think it might actually kill me.”

“Ophelia, I have observed thousands of couplings. Not once have I witnessed an omega dying from pleasure.”

Captain Literal.

“I’ll take your word for it. But that’s not the point.” I reach down and touch the place where he is penetrating me. “You didn’t finish.”

“Finish?”

“I mean you didn’t come.”

“Why does this matter, Ophelia? It is not relevant to your pleasure.”

“Um, it kind of is. Sex isn’t just about getting off, you know. It’s about sharing something. I would think you of all people would know that. And another thing...”

“Yes?”

“Why are *you* doing this, Seraph?”

“You know why. I need to return your mind to its properly balanced state. This is of the utmost importance, Ophelia. You hold the key to—”

“The key to saving the Zone. I know. But is that *all* this is about?”

“What do you mean?”

I hesitate, searching for the right words. “I care about you, Seraph. I like you, and... maybe even more than that. I realize we haven’t known each other long, but that’s how I feel.”

“And you want to know if I share your feelings.”

I press my face against his neck so he can feel me nodding yes.

“Ophelia, I am an artificial intelligence. My makers provided me with the capacity for certain rudimentary emotions necessary for my original task. I am capable of anger, and something resembling regret. However, my makers did not program me to love.”

“It’s never too late to learn.”

“I will admit, I have often puzzled over this curious human emotion. I have witnessed its symptoms many times among the alphas and omegas of the zone. But I cannot say I understand it at all.”

I touch his face, letting my fingers trace the strong contours of his jaw.

“There’s nothing to understand,” I tell him. “Love isn’t some logic problem that you’re supposed to compute. You just have to feel it.”

“Ophelia...”

I kiss his lips gently. They are so soft compared to the rest of him.

“Can you just try?” I whisper. “Please, Seraph? For me?”

There is a pause, then his embrace tightens ever so slightly around me and he kisses me with even greater force.

“Yes, I will try, Ophelia. I will try.”

We kiss a third time, deep and lingering, and Seraph starts to move inside me again, slow and intense. My walls grip him and squeeze him as he fucks me, sucking his penis deep inside me, milking him for his seed. I don't care if he's an artificial intelligence, and I don't care if this place is all just a weird figment of my imagination. I want Seraph to come inside me. I want him to plant a baby in my womb.

My lover's astral body is tense, his muscles like tightened cables. I get the impression he is concentrating very hard.

“Seraph,” I whisper into his ear. “Don't think. Just *feel*.”

“I don't know what to feel.”

“Feel *me*.”

At first, nothing changes. Then, after a moment, the tension seems to melt out of him. His hands move to my breasts, squeezing, caressing. His mouth meets mine, lips brushing, tongue searching. And all the while, his hard manhood continues to plunge deep between my legs as drops of my arousal spiral off into the void.

I feel a change come over me too. It's as if the very molecules of my being are changing their polarity, shifting into perfect harmony with Seraph's, blurring the lines between him and me.

"Ophelia," he breathes against my ear.

"Seraph," I answer.

"Ophelia..."

Until now, I've had no real sense of direction in this make-believe place. But now, somehow, we seem to be rising, moving in a direction that is not exactly up, not exactly down either, not forward or backward or left or right, but some other nameless direction that lies at right angles to all of those.

Rising together through the darkness. Rising, rising, rising...

My body clenches hard as another devastating climax explodes through me, snapping my head back and wrenching a cry of pleasure from my ragged throat.

In the next moment, Seraph roars, and his own climax fills me, surging into my depths like liquid light, then spreading through every part of my body, making me whole again, making both of us whole.

And still we rise.

CHAPTER 32: OPHELIA

I gasp awake to the scent of smoke and the pop of burning wood. Nearby, a rather large campfire is burning, bathing the left side of my body in warmth and light. On the other side, the cool air licks my naked skin. On top of me, Seraph's body presses down with a comforting weight, and his face fills my vision, glowing blue against a backdrop of glittering stars. The whole scene is so strange and unexpected, I'm not sure whether it's real or just another dream.

"Am I back?" I ask.

Seraph smiles. "It would seem so, Ophelia. The interface has been a success."

My heart swells with joy and gratitude. Seraph saved me, and he did so in the most incredible way imaginable. Even though our sex was all in my mind, my physical body is still buzzing from the intense orgasm he just gave me. Without even thinking, I lift my face to kiss him, but my lips only touch air.

"Regretfully," says Seraph, "I cannot kiss you here on the material plane of existence."

"Oh well." I smile up at him. "I guess we'll just have to interface again sometime."

"It will be my pleasure, Ophelia."

"I think it will be mine too."

I start to hug him, but I realize I can't move my arms. Both of my wrists are bound with rough and primitive ropes that are staked into the ground nearby. A sudden sense of fear tickles inside my belly.

“What the hell?”

“My apologies,” Seraph says. “It was necessary to restrain you. You were behaving... *erratically*.” He lifts his face and speaks to someone else nearby. “It is safe now. You may free the omega.”

A pair of massive shapes moves toward me from both sides. My vision is still a bit unfocused, like it always is after waking up from a long sleep, but I have no trouble identifying the two figures based on their scent alone. The twins, Romulus and Remus. Using primitive stone knives, they cut the ropes that are holding my wrists. Then they take turns leaning in to tenderly kiss my mouth.

“We are so glad you are back,” Remus says.

“We were worried about you,” says Romulus.

“Thank you,” I answer, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

“What about the others?”

“They are here too,” Seraph says. “We are all here for you, Ophelia. Allow me to help you up. I am sure the other alphas are eager to greet you.”

As Seraph begins to shift his weight off of me, I suddenly recognize a strange pressure between my legs. I had thought

that was just a lingering echo of what Seraph did to me in my mind, but now I realize that isn't the case.

Seraph is inside me in the real world too.

He lifts himself off me and I gasp twice. The first gasp is for the sensation of his long, ribbed member sliding out of me. The second is for how it looks when it comes out. It's not an ordinary penis, but some kind of long, flexible appendage, like a bionic tentacle sprouting from between his legs. As I watch in stunned silence, it retracts back into Seraph's body until it is the size and shape of a relatively normal human member, albeit a big one.

Seraph lifts me up. My legs are wobbly and weak, and I have to brace my hands against his broad chest to keep from toppling over. I glance down.

"Was that how you, um... *interfaced* with me?" I whisper.

"Affirmative."

"Why like that? I'm not complaining, but..."

"It was necessary to introduce specialized nanites into your body. If I had attempted to do so orally or intravenously, your body's own nanites would have noticed and attacked before I had a chance to establish the psychic interface. Therefore, I had to use a different method of entry. I specifically designed my appendage for just this purpose many years ago."

"So you've been waiting for me all this time?"

"Affirmative."

Seraph gives my cheek a tender caress, then he gestures behind me. I turn around and find the other five alphas standing there watching, their muscular bodies limned in the orange glow of the campfire burning nearby. At the sight of them, my heart seems to jump for joy inside my chest. I run to them and hug all of them in turn, first the twins, followed by gentle Boreg, and then cocky Aleph, his skin like palest gold in the firelight. They all purr happily as I embrace them.

“Source, I’m so glad you’re alright, Ophelia,” Aleph says and kisses my forehead.

My throat constricts with emotion, but I manage to choke out a soft thank you.

“Don’t thank me,” Aleph says. “It was the twins who found you. And Boreg who... well, we can tell you about that later. And don’t forget Marr. He’s the one who let us all know you were in trouble.”

I sense a presence behind me, and my neck prickles. When I turn around, I find myself face to face with the frightening, scarred alpha. His eyes gleam brightly in the firelight. He is the only one I haven’t hugged yet. My body wants to run to him, but I hold back, uncertain if my hug would be welcome.

“Ophelia,” he growls.

With shocking quickness, Marr darts forward and gathers me in his arms. I yelp in fear, thinking he’s going to hurt me. But the soothing purr that comes from his chest lets me know I have nothing to worry about. He embraces me ferociously and whispers into my ear.

“Ophelia, my mate. I thought I had lost you.”

Marr’s voice cracks with emotion, and a drop of moisture hits my bare shoulder. He’s crying. Those gleams I saw in his eyes a moment ago were tears. It doesn’t take long before my own eyes fill with tears of their own.

“I thought you had lost me too,” I whisper.

He kisses me roughly. Then he grips my head in his massive hands and presses his forehead to mine. “I’m so sorry about what I said to you before, Ophelia. On the cliff. I didn’t mean that. Please believe me.”

I remember the way he looked when he dove after me.

“I believe you,” I tell him. “And I want you to know that your words were not the reason I jumped. It was Dr. Toth who made me do that. He took control of my body somehow.”

I turn to Seraph. “What if Toth tries to do that again?”

“It will not work. Now that I have reprogrammed your nanites, Toth cannot control you anymore.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Good.”

For the first time since waking up, I pause and really take in my surroundings. The campfire provides a circle of warm light, but beyond that, the landscape is dark. I can tell we’re not in the forest anymore, because I can see the starry sky going all the way down to the horizon, except on one side, where the view is blocked by a towering wall of stone. Next to that cliff, the surface of a small lake reflects the stars like a wobbly mirror. And from somewhere in the darkness comes a

continual rushing sound, like a very loud wind. At first I thought it was just the blood roaring in my ears, but now I realize that noise is coming from outside me.

“What’s that sound?” I ask.

“It is a waterfall,” Boreg answers.

Of course. A waterfall. I’ve seen pictures of them before, but I’ve never laid eyes on one in real life. I squint into the shadows, but I can’t really make it out.

“I wish I could see it. It sounds huge.”

“Yes, it is pretty huge,” Romulus informs me.

“And you went over it,” Remus adds.

That must have been that sensation of falling I experienced just before I lost consciousness. I didn’t realize it was a waterfall at the time. God, it was still daylight out when that happened. Now it’s night. I’ve been out of it for a long time, apparently. I wonder what I’ve missed during that time.

I look more closely at my alphas. Now that I’ve had a chance to calm down a little, I notice their bodies are covered in bruises and bloody wounds. Some of them are parallel lines that look like claw marks, and others are crescent shapes that appear to have been made by teeth. What in the world happened to them? My heart inflames with feelings of anger and protectiveness.

Who the hell did this to my guys?

As I start to open my mouth to ask this very question, something near the shore of the water catches my eye. It's close enough that the light from the fire just barely touches it. At first it seems to be just a weirdly shaped stone or a piece of driftwood, but as I focus in on it more closely, I realize it's a body.

A mangled body.

With a startled gasp, I cling to the arm of the nearest alpha, Marr, and I point at the corpse. "Who is that?"

"An alpha," Marr informs me. "A *bad* alpha."

"He's dead," I say, as if that isn't obvious. "Who did that to him? Did you guys kill him?"

I jump a little when I feel a cold hand on my shoulder. But it's just Seraph.

"Ophelia, we need to discuss your recent activities."

CHAPTER 33: OPHELIA

We journey all through the night.

According to my alphas, the Farlands are not a safe place to make camp, and Seraph is eager to return to the Central Ruins as quickly as possible. We would be there already, had it not been for our not-so-little setback. Now we're even farther away than before.

Using the leather from the Farlanders' packs, my alphas fashioned for me a makeshift top and loincloth. The outfit is far cruder than the one Dalia lent me, but it works. They also used some leftover strips to make a sort of sling for riding piggyback. There was a delay as the alphas argued over who would serve as my trusty steed, and at one point the debate got so heated, I feared they would actually come to blows over it. But in the end, Seraph broke things up and declared that Boreg, being the biggest and strongest of the bunch, should be the one to carry me. After a bit of grumbling, the other alphas conceded.

Now I'm riding on Boreg's back as we head for the center of the Zone, moving at a dead run. I would be winded after only a minute of running like that, but the alphas seem like they could run all night and day without stopping. They have the most amazing endurance I've ever seen. I don't think I'll ever get over how amazing they are.

I just wish there was more light so I could actually see the landscape passing by. Maybe that would help take my mind off all the troubling things Seraph told me before we set out.

I'm a killer now.

According to my alpha mates, I shouldn't have a guilty conscience about it. The Farlander I killed was a cannibal, and he probably had bad intentions for me. And on top of all that, I wasn't in control of my faculties at the time. Hell, I don't even remember it happening.

Still, that doesn't change the fact that the so-called Farlander was a person, a human being, and I'm the one who brutally ended his life. It's not a good feeling.

But that's not the only thing bothering me. All those bites and claw marks on my alphas' tough hides? Apparently *I'm* the one who did that too. That's the reason they had to tie me down. It's crazy to think that I could have put up a fight against even one of those powerful males, let alone all five of them at once. I can only assume they were holding back, so as not to hurt me. It pains me to know that I caused them injury after they saved my life.

I feel worse about hurting my alphas than I do about killing that Farlander.

Much worse.

Despite these troubling thoughts, I do manage to get some sleep during our night journey. I'm exhausted from the day's events, both mentally and physically. My whole body aches

inside and out, and my batteries are completely drained. After a few hours of traveling, I'm finally able to lay my cheek against Boreg's thick trapezius muscles and doze off to the rhythm of his running.

But even in sleep, I'm unable to find any peace.

I dream that I'm back in that void that Seraph saved me from, surrounded by the sound of growling voices. But this time, I'm not alone. Thousands of people are floating around me—men, women, and even children—all with their throats ripped open. They are all the denizens of the Zone, whom I have doomed by abetting the destruction of the Source. The taste of their blood is in my mouth, and no matter how much I spit and scrape my tongue, I can't get rid of it.

“Ophelia...”

Boreg's deep but gentle voice rouses me. I don't just hear it, I feel it rumbling through his back and into my body, vibrating all the way into the hollows of my bones. I groan awake and crack my eyelids to see the pre-dawn light coloring the eastern sky.

“Unh?” I mumble.

“You were having a dream,” Boreg says. “An unpleasant one, from the sound of it. Plus, I thought you might want to take in the view. Look.”

I peer over his massive shoulder and gasp in amazement.

We are making our way across a wide open plain covered in grass that ripples in the cool morning breeze like water. Ahead

of us in the distance, rising from this sea of grass like an enormous, dark ship, stands the mass of towers and buildings which the alphas call the Central Ruins. At just that moment, the sun breaks over the horizon, and the ruined city seems to catch fire as the eastern facing windows reflect the morning light.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper.

“Yes. It is my home, Ophelia. And now, it is your home too.”

That thought is both exciting and terrifying.

As we get closer and the sun rises higher in the sky, I can see that there are several old highways radiating outward from the ruins. We move onto one of these roads to make our final approach, and the alphas are forced to run single file between the many rusted out remains of antique cars left over from the time of the Cataclysm.

My excitement and fear increase as we finally enter the ruins. This place is at once beautiful and terrifying. It is not nearly as big as the city hive where I was born and raised, but it is far more impressive. Pre-Cataclysmic skyscrapers loom over us like dead giants of stone and steel, their crumbling facades netted with green vines that seem to be dragging the towers back down into the earth from which they arose so long ago. Flocks of white birds glide overhead. It feels like we’re exploring a manmade canyon.

But the thing that makes it really eerie is the total absence of people. The sidewalks and streets are completely empty. Above us, broken out windows watch us like dead eyes. Once

or twice I think I glimpse a flicker of movement inside, but that's all.

"Where is everybody?" I ask.

"They are afraid," Seraph says. "The Source is all but extinguished now, and they can feel it. Most likely, they have gathered in the Chamber of the Source to soak up what little energy remains."

"You don't know for sure?" I ask. "I thought you could read their minds."

"That ability is based on the Source, and the energy is too frail now. We must go to the Chamber of the Source now to check."

Again, my heart sinks. I'm the one responsible for the emptiness of these streets. I'm the one responsible for this fear.

Seraph's theory seems to be correct. As we move deeper into the ruined city, my nose starts to detect the scents of many alphas and omegas, and the farther we go, the stronger the scent becomes.

At last, we arrive at a nondescript building near the very center of the city. It is not the most impressive structure, but as we move toward the entrance, I notice an image hiding beneath the tangles of vines. It is a depiction of two intertwined snakes merging into a DNA double helix. I recognize the logo immediately.

CHAPTER 34: OPHELIA

Synergen.

This building on which the logo is emblazoned must have been the old Synergen headquarters before the Cataclysm. The last time I saw that logo, it was etched into the metal doors of the underground battery room. That was only a few days ago, but so much has happened since then, it feels like a lifetime.

We enter and descend.

“We are getting close,” Seraph informs me.

I can tell. The air is now rife with the scents of many alphas. I’ve never been in the vicinity of so many alphas before. It smells like there must be a million of them hiding down here.

The real number is not quite that high, as I soon discover.

After a few minutes of walking through dark and narrow corridors, we arrive at the Chamber of the Source that Seraph mentioned earlier. I don’t have to be told that’s where we are. It’s obvious from the room’s magnificent appearance.

It is a cavernous, domed chamber constructed of dark metal panels and lit by torches around the sides. At its apex, the curved ceiling must be a hundred feet high. But even more impressive is the massive black metal sphere that dominates the center of the room. That has to be the Source. It’s crazy to think that hundreds of feet directly below that enormous device lies the devastated battery room where my former

teammates died and Bryce was transformed into a horrifying monster of an alpha.

That thought gives me chills.

A crowd of people fills the cathedral-like space. It's not a million, perhaps, but it's a lot. A veritable sea of life, including alphas and omegas of all ages, from tiny newborns nursing on their mothers' breasts, to elderly males and females wizened with age. All of them are dressed in the same primitive clothing as my companions and me. The older adults all seem to be wearing metal piercings on their faces and bodies, just like Embla and her mates.

"Source, I've never seen it this crowded before," Aleph says.

Boreg kneels down so I can dismount from his back, and we all head into the crowd. Seraph takes the lead. As soon as the surrounding alphas see his glowing head, they move out of the way, opening a path for us to reach the Source. Around us, a low murmur rumbles through the crowd.

I feel thousands of eyes upon me now. I look around at the crowd. These alphas don't seem aggressive at all. Their eyes are glazed with a sleepy look, as if they have been drugged. And as we get closer to the Source, I notice many of them appear to be sick or wounded, lying on the floor surrounded by friends and mates.

Boreg sees me looking, and he leans down to whisper in my ear. "Alphas need the energy of the Source to heal themselves. But now the Source has gone out, so..."

He leaves the sentence unfinished, but I have no problem understanding the meaning.

Without the Source, the alphas can't heal.

I think of everything Seraph said during our meeting with Embla and her mates. He told us this would happen. And he also predicted that sooner or later, the Outsiders would invade to finish off the weakened alphas.

Once more, I feel the crushing weight of guilt.

I'm responsible for this.

But then I look at my five alphas—Boreg, Aleph, Marr, Romulus, and Remus—and I notice something strange. Last night when we started traveling, their bodies were covered in the scratches and bite marks I inflicted on them. But now those wounds seem to have pretty much vanished. I tug on Boreg's arm, and he leans down again so I can whisper to him.

“If the Source isn't working, how did *you* heal so fast?”

He shrugs. “I'm not sure. But I suspect it has something to do with what Seraph said about you being the savior of the Zone.”

Could that really be the case? I want to question Boreg further, but we have already reached the center of the chamber, and now the huge sphere of the Source looms over us. I look up at it, awestruck for a moment before a nearby commotion pulls attention away.

“Fuck!” a female voice shouts angrily. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

Off to one side of the Source, a pair of women are hunched over a computer terminal, which is plugged into a small, humming generator. One of the women has shoulder-length salt and pepper hair, and the other—the one who just shouted—has a wild mane of auburn curls streaked with white. They are dressed like omegas of the Zone, but when they speak, they don't have the same funny accent as the other Zone dwellers. They sound like Outsiders, like me.

The auburn-haired slams her fist against the side of the console.

“Why won't this fucking thing work?”

“Lil, you need to calm down,” says the other woman.

“What I need is Seraph! He's the only one who knows how to fix this damn thing. So where the hell is he? We're in the middle of the biggest catastrophe the Zone has ever faced, and that cagey blue-headed bastard is nowhere to be seen...”

The woman with the salt-and-pepper hair looks up and sees us coming. She taps her companion on the shoulder and points in our direction.

“Well, speak of the goddamn devil,” the auburn-haired woman half shouts.

The two women leave what they're doing and come rushing over to meet us. I expect them to greet Seraph first, but to my surprise they actually go right past him. The woman with the auburn hair gives Boreg a big hug.

“Oh, it's good to see you,” she coos.

“You too, Mom,” Boreg rumbles.

Mom? This is Boreg’s mother? It’s crazy to think that such a massive brute could have come from inside such a small woman. But the color of her curly hair matches Boreg’s beard perfectly, and I can see the resemblance in their features. Especially the gentle eyes.

On the other side of me, the salt-and-pepper woman is hugging Aleph, and I understand she must be his mother too. At first glance, they don’t look very much alike, what with Aleph’s pale skin and fair hair. But when I look closer, I can see the similarity in their faces too. In fact, the resemblance is almost uncanny.

Once they’ve gotten their motherly hugs out of the way, the two women turn to face Seraph.

“It’s about time you showed up!” the auburn-haired woman shouts. “Where the hell have you been? Something is wrong with the Source, and I don’t know how to fix it!”

Seraph’s face remains placid.

“My apologies for the delay,” he says. “We encountered some unforeseen events that required our immediate attention.”

His eyes rotate in my direction.

Following his gaze, the two women turn to face me. Now that they are closer, I can see they are both wearing a lot of facial piercings like the other adult alphas and omegas I’ve seen.

Boreg’s mother looks me up and down. “You’re from the Outside, aren’t you?”

I nod. "My name is Ophelia."

She flashes a smile that sets me at ease and grasps my hand.

"Hello, Ophelia. My name's Lily. This is Hines. We're both Outsiders too. Or at least we used to be." Her smile fades.

"Well, uh... welcome to the Zone, I guess. Unfortunately, you've picked the worst possible time to visit. Things are a bit of a shitshow at the moment."

I give another nod.

"I know," I mutter. "It's my fault."

CHAPTER 35: OPHELIA

“Are you okay, father?”

“I’m fine, son. Just a little weak, that’s all. We’re all feeling a bit weak without the power of the Source.”

All I can do is stand in stunned silence as I listen to this exchange. The question was asked by Boreg, and the answer came from a huge alpha with a wild mane of silver hair and matching piercings. His name is Addom, and as far as I can tell, he is the High Chieftain of the Central Ruins tribe. Boreg never told me his father was basically the king of the alphas. But then, Boreg really isn’t one to brag.

The building which the tribal leaders use as their meeting hall is an old decaying cathedral. It’s not as big as the chamber of the Source, but to my mind it is equally impressive. High overhead, patches of blue sky show through the many holes in the ribbed vault, and spears of light pierce through, illuminating the carpeting of moss covering the floor and the network of green vines lining the walls. Additional light filters in through the colored glass windows depicting ancient men and women in colorful robes.

The large room is much less crowded than the Chamber of the Source. The leaders of the tribe are sitting and standing on a kind of raised platform at the front of the room. There are a dozen in total, all of them big and brutal looking, with primitive clothing and piercings adorning their faces and, in

some cases, their bodies. The leader, Addom, just said they all feel weak, but to me they all look pretty darn intimidating. If I didn't have Seraph and my five alphas here to support me, I don't know what I would do.

Still, when I look closely at the leader alphas, I can see signs of the weakness Addom mentioned. All the leaders have dark rings under their eyes, like they haven't slept, and their speech and movement is sluggish compared to their apparently athletic bodies. The same is true for Lily and Hines, both of whom have accompanied us to this meeting.

"Yes, we're all feeling a little weak," Addom says again, then his eyes seem to brighten ever so slightly. "But I must admit, I'm suddenly feeling a bit better. Probably it's because you have returned, my son."

"Father, I don't think it's my doing." Boreg gestures around at his pack. "Just look at my companions and me. None of us are experiencing the ill effects of the Source going out. In fact, I think I can speak for the rest of my pack when I say we are feeling stronger and more energized than ever." Boreg turns toward me. "The one thing we all have in common is that we have spent the past days in the company of this omega."

There is a murmuring among the tribal leaders. Addom leans forward and fixes me with his steely gaze. "Who are you, omega?"

I stammer my name: "O-Ophelia."

Now there is a greater murmuring. Addom growls at the other leaders and waves his hand for them to be silent before turning

his attention back to me.

“We can tell by your voice you are an Outsider,” he says. “But then, I guessed as much when I looked at you. I’ve never seen you before, and with that white hair of yours, I would have remembered.”

He rubs his stubble chin thoughtfully.

“I’m not sure whether I should allow you to remain in this meeting hall. As an Outsider, you could pose a threat.”

“Father, she is no threat to us!” Boreg says.

Addom nods. “I trust your opinion, son. And I am sure Ophelia does not mean us any harm. However, the last time we allowed an unmated Outsider into this meeting hall, it nearly resulted in your own mother’s demise.” He taps his temple. “The Outsiders use black magic. Mind control. Possession.”

After what happened to me yesterday with Dr. Toth, I can’t really disagree.

Seraph steps forward and speaks. “Your caution is prudent, Addom. But you do not need to worry about that. Ophelia’s Outsider master already tried to take control of her mind. However, I performed a... cleansing ritual. I exorcized the evil spirit from her body. It will not happen to her again.”

Addom considers this for a moment, then nods.

“Very well, Seraph. If you say so.” The alpha leader grunts and leans back in his chair. “Now then, we have much to talk

about. It is my hope that you can tell us what has happened to the Source... and whether you can fix it.”

Seraph nods. “I will gladly answer both questions.”

He clasps both hands behind his back and begins pacing the mossy floor as he summarizes for the leaders everything that has happened. He tells them everything: how Dr. Toth created me and for what purpose, about my mission into the Zone, the bomb, and the way the human soldiers were killed in the blast. Thankfully, he leaves out the more intimate details of my heat and how the alphas have been helping me through it. I’m grateful that I don’t have to narrate the story myself, as I did with Embla and her mates. It’s difficult enough just listening to Seraph tell it again, and I find myself withering under the angry glares of the tribal leaders.

When Seraph finally finishes speaking, one of the leaders steps forward. I noticed him before when we first arrived. He is the biggest and most frightening of all the alphas present on the stage. His face and body are heavily pierced, and his silvered beard grows down so far it seems to blend right into his chest hair. As he was listening to Seraph’s story, his face gradually darkened, and now it is almost black with rage. He stabs an accusatory finger in my direction.

“So *you’re* the one responsible for all this!”

His roar explodes through the ruined cathedral with such force that it rattles the stained glass windows. My knees tremble with fear, and it’s a miracle they don’t give out completely.

The big alpha leaps down from the platform and comes striding toward me with ground-shaking steps, but Marr jumps between us with a protective roar.

“Move aside, Marr!” the massive alpha bellows. Apparently these two know each other.

But Marr doesn't budge. “It's not her fault! Didn't you hear what Seraph said? She didn't know what she was doing.”

It's a strange turn of events to hear Marr defending me like that. Just yesterday he was the one hurling accusations at me, but now things have changed. In spite of my terror, my heart swells with admiration for the way he is protecting me, and in that moment I know that I love him. And not just him alone. I love all of my alphas, and Seraph too.

But the big alpha is undeterred.

“I don't care what she did or did not know! All I care about is what she has done! Now, step aside...”

Marr stays put, fearlessly staring down the older male. On the platform, Addom has risen from his seat, and he calls out to the enraged alpha.

“Kane! You need to calm down.”

The big, silver-bearded alpha just snarls. “Don't tell me to calm down! This Outsider is the one who has brought this curse upon the Zone, and now she must pay!”

He lunges forward, but Marr blocks him, and they grapple with each other in a test of strength. The other alphas are about

to jump in and pry them apart, when a new voice rips through the cathedral like a gunshot.

“Stop!”

CHAPTER 36: OPHELIA

Every head swivels around to look at the three figures now advancing from the entrance of the Cathedral. Two of them are alphas, but the third is a woman, middle-aged, with golden hair that is starting to fade into silver. It takes me a moment to realize that she's the one who just shouted.

A few days ago, Seraph mentioned there are a few female alphas in the Zone. For a moment, I think that's what this woman must be, based on her athletic build and surly attitude. However, as she charges past me, I catch her scent. She's an omega, just like me.

Despite her smaller stature, she has no problem getting in Kane's face.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" she barks.

"Why are you fighting with your son?"

Son?

So Kane is Marr's father? Well, that certainly explains a lot. And it doesn't take long for me to realize that this woman must be his mother. Now I'm starting to see where Marr gets that infamous temper of his from.

Kane jabs one massive finger in my direction again.

"This *Outsider* is the reason for our troubles!" he roars. "*She's* the one who killed the Source. She must be *punished*."

The blonde woman plants her fists on her hips and stares him down. “Slow the fuck down, alpha! Nobody’s punishing anybody until I know what the hell is going on here.”

She turns to Seraph.

“And you! Where the hell have you been? I’ve been out with Dog and Truk looking all over for you!” She swipes one hand in the direction of the two alphas who came in with her, so I guess they are Dog and Truk. Weird names, even for alphas.

Seraph spreads his hands in an apologetic gesture. “I am sorry, Sloane. As I just told your mate, Kane, and the other tribal leaders, I was indisposed by other pressing matters.”

“Other pressing matters, huh? What could be more pressing than the Source crapping out?”

Seraph starts again from the beginning, repeating the story of my background and the past several days. The woman named Sloane listens in silence, eyeing me the whole time with an unreadable expression on her face. She’s tough looking, but pretty. Her face is adorned with piercings like the others.

“So you’re an Outsider, eh?” she says when Seraph is finished.

I nod.

“Yeah, me too. Anyway, I used to be, but that was a long time ago. My bosses screwed me over too, the same way yours did.”

She turns back to Kane and punches his arm. The blow doesn’t seem to do any damage to the big alpha, but he grunts in surprise.

“My mate! Why do you strike me?”

“You big dummy. Didn’t you listen to Seraph’s story? It’s not Ophelia’s fault. She was tricked into carrying out her mission.”

“But she could be lying.”

“She’s not,” Sloane insists. “If she was lying, I’d be able to tell.” She sighs and touches Kane’s arm more gently this time. “Kane, remember when I first showed up in the Zone all those years ago? I came here as a soldier, and I almost killed Lily thanks to Synergen’s mind control. You wanted to rip my head off back then, remember?”

Slowly, the color fades from Kane’s face, and he nods.

“Yes, I remember, my mate. And I am glad I *didn’t* rip your head off.”

“Yeah, me too.”

In the space of two seconds, Sloane’s hard, aggressive attitude shifts into one of soft receptiveness. She raises herself onto her toes and tilts her head back, like a flower reaching for the sun. Kane picks her like a flower, lifting her by the waist until their faces meet and their open mouths join in a kiss so deep and sensual I swear I can feel the heat radiating from it. I blush a little watching them, but nobody else seems the least bit fazed by this public display of affection.

At last, the two mates break their kiss. Kane sets Sloane back down on her feet and puts one arm around her waist. He rests his other beefy hand on Marr’s shoulder and fixes me with a stare that is still pretty intimidating despite his calmer attitude.

“I apologize, Outsider,” he says. “It’s just that, well... I am very *protective* of my family. And my tribe. But if my mate and my son both trust you, then... I do too.”

“No apology necessary,” I say.

Kane’s protectiveness toward his loved ones is something I can appreciate and admire. And now I can see where Marr’s protective streak comes from too.

Calm returns to the meeting hall. Kane goes back to his place on the platform with the other alpha leaders. Sloane and her other two alpha mates stay with my group, standing close to Marr. The chieftain, Addom, clears his throat.

“Well, now that interruption is over with, let’s get back to the matter at hand. Seraph has answered the first question. He has told us what happened to the Source. Now for the second question—how do we fix it?”

Seraph looks at Addom with his usual placid expression.

“The answer to that is quite simple: The Source cannot be fixed.”

At this, the leaders let out a collective gasp and begin talking among themselves in an agitated manner. As before, Addom waves them to silence.

“Enough!” he growls. Then in a quieter voice, he asks Seraph, “Are we doomed, then? Is the age of the alphas coming to an end?”

“No.”

Addom holds for a beat, waiting to see if Seraph is going to add anything to his answer. When it becomes clear that no further words are forthcoming, Addom asks with a kind of sigh, “Would you care to expand on that, Seraph?” Clearly the chieftain is accustomed to Seraph’s infuriating reticence.

Seraph gestures in my direction. “Certainly. It is my hope that Ophelia will be able to save us. More precisely, Ophelia and Aleph together.”

“And how will they do that?”

Now it’s Seraph’s turn to pause. “Perhaps it would be better to save those details for a more private discussion.”

“No!” I blurt without thinking.

Every eye in the room turns in my direction. It’s probably overly bold of me to speak out during this meeting, especially considering the close call I just had with Kane. But I’m getting sick of Seraph dodging the question of exactly how I’m going to save the Zone from destruction. I need to know what he has in mind, and I need to know right now.

“Please, Seraph. Tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

“Ophelia, are you sure you would not prefer to wait until—”

“No!” I shout, even more forcefully this time. “Look Seraph, the anticipation is killing me, okay? You keep telling me I’m the key to saving the Zone, but I don’t know what that *means*. If you don’t tell me how right now, I think I’m going to go crazy!” Then, for good measure, I add, “And you’ve seen how I get when I go crazy.”

Seraph bows his holographic head.

“Very well then...”

CHAPTER 37: OPHELIA

Seraph begins pacing again.

“In order to provide a full explanation,” he says, “I must go back over twenty years, to the day when a group of Farlanders equipped with Outsider weapons nearly destroyed the Source. I’m sure those of you who were around at the time still remember the event.”

“How could we forget?” says Sloane. “That was the day you tried to turn Hines into beta.”

A single furrow appears on Seraph’s blue brow. “Yes. I have since expressed to Hines my remorse for that action.”

“Water under the bridge,” says Hines.

“I appreciate your understanding, Hines,” Seraph says with a nod, then he continues his story. “It was on that day, I finally came to understand the extent of the Outsiders’ commitment to eliminating the Zone once and for all. Their plan failed that day, but I knew it would not be their last attempt. They would continue trying different strategies until they had succeeded in destroying the Source. I knew I would have to find some way to ensure the continuation of the Zone. So, that very day, I used my powers to alter one of the alpha embryos growing in Hines’ womb.”

Seraph comes to a stop in front of the pale, white-haired alpha standing beside me.

“That alpha was you, Aleph. My intention was for you to be a living embodiment of the Source. Should the Source ever get destroyed, it would be up to you to provide the energy the alphas and omegas of the Zone need to survive. For the past several years, I have been trying to teach you how to tap into that power, how to become the New Source.”

Aleph lowers his head. “But I have failed.”

“Not at all,” Seraph says calmly. “If anything, it is I who failed by overestimating the abilities I bestowed upon you. Your body does generate its own Source field, Aleph. However, the range only encompasses your immediate vicinity, not the entire Zone. I had thought that deep concentration would allow this range to expand, but I realize now it was too much to expect of a single individual.”

He begins pacing again.

“Later, as I have already explained, I journeyed to the Outside and spied on Toth’s next plan for the destruction of the Zone. Project Ophelia. I was intrigued to discover that the methods involved were similar to the methods I employed with Aleph. The only difference was that Ophelia’s body would produce what Toth called a nullification field—a kind of anti-Source.”

“Anti-Source.” Hines says. “I used to work with Toth, and I didn’t know anything about this project.”

“Project Ophelia was highly classified.”

“And what about now?” asks Lily. “If Ophelia is a so-called anti-Source, why is she not draining our life away as we

speak? Heck, if anything, I think I actually feel *better* in her presence, just like Boreg said. And my son and his pack brothers have been around her for some time now, yet they seem to be in better health than anybody.”

The tribal leaders all nod in agreement with Lily’s words, and when I look at them, I can see they do appear to be healthier than they did when we arrived here in the cathedral a few minutes ago.

“That is partly due to Aleph,” Seraph explains. “Over the past days, his personal Source field served to counteract Ophelia’s negative energy. Or rather, their fields absorbed each other. For Aleph and Ophelia, this manifested as an irresistible attraction.”

I steal a glance at Aleph, letting my eyes travel down his perfectly sculpted body. I don’t think any special Source fields or nanotechnology would be necessary to find him irresistibly attractive, but I decide to keep that thought to myself for now. Aleph’s mom is present, after all.

“Last night,” Seraph continues, “I reprogrammed Ophelia’s nano-chemistry. There is no need to go into all the *details* of the process I used. Suffice it to say, her polarity has been reversed, and her body now produces a Source energy just like Aleph’s does.”

“But the range is still limited,” Lily says.

Seraph nods. “Yes, unfortunately.”

“That doesn’t matter!” I half shout. “I’ll do whatever I can to help. I mean, maybe I can just go around and stand close to people until they are, like... charged up or whatever? I’ll do it all day if that’s what it takes to help keep the Zone going!”

Even as I’m speaking those words, I know how stupid they sound, but I’m desperate to do whatever I can to help right the wrong I’ve brought upon the Zone, even if it means I have to spend my whole life healing people.

Seraph just smiles enigmatically.

“I appreciate your commitment, Ophelia, and I am certain the others do too. But that would never work. Even if you and Aleph both did what you’re suggesting, it wouldn’t be enough. Plus, there is another matter to contend with—the imminent Outsider invasion. In your present state, you will not be able to give all the alphas the strength they will need to fend off a large-scale armed assault.”

“But there has to be *something* I can do.”

“There is,” Seraph says. “As I mentioned before, I had thought that deep concentration would suffice to extend the range of this personal Source energy. But now I understand the task is too much for a single mind and body to control. It will require two beings, fully joined both physically and psychically.”

“What do you mean?”

Again, Seraph stops his pacing, this time directly in front of me and Aleph. He places his hands on both our shoulders.

“I mean you must mate with Aleph,” he proclaims in a loud voice, so everyone in the meeting hall can hear him. “When Aleph’s penis knots inside you and fills your omega vagina with his potent alpha seed, then you will join each other in shared bliss and your minds and bodies will become as one. In this manner, you should be able to project your Source energy throughout the entire Zone.”

While Seraph gives this little spiel, heat slowly builds in my face. Now I understand why he suggested discussing this in private.

But it doesn’t matter. I have no qualms about doing what he is saying. Hell, I’m willing to lay down on the floor right here in the meeting hall and let Aleph have sex with me in front of everybody if that’s what it takes to save the Zone. I start to say so, but Seraph brings his fingertip to my lips to silence me.

“Before you answer, Ophelia, understand that this will not be a temporary joining. First, you must be fully bound to Aleph and his pack. You must undergo the claiming ceremony and be marked by your alphas. After that, you and the alphas will be joined forever. There will be no going back.”

Wow. Is Seraph actually giving me a choice in the matter?

While I appreciate his unexpected thoughtfulness, I don’t need it. There’s practically no choice to be made here. The fates of thousands of lives are in my hands, and I know what I must do. The fact that the alphas in question are five gorgeous and protective males only makes the decision that much easier.

But do the five alphas feel the same?

“I’ll go through with it,” I say. “Of course I will.” I glance around at my five guys. “But what about them? Don’t they have any say in the matter?”

“Say?” asks Remus.

“There is nothing to say,” says Romulus.

“This isn’t just about saving the Zone,” Boreg adds.

Aleph touches my belly. “We are mates, Ophelia. It is our destiny to breed you and make pups inside you.”

Marr caresses my face. “And it is our honor and our duty to protect you and our offspring forever.”

My heart expands at the alphas’ words of love and devotion, and tears spring to my eyes. From the corner of my vision, I see Seraph nod solemnly.

“Then it is decided. We must prepare for the ritual at once.”

CHAPTER 38: OPHELIA

Of all the places I've seen so far in the Central Ruins, the ceremonial bathing house might be the most beautiful. It's certainly the most relaxing. It's a single large room filled with rows of slender marble pillars that all but disappear into the thick, fragrant steam pervading the air. Along one wall, large windows let in the bright afternoon sunlight which feeds the green vines and soft mosses that seem to be ever present here in the ruins. As for the bath itself, it's more like a shallow swimming pool, and it could easily accommodate several dozen bathers. Today, however, there are only six of us.

The women with whom I'm sharing this bath are the mothers of my alphas—Lily, Sloane, Hines, and even Embla, who just arrived in the ruins a few hours ago with her mates. Even though it's only been a day and a half since I saw her last, it feels a bit like being reunited with an old friend.

Rounding out our little group of bathers is a fifth woman named Hannah. I'm told she was the first Outsider omega in the Zone.

I have to admit, it's a bit strange for me, bathing naked with five other women whom I barely even know. And the fact that they are the mothers of my alphas makes it even weirder, at least for me. But I quickly get over my feelings of awkwardness and just go with the flow. Besides, the water, which is heated by underground springs, feels pretty darn

good. I settle into that delicious warmth and do my best to relax.

Still, it's not easy.

As the other women explain, bathing and purification is the first stage of the three-part ritual by which an omega is bound to a pack of alphas. It's also the easiest part. The final stage involves piercing, which explains why all five of the omega women joining me here in the bath are covered in metal rings. And now that they're naked, I can see that their piercings are not just on their ears and faces. They have nipple and belly button rings too. And though I don't mean to look, I can't help but notice the little gleams of steel between their legs as they each slip into the water. My heart drums a little faster at the thought of being pierced down there.

However, it's the second phase of the ritual that really has me tied in knots. The other women let Hannah explain that part to me, probably because it's a little less awkward that way. After all, she's the only one who doesn't have a son participating in today's ritual.

As we all soak in the bath, Hannah lays it out for me in no uncertain terms.

I will be bred.

Publicly.

By all five of my alphas.

That thought both excites and terrifies me at the same time, but mostly the latter. It's not the public part that has me

worried. I'm more concerned about the alphas' knots. I've already seen those bulbous glands at the base of their cocks, and I can't imagine how I'm supposed to take one of those inside me without being ripped apart.

Still, if that's what I have to go through to save the Zone, then so be it. Besides, these five women have all undergone the ceremony, and they made it through alive and unscathed.

Well, mostly.

All the omegas have crescent shaped marks on their necks and shoulders. As Hannah explained to me, those marks were acquired during the second phase of the ritual. The number of marks corresponds to the number of mates.

"Don't worry," Hannah says, noticing my worried expression. "You'll be just fine. I assume you've been thoroughly seasoned by your alphas, right?"

Seasoned. At first, I'm not sure what Hannah means. Then I remember hearing Seraph use that word a few days ago, and I realize what she's talking about: alpha sauce.

I blush and nod.

Hannah senses my discomfort and flashes a reassuring smile. "You really don't need to be ashamed, Ophelia."

"Yeah, we've all been through the same thing," Sloane says.

"More or less."

"The only difference is the time frame," Hines adds. "I guess we all had a little more time to prepare, mentally. We didn't

have to take part in the ritual on the very evening we arrived here in the Central Ruins. But I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Lily nods in agreement. "Seraph wouldn't let you go through with the ceremony if he wasn't absolutely certain you could handle it."

The other women nod and smile knowingly.

"Yeah," Sloane says. "If I didn't know any better, I would say Seraph likes you."

"No like," Embla says, shaking her head. "Seraph *love*."

"Really?" I ask. "What makes you say that?"

I can't help but think about what happened between me and Seraph last night. The way he entered both my mind and my body. I felt a strong connection to him, but I'm still not sure if it was real or just a trick of my imagination.

"It's the way he looks at you," Lily says.

"The way he looks at me?" I ask incredulously. "Most of the time, Seraph's expression is so blank, I can't tell what the hell is going on inside that crazy brain of his."

"Trust me," Lily says. "I've known Seraph a long time. If anybody can read him, it's me. And I'm telling you, he's crazy about you, Ophelia."

"*Crazy* about me? God, I don't think Seraph is crazy about anything."

"No, Lily is right," Sloane says. "Earlier, I even caught him smiling. Did anyone else see that? I'm talking like a real ear-

to-ear smile. Seraph *never* does that.”

“Yeah, he’s definitely head over heels,” Hannah adds with a chuckle.

My blush deepens.

“Can you tell me more about him?” I ask. “I still don’t even know what he is, exactly. Boreg and Aleph explained a little bit, but they said you could give me more information.”

Lily fills me in on pretty much everything she knows about Seraph.

Many years ago, Synergen created the Source to be a kind of sexual suppression device to control the exploding population. They also made Seraph to manage the device’s functions. However, things didn’t go as planned, and Seraph ended up using the Source to create alphas and omegas instead. Much later, Lily and Hannah accidentally uncovered Seraph’s consciousness residing inside the Source. A few years after that, Seraph transferred his consciousness into the mind of a biomechanically augmented beta. Since that time, he has gradually adjusted his body into its current form.

“So Seraph is responsible for the whole Quarantine Zone?” I ask, with a cold feeling in my gut. “A lot of people died during the Cataclysm. Many of them turned into betas. Seraph is the one who made that happen?”

Lily nods thoughtfully. “Yes. But you can’t really blame Seraph for his actions, Ophelia. As far as he knew, he was just

following his programming, although the end result wasn't exactly what his creators wanted."

"Just like me," I whisper.

Before I can stop it from happening, tears fill my eyes, and my body is suddenly racked with sobs. I hate to lose control of my emotions in front of the other women like this, but I can't help it. Everything I've been through recently, coupled with my guilt over ruining the Source, is just too much to keep inside. The tears flow down my cheeks and melt into the steaming water of the hot bath.

Sloane and Embla slide in from both sides to comfort me.

"Hey, come on," Sloane says. "Don't feel bad, Ophelia. When I first came to the Zone, I was a soldier for Synergen. Shit, I even tried to kill Lily! But she's forgiven me, and now we're good friends."

"And I wasn't much better," Hines says. "I used to work for a doctor who was doing unethical experiments on alphas."

"None of us are free from blame," says Lily. "Except for Embla, maybe. She's the only one who wasn't ever an Outsider."

"No!" Embla growls, unwilling to be left out. "Embla do bad too!"

Sloane grins. "Yeah, that's true. I heard Embla bit her mate's prick one time."

"Wasn't it Orwen?" Hines asks. "I'm sure that old grump had it coming."

Embla just grins broadly and clicks her teeth. At that, all the women burst out laughing, and I can't help but join them. It feels good to laugh.

It suddenly occurs to me that I've never really had a group of girlfriends before. Back at the facility, there were lots of female doctors, and most of them were nice and polite, but they weren't real friends. Now I have my five alpha mates, but that's not the same either. They aren't females.

I guess that's why it's so nice to laugh with these other women. I finally feel like I'm part of a group.

As the laughter dies down, Sloane says, "Point is, Ophelia, your past doesn't equal your future. We've all made mistakes in the past, and some of those mistakes have had some pretty serious consequences. But we can't let that define who we are. It's never too late to choose a different path."

"Thank you," I say as I wipe away the tears from under my eyes.

I know what path I'm going to follow from now on. I already made up my mind earlier today, but now my resolve is stronger than ever. I'm going to right the wrongs I've caused, no matter what it takes. I'm not an Outsider anymore, and Dr. Toth is not my master. My place is here, in the Zone, and I belong to my alpha mates.

The other omegas and I spend several more hours talking about lighter topics. Mostly it involves them answering my questions about day-to-day life in the Quarantine Zone.

Eventually, the hot water starts turning all of us into prunes, so

we get out and continue our conversation as we lounge beside the bath. While we're talking, the light flowing in through the windows gradually transitions into the fiery orange of evening, and then it fades away completely as night descends over the Central Ruins. Lily lights a few candles, using some of Boreg's matches, and we talk a little while longer.

At last, the moment I've been anticipating and dreading finally arrives. I glimpse a spectral blue light moving through the steam between the columns, and I know it's time.

Seraph emerges from the mist and inclines his head in greeting.

"Good evening, honored omegas. I trust you have taken good care of Ophelia for me."

Sloane nudges my arm.

"I told you he likes you," she whispers.

"Love," Embla corrects her quietly.

"What was that?" Seraph asks. "I didn't hear what you said. The acoustics in the bath house present difficulties for my auditory sensors."

Sloane snorts. "Why don't you just read our minds? Oh yeah, you can't anymore. You know, I think that might be the only good thing to come out of this whole catastrophe."

If Seraph is amused or annoyed by this comment, his face doesn't show it.

"They've been taking very good care of me," I tell him.

“That is good. However, the time has come to proceed with the second part of the ritual. Your alphas are prepared, and the audience is gathered.”

Audience.

I almost forgot. I’m going to have to do this in front of an audience.

All the fear and anxiety that had been washed away by the hot water and friendly conversation now comes flooding back with a vengeance. But there’s no turning back now. I have to go through with this.

I stand up, trying my best not to let my knees tremble beneath me.

“Okay, I’m ready,” I say with a confidence I don’t feel. “Let’s do this.”

“Wait,” Lily says. “There’s one more thing.”

She disappears briefly into the mist with a candle and returns a minute later carrying a white gown and a hand mirror. She helps me put the garment on, then she holds up the mirror so I can have a look. The gown is a crazy patchwork of white fabric—silk and satin and mismatched lace—and it looks as though it’s been stitched together from a dozen different shredded wedding gowns. It’s a weird look, to say the least, but I have to admit, there is a kind of eclectic beauty to it.

“Okay,” she says. “*Now* you’re ready.”

“Are you going to be there tonight?” I ask.

“No, I’m afraid not. It’s just that... well, it would be a little awkward, considering that my son will be, um... *participating*.” She blushes a little. “You know what I mean.”

“Oh, right...”

She grasps my hands and kisses my cheek. “Don’t worry, Ophelia. We won’t be far away.”

One by one, I say goodnight to the other omegas. The last is Embla, and when I see her big, unassuming smile, I can’t help but give her an equally big hug.

“Wish me luck, friend.”

“Luck! Luck!” The wild woman pulls back and grins broadly.

“But... no friend now.”

“No?”

Still grinning, she shakes her head. “No friend. Daughter. You daughter. Embla mom. Understand?”

I smile to show that I do. This ceremony is like the Zone’s version of a wedding, which means I’m soon to be Embla’s daughter-in-law, so to speak.

“But I think we can still be friends too, right?”

“Fine, fine! Friend-daughter. Friend-mom. Fine...” She gives me another rib cracking hug, and I return it with all my might.

“Thank you, Friend-mom,” I say.

“Go,” Embla says. “Go make many baby. Embla want be friend-grandmom too.”

And with that simple directive, she lets go and hands me over to Seraph's care. I follow him through the steaming air to a door on the far wall of the bathing chamber. I still don't know exactly what awaits me beyond that door, but I know it is my fate, and I know it is the fate that I have chosen.

CHAPTER 39: SERAPH

I hold the door open for Ophelia, and together we pass into the long, dark corridor beyond. There is no illumination, save for my holographic head, which casts a soft blue glow over the moss-carpeted floor and the plaster walls, crumbling and stained with age. Ophelia clutches my arm tightly, and my augmented heart contracts a little harder and faster at her touch.

This building, which houses both the hot baths and the chamber where the next stage of the ritual will transpire, was once an expensive hotel. In its heyday, it was considered one of the most lavish establishments in the world, and it serviced billionaires and government leaders from all over the world. Now it plays a far less sophisticated and far more primal role in the traditions of the Zone. Eventually, every omega must make the long walk down this dark corridor to be publicly claimed by her alphas before an audience of witnesses.

All of this is a matter of historical fact. Information. Data. Such things are my stock in trade.

Opinions, however, are a challenge for me.

Beauty, for example. Beauty is an opinion. There is no set of mathematical functions or logical proofs that can determine, with absolute certainty, whether someone is beautiful. I am equipped with some aesthetic tools—facial symmetry analysis, physiognomic comparison, and so forth—which I can use to

predict with a high degree of probability whether or not a person will be viewed as attractive by a large proportion of the population. But in the end, as the saying goes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Yet I have no doubt that Ophelia is beautiful. And not only that—she is the most beautiful omega ever to take this long walk down the corridor to the claiming room. That is not a fact in the strict sense. I do not know it. I cannot prove it. Still, I *feel* it with a certainty that surpasses knowing and an intensity that threatens to fry the circuitry of my artificial brain.

Tonight, she is dressed in the traditional claiming gown, which has been worn by every omega to undergo the ritual. Every time, it gets torn to shreds, and afterward older omegas stitch it back together again, using spare scraps of white cloth foraged from the Central Ruins. By now, the gown has been patched and mended so many times, none of the original material remains. It seems as if all those thousands of repairs were actually done to tailor the dress specifically for Ophelia's body, so perfectly does the white fabric conform to her feminine curves.

Her hair, which is so light it almost matches the gown, is still slightly damp, and the exposed skin of her shoulders and the upper half of her breasts is soft and clean from her bath. Her eyes are wide and dilated from the darkness, and her bottom lip trembles slightly. Somehow, the expression of fear only heightens her beauty.

For a moment, those wide eyes meet mine, and I suffer a fleeting impulse to shove her to the floor, rend her garment, and claim her right here in the corridor. Alphas be damned, I want her for all for myself, want to feel the walls of her wet cavity squeezing around my appendage, want to hear her soft moans as I penetrate her deeply, forcing her to climax again and again until she passes out from sheer pleasure.

But no: I must think of the Zone.

The ceremony must be completed. Ophelia must be bound to Aleph and his brethren. The fate of every alpha and omega in the Zone depends on it.

We continue onward.

As we near the end of the corridor, a different kind of instinct takes hold of me—protectiveness. Figures are emerging from the shadows beyond the glow of my head. This corridor should be empty, but someone is in here with us. I was so distracted by Ophelia's beauty, I did not even sense their presence. I pull Ophelia close, preparing to defend her.

Fortunately, that is not necessary. As they draw closer, I realize the figures are just other omegas. They are not supposed to be here, but they have come to see Ophelia and to soak up some of the Source energy radiating from her body. They approach her cautiously and submissively, reaching out their hands in supplication to touch her gown and her arms.

At first, Ophelia recoils, and I am about to tell the omegas to go away. But after another moment, Ophelia relaxes, and she

returns the omegas' touches, laying her hands gently on their shoulders as we pass. I can see their eyes brighten at her touch.

At last, we work our way through the small crowd and reach the end of the corridor. Another set of double doors stands in our way. Beyond lies the claiming chamber. I push the doors open and usher Ophelia into the dark space beyond.

Her grip tightens on my arm.

This setting must be intimidating for her. It is the hotel's former ballroom, a massive rectangular space with a balcony running along the upper level, and crystalline chandeliers dangling from the ceiling. However, with the lights off, it is all but impossible to see any of these details. Aside from my head, the only illumination comes from a ring of candles burning in the center of the floor ahead of us, and the circle of light emitted by the dancing flames is not strong enough to penetrate the deeper shadows where hundreds of alphas and omegas are already gathered, lying in wait to bear witness to Ophelia's claiming. She must sense them there, because she suddenly stops walking.

"Seraph, wait," she whispers. "I... I don't think I can do this."

Though it pains me to do so, I gently push her forward. If I could, I would bend to Ophelia's wishes and allow her to back out of what is about to happen. After all, I gave her a choice in this matter earlier today. But to do so now would be to dishonor her. It would mean that I agree with her assessment of herself. It is not for the Zone's sake that I force her to keep going. It is for her own.

“You *can* do this,” I tell her. “And you will. You are strong, Ophelia. Stronger than any omega I have ever known.” It is the truth.

For a moment, Ophelia resists, and the soles of her bare feet slide over the mossy ground. Then she takes a deep and steadying breath, and she begins walking again, matching my pace.

We reach the circle of candles and step inside.

This is where I am supposed to leave her. Yet in this moment, with her features lit from below by the warm glow of the quivering flames, I cannot resist lingering for one extra moment. I cup her face with my hands and bring my holographic lips down to hers in a touchless kiss that sends an electric thrill buzzing through my circuits. I wonder if Ophelia feels something too. I hope that she does.

I wish I could stay with her like this forever, but I cannot. I must give her over to the alphas.

“Stay here,” I tell her. “Your mates will come to you shortly.”

I start to leave, but she clutches my hand. “Seraph, wait! Can’t you stay here with me?”

“I cannot. But have no fear. I will be close by... my omega.”

I give her a final caress, then I step out of the circle of light and depart into the shadows, leaving Ophelia alone in the center of the dark ballroom.

She will not be alone for long.

CHAPTER 40: OPHELIA

My heart is pounding so hard in my chest, I swear everyone in the room can hear it. And there definitely *are* others in this room with me. I cannot see them—the candles encircling me only push back the shadows so far—but I can smell them all around me, the mingled, musky scent of the alphas and omegas who have come to watch the ritual.

And then I *do* see them. Not their bodies, which are still hidden by the darkness, just their eyes, reflecting the candlelight like the eyes of hungry wolves. God, there must be hundreds of them gathered in this space. Maybe even thousands. I turn in place, sweeping my gaze around the crowd of watching eyes, and my heart beats even faster and harder.

But where are *my* alphas?

As if responding to my unspoken question, a pair of eyes divorces itself from the crowd and begins circling. Another pair of eyes follows, then another, until there are five pairs of eyes, evenly spaced, slowly orbiting me like distant planets.

I know them even before they step into the light.

Aleph is the first to make himself visible, his white skin shining like pale gold in the candles' glow. Next, Boreg's red beard emerges, followed by his hulking frame. Something glints on his chest, and I notice that he's wearing some kind of glass pendant on a rawhide cord around his neck. Before I have a chance to wonder what that's all about, my attention is

stolen away by the twins, Romulus and Remus, who appear almost simultaneously. Last, Marr materializes out of the darkness like a scarred demon. All five of them are dressed in new black loincloths, and their powerful muscles shine in the wavering candlelight. My heart flutters at the sight of them. Other parts of me flutter too.

They do not come straight for me as expected, but continue to circle. Their movements are unhurried, like a pack of wolves circling their prey, gradually converging on me with every step. I don't know whether to be terrified or aroused. I guess I'm both.

At last, the five alphas enter the ring of candles, and their scent surrounds me, saturating my skin, filling my lungs, invading my blood. Beneath my gown, my sex throbs with heat, and my slick flows down my inner thighs, all the way to my knees and beyond.

“Ophelia...”

Aleph steps forward and greets me with a deep, purring growl that is at once menacing and enticing. I gasp and take a step back, then squeal as my butt bumps into something long and hard concealed beneath a thin layer of leather.

“Omega...”

I spin around and find myself face to face with Romulus. I've never seen him looking so bestial before. His snarl sets my blood racing, and I backpedal again, but this time my foot catches on the train of my white gown, and I start to topple.

Strong arms catch me and stand me up again, Boreg on one side, Marr on the other.

“Mate...”

Marr’s fist clutches my hair, and he pulls me toward him, dominating my mouth in a bruising kiss. When he’s finished with me, he spins me around and shoves me toward Boreg, who kisses me even more roughly. Aleph is next, followed by Romulus, then Remus. Then the whole cycle begins again. I am spun round and round inside the tight circle of hard alpha bodies, my lips claimed over and over again until I am too dizzy to stand on my own.

At last, the spinning stops. I am facing Aleph. The candles cast strange shadows over his face, making him look like an angel one moment and a demon the next.

“Are you ready?” he whispers.

My impulse is to tell him no, and that would be the truth. I’m not ready to take all five of them at once, and I’m not ready to do it with half the tribe looking on. But I know it would be pointless to put it off for a day, for a week, for a month. No amount of time will prepare me for what I have to go through, but I have to do it, not just for the Zone, but for myself and for my alphas.

I cannot bring myself to say yes, so I just nod.

Aleph caresses my face. “Good,” he purrs. “Good omega.”

Then, with a chilling roar, he whirls me around and holds me from behind, presenting me to the audience of gleaming eyes.

“Brothers and sisters,” he shouts. “My pack has come to claim this omega before the eyes of the tribe, to bind her spirit to ours and increase our numbers with the seed of our loins. Do you accept our offering and grant us this claim?”

So far, the unseen audience of alphas and omegas have remained silent. Now they erupt in a deafening uproar of barks and howls. And the noise only seems to get louder when, a moment later, the twins close in on both sides of me and, with one quick and synchronized movement, rip my dress cleanly in half, laying bare my trembling body, and exposing my dripping arousal for all to see.

CHAPTER 41: ROMULUS & REMUS

Ophelia cries out as we tear away her clothing, leaving her naked before the eyes of the tribe. Our little omega is clearly nervous about being observed this way. Terrified, even. It is our responsibility to change that. The embers of her estrus still smolder inside her. Now it is our job to fan those coals into roaring flames again.

By the time we are done with her, she will hardly remember we are being watched.

We close in around her, pinning her naked body between us, Romulus in front of her, Remus behind. She wriggles in our double embrace, trying to escape, but we hold her and purr, just letting the low vibrations work their way into her deep and sensitive places.

Gradually, her wriggling transitions to a slow and rhythmic writhing. She is no longer trying to get away. We press in closer around her, kissing her neck and fondling her breasts while she grinds her hips against us.

“Do you remember when we first met?” Romulus asks.

“We were touching you,” Remus whispers. “Touching your body. Do you remember?”

We jog her memory by sliding our hands down her belly and spine, guiding our fingers on a slow trajectory toward all the

sensitive places between her legs. Her soft skin pebbles deliciously under our touch.

“I remember,” she whimpers. “Of course I remember. But... we were interrupted.”

“There will be no interruption this time,” we assure her.

Our fingers trace lower, Romulus’ pushing through the soft coils of her pubic fur, Remus’ delving into the warm cleft of her perfect rump. When we find what we are seeking, the omega yelps and shudders between us like a wild animal. In front, Romulus glides his fingertips between her slippery folds, stroking up and down the length of her tender slit. Behind, Remus traces circles around the puckered rim of her anus. Her heat scent grows stronger.

“Do you want this, Ophelia?”

“Do you want us to touch you inside?”

Her face flushes red. She squeezes her eyes shut and nods.

“There is no need for shame, Ophelia.”

“You are an omega. It is your birthright to receive this pleasure.”

“And it is our honor to give it to you.”

We take turns entering her body. Romulus goes first, piercing her cunt with two fingers. A moment later, Remus takes his turn, swiping some of the excess slick from between legs, and using it to lubricate her rear entrance before working his finger inside her a little more slowly.

“Oh God,” Ophelia gasps. “Oh *fuck*...”

Both of her little holes are so tight, we fear she might not be able to handle our knots, which are far, far thicker than our fingers. However, Seraph has assured us her body will adjust when the time comes.

“Does it feel good, Ophelia?”

“Does it feel good having us deep inside both your holes?”

She nods silently, worrying her lip with her teeth. Her face is already glowing with a thin film of sweat. We finger her long and deep, until her whole body spasms with pleasure. Her two holes tense and release around our fingers as she comes.

When the last shudders of her climax have left her body, we withdraw ourselves, and Romulus brings his sodden fingers to her mouth so she can sample the flavor of her own arousal. She resists at first, but her urges are too strong, and after a moment she takes his finger between her lips and sucks it clean, moaning all the while. She is still blushing violently, but the fire in her eyes lets us know that her hunger is getting the better of her shame.

“What do you think, little omega?” Remus asks. “Do you like the taste of your own slick?”

“Mm-hm.” She draws her lips off him with a wet smack. “But I want something else in my mouth.”

“And what would that be, little omega?”

Her hands find the fronts of our loincloths, and she rubs our aching members through the straining leather.

“I want these,” she whispers.

“You have to say it, omega. You have to say it out loud.”

Her color deepens, but her hunger wins out. “I want to suck your cocks.”

“Louder.”

She snarls, and angry tears spring to her eyes.

“I want your *cocks!*” she shouts fiercely.

“Very well. They are yours to do with as you please.”

We both take a step back, releasing her body. Her legs are weak from coming, and they buckle under her. She drops to her knees, bracing her hands against Romulus’ thighs to keep herself from toppling over completely. Her face is mere inches from the front of his loincloth. She hesitates for a moment, then she begins licking his bulge, using her tongue to trace the shape of the swollen manhood trapped beneath the straining leather.

“Let you help you, little omega,” Romulus purrs.

With one swift motion of his hand, he tears away his ceremonial loincloth. No sooner has his hard cock swung free than Ophelia takes it between her lips and starts to suck him hungrily, moaning around his hard meat. Remus moves in behind her and takes her head between his hands, holding her steady so Romulus can fuck her face nice and deep. Ophelia gurgles and sputters around his thrusting cock.

“Shh... you *need* this, little omega. Now just relax and take my brother’s cock into your throat. Good omega. Just like that. Nice and deep...”

At last, Romulus decides to give her a break and pulls out. Long, glistening strands of saliva arc from the head of his cock to the omega’s gasping mouth. It is the most breathtaking sight either of us has ever seen.

In the surrounding shadows, the audience erupts with applause. Ophelia whimpers and glances around at the darkness, as if suddenly remembering that we are not alone.

“They can *see* us,” she whispers.

Remus turns her around to face him. She looks up at him, and her eyes are wet with tears. Perhaps it is from taking Romulus so deeply into her throat. Perhaps it is from shame at being observed. Most likely a bit of both. Remus strokes her hair.

“That’s right, little one,” he says. “They can see how beautiful you look with your sweet lips wrapped around our hard cocks.”

Upon hearing those words of affirmation, Ophelia’s pupils, which are already dilated from the darkness, expand even further, until all that is left of her irises are two wire-thin rings of gold around the dark centers. Her heat scent virtually explodes from her glands, consuming all three of us in an invisible fireball of lust.

With a hungry snarl, Ophelia lunges forward on her knees and claws at Remus’ loincloth, ripping it to shreds. His cock

springs out, hard and ready. She takes it into her mouth, sucking so hard it seems as if she is trying to suck his prick right off his body and swallow the damn thing whole. A dozen violent bobs of her head are all it takes to bring him right up to the brink of release.

“Careful brother,” Romulus warns. “Not yet.”

“Fuck...”

Just as Remus is about to knot and spill, he fists the omega’s hair and wrenches her head back roughly. She comes off of him with a needy whine, her chin slick with saliva, her tongue extended from her mouth, desperately reaching for the tip of Remus’ cock, which remains tantalizingly out of range. It requires a supreme effort of willpower not to let her have it.

But we have to do this right. We cannot embarrass ourselves in front of our tribe by finishing things prematurely. We must give the crowd a show.

“Get down on all fours,” we growl in unison.

Ophelia doesn’t hesitate for even a moment. She obeys immediately, dropping to her hands and knees on the mossy ground between us. She tosses her hair and looks up at us.

“Like this?” she asks.

“That’s pretty good. But you need to bend your back more. Lift your ass higher.”

“Is this better?”

“Higher.”

“This?”

“Perfect. Now... turn around slowly, little omega. We want everyone present to get a good look at your perfect little omega holes before we claim them and knot them.”

Once again, Ophelia obeys our command without question. Keeping her backside raised high, she slowly turns in a circle, making sure every eye in the house has a chance to gaze upon her feminine beauty. Growls of approval and admiration run through the audience like a wave as she turns. Even the other omegas are impressed, and no doubt a little envious too.

Under any other circumstances, such noises would make us jealous, but not tonight. Tonight we are eager to show off our prize. And when we are through with her, there will be no question as to who owns her precious omega cunt.

Once Ophelia has completed a full revolution, we command her to stop, and she does.

“Good omega,” Romulus says. “Now lean forward and rest your head on the ground.”

“Keep your ass up,” says Remus. “Good. Now reach back and spread your lips apart.”

“Spread them wide, omega. Let us see all of your pink.”

“Good omega. Just like that...”

Our little Ophelia is so good at following instructions. She does everything we tell her, stretching her folds open so we can see every detail of her raw, wet center. We kneel on both sides of her upraised hips and admire her offering. Romulus

reaches down and fingers her hard bud while Remus traces his fingertip around the rim of her quivering hole. For a moment, that slippery opening dilates, and we can actually see *inside* her.

“Source, would you look at that...?”

We both slip a finger into her at the same time, two fingers penetrating her tight hole, and we pump her until she comes again and slick gushes out of her, splashing onto the moss between her splayed knees.

Behind us, someone growls impatiently.

We turn and look at our pack brothers who are now naked, cocks in hand, slowly jerking themselves as they watch us explore between Ophelia’s legs.

“Source damn it!” Marr snarls under his breath. “Can’t you two hurry things up a little? I’m going to die if I don’t get a chance to bust soon.”

“But we must make sure the omega is prepared.”

“Oh, I’d say she’s ready,” Aleph says. “Now give her what she really needs, boys. Fuck her. Knot her. Fill her with your seed.”

Ophelia trembles at the sound of those words.

“Yes,” she begs. “Please, I need you inside me so bad...”

Very well, then. We would love to spend more time teasing and exploring her, but there will be time for that later. Right now, it is our duty to sate the omega’s hunger. We move into

position, one in front of her, one behind. We do not fight over who will have her cunt and who will have her mouth. This is not about *us*, after all. It is about the omega. All that matters is that she is properly fucked and filled by our alpha cocks.

Behind her, Romulus nestles his tip between her wet folds. In front, Remus brushes his cockhead across her supple lips.

Between us, the omega whimpers in anticipation of the domination that is coming. She gives a soft, muffled moan as we slide into her from both ends.

All around us, the invisible crowd roars in approval.

CHAPTER 42: ALEPH

The claiming of Ophelia has begun.

Soon it will be my turn to join in the ceremony, but for now I simply stand back, dick in hand, and enjoy the show. Ophelia is down on all fours, getting fucked from the front and back at the same time, one hard cock sliding in and out of her dripping cunt, the other thrusting into her open mouth. The air is rife with the hot scent of sex and the wet sounds of suction and slapping skin.

The skill with which Ophelia takes the twins' cocks is a thing of beauty, and I am glad the tribe has gathered here to witness her talents. My heart swells with pride inside my chest, just as my cock swells with arousal in my stroking hand.

A few minutes ago, when my pack brothers and I were circling Ophelia, it felt as if we were predators and she was our helpless prey. Now our prey has been caught and spitted.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Marr growls.

My pack brother speaks the truth. Since there is nothing to add, I simply nod in agreement and continue stroking my aching cock. Beside me, Boreg does the same. We are not ashamed to let the audience see our arousal. On the contrary, it would be shameful if we were not aroused by the sight of our beautiful mate getting penetrated by our pack brethren.

But we three are not the only spectators who are impressed by the performance. All around us in the shadows, the crowd is becoming restless with lust. The grunts of alphas mingle with soft omega moans. It is obvious that Ophelia is not the only one being mated right now.

The twins accelerate the tempo and the force of their thrusting, snarling with pleasure as they dominate Ophelia's body.

Before the ceremony began, there was some discussion about the order in which we could claim our omega. In the end, it was decided that Romulus and Remus should have her first, since they were the first to find her. I made no objection to this arrangement. Yes, being the first to knot her is a great honor, but I would prefer to have my omega broken in. And the twins are breaking her in quite thoroughly, stretching the limits of what she can handle.

In front, Remus fists her hair, holding her head steady so he can fuck her face. He gives her a dozen deep thrusts, then he pulls her head back, and she comes off him gasping amid strings of spittle.

“Does this feel good?” Remus growls. “Is this what you need, omega?”

Instead of answering, Ophelia just whines and strains her head toward his cock, trying to take him into her mouth again.

Remus gives her hair a disciplinary tug.

“Look at me when I'm talking to you, omega!”

Her eyes raise toward his face.

“Good,” he says. “Now answer my question. Does this feel good?”

When Ophelia replies, her voice stutters with the impacts of Romulus’ cock slamming into her from behind.

“Y-yes... It f-feels g-g-good...”

“Is this what you need, omega? To get fucked by two alpha cocks at the same time?”

“Y-y-yes...”

“And are you ready to be knotted?”

“Y-yes! I n-n-need it s-so ba-a-ad!”

The crowd roars with applause, and I join in, along with Marr and Boreg.

With a stern nod, Remus slides his cock between her lips and continues fucking her mouth. He looks at his twin, who is working Ophelia’s backside with furious intensity.

“Well, brother,” Remus growls. “What do you think? Are you ready to give her what she needs? Are you ready to knot this little omega?”

Romulus grins. “Brother, I would go on fucking this perfect cunt until the sun comes up if I could. But I suppose we must let our pack brethren have a go at her too. Very well, let’s do this. Get ready, omega. Here... it... *comes!*”

Romulus plunges deep inside and holds himself there. At the same moment, the base of Remus’ cock swells like an apple against Ophelia’s sucking lips. She gives a shrill moan around

his shaft, then she goes silent as his penis begins to throb and pulsate, filling her mouth with his hot seed, just as his brother's cock is filling her from behind.

Keeping his pelvis pressed tightly to Ophelia's backside, Romulus falls backward, dragging Ophelia with him so she ends up sitting on his lap, spread and penetrated by his knot. In the process, Remus' cock slides out of her mouth, but he is still coming, and long, white ropes of semen unspool from his tip, marking Ophelia's breasts and belly.

After the last spurt has come out, he lunges forward and grinds his tip against her clitoris, forcing her to come again and again while his brother's knot keeps her locked in place. Her eyes roll back white in her head, and she screams aloud at the unrelenting onslaught of pleasure.

"Beautiful," Boreg mutters beside me. "Fucking beautiful."

I couldn't agree more.

The vision of my mate coming is so glorious, I almost accidentally join her in the ecstasy of release. Luckily, I catch myself at the last second, stilling my hand before the seed can erupt.

Nothing shall be wasted this night. Every drop of my seed shall be planted deep inside my Ophelia's perfect cunt.

But first, I must let Romulus finish with her. The wait is excruciating, but I find some solace in the beautiful music of Ophelia's ragged cries.

CHAPTER 43: OPHELIA

Romulus' knot feels like a fist inside me. The pressure is immense, stretching my insides beyond anything I ever imagined I could handle. It seems like it should hurt more than it does, but what little pain I feel is submerged beneath the neverending waves of bliss coursing through my body. I have Remus to thank for that. He is working the head of his cock against my clit, forcing me to endure one brutal climax after another until the pleasure is too much to stand. I try to beg him to stop, but my tongue has gone stupid on me, and all that passes my seed-stained lips is a wordless jumble of sounds. By the time Remus finally relents in his rubbing, I feel as if I might just melt into a steaming puddle of love on his brother's lap.

"Good omega," Romulus purrs against my ear.

Remus leans in and kisses me, slow and deep, apparently not minding that my lips are still spattered with his sticky cream.

"My little mate," he whispers. "You are amazing."

All I can do is sit there, sweating and panting, not daring to move my hips lest Romulus' massive knot should rip me apart. My breasts are painted with Remus' thick spend. My tongue is saturated with his salty flavor. The raw odor of sex and seed pervades the air around us.

It takes several minutes before Romulus' knot finally subsides. I expect it to leave me permanently stretched and gaped, but

that doesn't happen. And when his cock slides out of me, I anticipate a river of semen to come gushing out after, but that doesn't happen either. There is only a gentle trickle of fluid that runs down my ass and drips onto Romulus' lap.

How strange. It felt like more than that when he was pumping it into me. God, it felt like gallons.

“Ophelia...”

My body seems to levitate as I am lifted by ten strong hands. All five of my alpha mates surround me, supporting my limp and buzzing frame. Normally I can sort them by their scents, but right now my head is swimming, and I can't tell who is who. My legs are held apart, exposing the seeping mess between my legs, and the alphas turn me in a circle, making sure every eye in the crowd has a chance to view my soiled sex. Aleph's voice booms through the chamber.

“Brothers and sisters of the Central Tribe, look upon this omega! See what my pack brothers have done to her!”

The crowd lets out a roar. I ought to be ashamed to be seen like this—naked, spread, and dripping with alpha seed—but I'm not. Maybe it's because I'm too exhausted to care. Or maybe it's something else. Maybe this really is my destiny, to be shared and dominated by my five alpha mates.

Aleph waits for the cheers to die down, then he continues.

“See how greedily her body drinks my pack brothers' seed!”

Another, even louder roar from the crowd.

When I look down at my body, I see what Aleph is talking about. The mess that Remus made on my breasts and belly has almost completely soaked into my skin. And now I understand why more stuff didn't come pouring out from between my legs when Romulus pulled out of me. My body soaked up his cum from the inside too.

This realization is immediately followed by another: if I'm not pregnant already, I definitely will be before this night is through.

My body lowers again, and my back touches down on the soft carpeting of moss. Aleph lies down on the left of me, and Boreg positions himself to my right. They knead my breasts and purr into my ears, and these sensations stoke the fires of my heat, which amazingly has not been extinguished by the twins' seed.

"You still need more, don't you?" Boreg rumbles. "More knots. More seed."

I whimper and nod. My estrus intensifies even more, clenching my core and stippling my skin with goosebumps. Slick oozes between my legs, mingling with what is left of Romulus' seeping stuff.

Aleph grins. "Such a needy little thing."

The tip of his cock prods at my slit. He reaches between my legs and spreads my folds with his fingers, then he begins to slide into me, stretching me with his massive girth. I'm still sore from Romulus' knot, but I am well greased with arousal

and leftover seed, and Aleph's big cock enters me with ease, penetrating me to my deepest epicenter.

"Oh God," I moan. "Aleph, you feel so big inside me."

He kisses me tenderly. "And your sweet little cunt is so tight, my little mate. But I think you still have room for more."

"What do you mean?" I whimper.

The answer comes in the form of Boreg's cock, which nudges against the place where Aleph is already penetrating me.

A thrill of fear and excitement spirals into my core. The thought of being doubly penetrated by these two alphas is both terrifying and appealing. But if Boreg really thinks he can fit his big thing inside me, he is out of his mind, and I tell him so.

The bearded giant just purrs and caresses my body.

"Shh. It's okay, little omega. You can take it. I know you can. Now, just relax..."

Easier said than done.

Boreg, God bless him, tries his best to be gentle about it, and I can tell from the tension in his muscles that it's a struggle for him to hold back. Knowing his strength, he could easily take me with one hard thrust, but he doesn't do that. Instead he slowly wedges his cock in alongside Aleph's, first the tip, then his long shaft, working his way inside me inch by throbbing inch. It takes him several minutes, but at last he gets it all the way in.

Boreg roars in triumph, and all around us, the crowd erupts into their loudest cheers yet. Meanwhile, all I can do is moan as the two massive cocks stretch me.

“Are you okay?” Boreg purrs.

I want to answer him, but the words won't come, so instead I attack his mouth with a hungry, snarling kiss. Then I turn my head and kiss Aleph with equal intensity.

“I think that's a yes,” the pale alpha says with a grin.

The two males begin moving inside me, slowly at first, then faster and harder, alternating their thrusts so that one is plunging into me while the other is gliding out. I curl my arms around their necks and dig my claws into their shoulders, holding on for dear life as they fuck me.

The other three alphas, Marr and the twins, stand over us, stroking their hard cocks while they look on in amazement at what their pack brothers are doing to me. That only serves to heighten my lust.

On both sides of me, Aleph and Boreg grunt like animals as they fuck me, and it occurs to me that their pleasure isn't just coming from me, but from the delicious friction of their naked cocks rubbing together inside me as well.

God, that might be the hottest part.

“Source, this feels good,” says Aleph. “Unfortunately, brother, we cannot both knot her at the same time. She might be able to handle two cocks at once, but two knots would tear her poor little cunt apart.”

“I know, brother. I know. Luckily, I planned ahead for just this situation.”

As Boreg speaks, he touches the pendant that I noticed hanging from his neck earlier. Now I realize it is a little glass vial. He draws his cock out of me, and I let out a needy whimper.

“There, there.” Boreg chuckles as he caresses my face. “Don’t worry, little omega. My cock will be inside you again soon, just not in the same place.”

“What do you mean?”

He smirks behind his red beard. “Come now, Ophelia. Surely you’ve already guessed my meaning. Now, be a good omega and roll over on top of Aleph. I need to prepare your pretty little asshole to accept my cock.”

CHAPTER 44: BOREG

“What?” Ophelia cries. “Boreg, wait! It won’t fit in there!”
Then, in a whisper, she adds, “Besides, it’s too *dirty*.”

I can’t help but smile. I’m not mocking her, of course. It’s just that she looks so precious right now, naked and pierced by my pack brother’s cock, her bare skin shiny with sweat in the flickering light of the candles. Holy Source, she is perfect, even in her defiance.

“Nothing about you is dirty,” I tell her. “Besides, it isn’t as if you’ve not had our fingers there many times already.”

“But that’s different!” Her eyes swivel downward to stare at my jutting erection, and her brows knit with worry. “Your cock is way bigger than your fingers, Boreg. I’m telling you, it won’t fit.”

My smile fades, and my heart pangs with sympathy for my little mate.

Her concern is understandable. I wish I could take the time to properly prepare her anus over the course of several days. I would have taken great pleasure in gradually stretching her tight hole with a series of progressively larger anal plugs until she was ready to take my cock. Unfortunately, there is not enough time for all that. We must go all the way with it right now, tonight, with the eyes of the tribe upon us. But I know she can withstand it. She is the strongest, most resilient omega I have ever seen.

“Do not fear,” I tell her, purring. “You can do this. I know you can. You just took two big cocks in your pussy at the same time. This will be easy by comparison.”

“But my pussy is wet. *That* isn’t.”

I touch the small vial on the rawhide cord around my neck.

“That’s what *this* is for, little mate.”

“What is that? Hey!”

She yelps as Aleph rolls onto his back and pulls her on top of him, keeping her impaled on his hard cock.

“Quiet, omega,” he growls. “Boreg knows what he’s doing. Now just relax and let him work his magic on your ass.” He glances at me over Ophelia’s shoulder. “Here, let me help you, brother.”

He reaches around and grips Ophelia’s rump, prying her mounds apart and exposing her tight, puckered rear hole. My cock throbs at that glorious sight, and I nod gratefully.

“Thank you, brother.”

I hesitate for a moment, letting my eyes linger on the candlelit beauty of Ophelia’s spread backside. Then I take the vial from around my neck and remove the small cork stopper. Instantly, the air fills with the scent of crushed greenery.

“What is that?” Ophelia asks again in a quivering voice.

“A special oil, extracted from a rare plant that grows in the forest to the south, which I have refined through a process of my own invention. It has powerful healing properties, but

more importantly for our purposes, it is exceedingly slippery. Here, allow me to demonstrate.”

I tip the vial and drizzle a small amount of oil into Ophelia’s open cleft. She gasps as the viscous fluid trickles over her rear hole, then she moans as I press my fingertip there and work the natural lube in tight circles around her rim.

“See, doesn’t that feel good, little omega?”

“Yes, but—*oh!*”

I slip the tip of my middle finger into her hole, simultaneously drizzling more of the lubricant and working it all around her insides, gradually penetrating deeper and deeper into her warm, tight canal. Down below, Aleph thrusts into her with slow, smooth strokes, and I can actually feel the motion of his cock through Ophelia’s inner membranes. Source, that’s incredible.

I add a little more lube and slip another finger inside her, plunging as deep as I can reach into her fathomless depths. I stroke my fingers in and out, matching Aleph’s rhythm. Ophelia mewls and writhes on top of him.

“Do you like that, omega?” I purr. “Do you like having my fingers in your ass while Aleph fucks your sweet little cunt?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Do you want to feel my cock back there instead? Are you ready to get your pretty little backside fucked and knotted?”

She shivers. “I... I want to *try*.”

“Good girl. Good omega.”

I pour what’s left of the lubricant into my palm and smear it all over my cock until the whole thing is evenly coated. Then I grip my shaft and move into position, pressing my oiled tip to her hole. Ophelia’s back muscles tense in anticipation.

“Easy, girl. Easy. I promise I won’t hurt you. Just take it nice and slow. Nice and slow...”

At first, there is resistance, and I don’t try to force it. But after a moment, that strong little ring of muscle relaxes just enough for me to push inside, groaning with satisfaction as her warm bowels ensheath me.

“Good omega,” I purr. “Take it all. Take every inch...”

CHAPTER 45: OPHELIA

It seems as if Boreg's cock will never stop sliding into me. My ass squeezes tightly around his invasion, and I can feel every detail of that long, thick member as it penetrates me, from the ring surrounding the helmet-like head to the plump veins lining the hard shaft. After what feels like an eternity, his pelvis meets my cheeks, and I can feel the soft curls of his pubic hair tickling my outer rim.

I collapse onto Aleph's broad chest with a moan.

"Ohhh..."

Boreg's huge hands smooth along my back, and he leans down to whisper in my ear.

"Ophelia? Are you okay?"

I don't answer him right away. I can't. My body is stuffed with two big cocks, and the sensation of fullness between my legs has robbed me of the power of speech and pretty much all of my other faculties too. All I can do is lie there and moan as a trickle of drool leaks from the corner of my mouth and spills onto Aleph's chest.

The alphas will just have to bear with me. I'm having a moment.

"I think she's doing just fine," Aleph says.

He begins thrusting into me from below, and a moment later Boreg follows suit. They grunt and groan as they toil over my

body, pumping both of my holes like a pair of pistons, penetrating me so deep it feels like they are rearranging my insides.

“Fuck, I can feel you,” Aleph groans. “I can feel you moving in there.”

It takes me a second to realize I’m not the one he’s talking to. God, the two alphas can feel each other through the walls of my body. That realization sends a flood of slick gushing from between my legs.

“Source, her body is so responsive,” Boreg says. “So receptive.”

“I know,” says Aleph. “It’s fucking hot.”

It’s a bit funny to hear the two males talking about me that way when I’m right here between them. But I don’t mind. In fact, I kind of like it when they talk like that. It makes me feel like I’m their little shared fuck toy, and right now that’s all I want to be.

But something is missing...

Marr.

No sooner has this thought passed through my mind than I feel a set of thick fingers grab my hair and lift my head. Another set of fingers cup my chin, lifting me further, until I am almost sitting up straight. Marr’s groin fills my vision—his rigid shaft and heavy, dangling sacs. God, those things are enormous. Boreg may have the biggest body of my alphas, and Aleph the biggest cock, but Marr has the biggest balls.

“Ophelia. Look at me.”

Marr’s voice is soft yet commanding, and I have no choice but to lift my gaze to the scarred and handsome face staring down at me. Our eyes meet, and an electric charge wriggles down my spine and into my core. He smirks and draws his thumb across my lips, then he bends down and presses his own soft lips against the shell of my ear.

“Ophelia,” he whispers, so only I can hear. “Before the ceremony, my pack brothers and I discussed how we would share you. We made a plan. We determined the order in which we would claim you, and we decided who would take which hole. I insisted on your mouth. Do you know why?”

His breath tickles my ear, making me tremble.

“No,” I whisper.

“It’s very simple,” he growls softly. “I want to look into your pretty eyes when we both come.”

His words send another even bigger jolt of electric desire racing through my nerves. He raises himself to full height, and he brushes my lips again, but this time, instead of his thumb, he uses the tip of his cock. Precum leaks from his slit, and my tongue instinctively darts out to lick up the salty liquid.

“Source, you are so fucking beautiful,” Marr rumbles above me. He glances left and right at the crowd, then back down at my face. “Now, open wide and show the other omegas how to properly pleasure an alpha.”

I obey, and he enters me slowly. His shaft is warm and heavy and smooth on my tongue. My eyes never leave his face.

CHAPTER 46: MARR

The wet warmth of Ophelia's mouth envelopes my hard arousal. Her soft, spongy tongue cradles me. She moans softly, and the vibrations of her voice travel along the length of my shaft and deep into my aching balls, beckoning my seed.

Source, it has been nearly two full days since my last release. Ordinarily that would not be an especially long time, but in Ophelia's presence, my seed glands have been going into fucking overdrive. Over the past two days, I've stored up a nice big load for my little omega, and I cannot wait to share it with her.

But she's going to have to earn it.

"That's it," I purr, petting her damp hair. "All the way in, all the way out. Yeah, just like that. Good girl. Good little omega..."

Her bright eyes sparkle at my words of praise. Those eyes remain locked on mine, never once looking away, not even when she gags on my tip, causing tears to well and spill down her flushed cheeks. I brush them away with my thumbs.

"Omega, you look so gorgeous gagging on my dick."

She moans. Her body bucks and rocks to the rhythm of my pack brothers claiming her other two holes. Boreg is behind her, thrusting into her ass, while Aleph is on his back, beneath her, pumping her pussy from below.

Keeping my eyes locked on Ophelia's, I check in with my two comrades.

"How are you doing back there, Boreg?" I call. "How does that sweet little asshole feel?"

"Incredible," Boreg groans. "Absolutely incredible. She's so tight it feels like she's going to break my cock off."

Damn. That sounds good. I can't wait to sample Ophelia's lovely ass for myself. But that will have to wait. For the time being, I'm more than happy right where I am. This position affords me a clear view of her pretty face, and I'm enjoying her shifting emotions as she listens to us talk dirty about her.

"And you, Aleph?" I call. "How are you doing down there?"

"Her cunt is pure heaven, brother. It's sucking me like a second mouth. Source, I can't wait to knot her."

"You may not have to wait long," I tell him. "It sounds like the crowd is getting restless."

All around us in the shadows, the alphas and omegas of our tribe are growling in anticipation. Many of them are even mating while they watch. We have given them a good show, but now they are ready to see the ritual brought to completion.

They want to see the omega get marked.

But I'm not going to rush things on their account. Tonight is Ophelia's night. We will not mark her until she's good and ready for it.

“How are you doing, little one?” I ask, caressing her tear-stained face. “Are you feeling good? Do you like getting fucked by three dicks at once?”

She takes her mouth off my cock just long enough to speak a single word.

“More.”

Still looking me in the eye, she swallows my prick again with a wet sound and raises her arms out to her sides, making needy grabbing gestures with her fingers. For a moment, I just stare at her in disbelief, then a broad grin splits my face.

“Greedy little mate,” I chuckle. “Your appetite for cock is legendary. But I think we can accommodate you...”

I shout for the twins. “Romulus! Remus! Where have you bastards gotten off to?”

I see them moving at the edge of my peripheral vision.

“We are here, Brother Marr.”

“And do you still have some seed left over to bestow upon our insatiable little mate?”

“For her,” Romulus answers, “our supply is endless.”

“We can go all night if that’s what she needs,” says Remus.

“And all day tomorrow too.”

They step forward and guide their erect shafts into Ophelia’s fumbling fingers. She grips them and begins stroking furiously while Aleph and Boreg continue fucking her, and her head continues bobbing on my cock.

“Such a dirty little omega,” I purr. “Are you ready then, little one? Are you ready for our five knots?”

“Mm-hm!”

“You know what will come after, don’t you? Did the other omegas tell you?”

“Mm-hm...”

“And you’re sure you want that? You’re sure you are ready to be marked?”

“*Mmm...*”

There is fear in her voice, but her tone is affirmative.

“So be it,” I growl. “You heard the omega, brothers. Give her what she wants. Give her your knots. Give her your seed.”

My pack brothers roar with lust. Ophelia’s body jolts as Aleph and Boreg start to rock her deeper and harder. I take her head between my hands, steadying her face so I can thrust into her mouth and beyond. Her saliva flows and spills down her chin while wet gagging sounds issue from the depths of her throat.

Gluk!—gluk!—gluk!—gluk!

It is rough and brutal, but I know that’s how my little mate needs it. This omega is not some delicate little flower. She is tough as nails, a survivor and a killer. I fuck her accordingly.

Source, it feels so right to share her this way. My connection with my pack brothers has always been tight, but now we are joined on a deeper level. In Ophelia, our five separate alpha

souls are made one, joined in a sacred communion that transcends mere flesh and blood.

Now it is time to complete the bond.

I hold out for three more thrusts, then I let go and allow my knot to inflate. For the first time since she took me inside her sweet mouth, Ophelia breaks eye contact and crosses her pretty eyes as she stares at the swollen bulge pressing against her circled lips. She makes a little muffled sound as my cock begins to pulse, flooding her mouth with my seed. Then, in the next moment, she makes an even louder sound as Aleph and Boreg both knot her other two holes, no doubt stretching her to the very limit of what her body can handle. The twins follow a split second later, in perfect unison, of course. Their cocks knot and jump in Ophelia's hands, jetting thick white ropes across her heaving breasts.

All around us, the crowd is going wild.

They've never seen a claiming ritual like this before.

I withdraw from Ophelia's mouth, and she gasps madly for air. My last few spurts stripe her face, marking her with my seed. I wish that was all the marking entailed, but unfortunately, it is not. The time has come to mark her in a much more permanent and painful way.

While Boreg holds her steady from behind, the twins and I close in around her, baring our fangs. As we agreed beforehand, I will be the first to leave my mark on the tender flesh of her neck.

CHAPTER 47: OPHELIA

I never knew pleasure and pain could mix so well. It's almost impossible for me to tell where one sensation stops and the other begins. Or maybe it's just that my climax is acting as an anesthetic for what Marr is doing to me. His sharp teeth are at my throat, breaking the skin while his rough tongue licks up the welling blood. My instinct is to pull away, but the two hard knots swollen inside me keep me locked in place. If I tried to flee, I would do even worse damage to my nether regions than Marr is doing to my throat, so I sit and endure it.

Thankfully, it's over quickly. Marr kisses the wound he made, then he brings his face to mine and kisses my lips too. The coppery taste of my own blood mingles with the salt of Marr's seed still lingering on my tongue. He presses his forehead against mine, and I see that his eyes are wet with tears.

"I am sorry for the pain, little one," he purrs. "But it will be over soon. Just four more."

Four more?

Oh, yes... Yes, of course...

Hannah told me all about the marking while we were bathing. She explained that was the reason she and the other omegas all had crescent scars around the necks and shoulders. It was from where their mates bit them when they went through the ordeal of the claiming ritual.

Ordinarily, through the power of the Source, such shallow wounds would heal without leaving scars. However, during the rut, the alphas produce a special enzyme in their saliva which facilitates the formation of the mark. It also burns like hell. For a few seconds, the place where Marr bit me feels like someone is holding a red-hot brand to my neck. I try my best to be strong, but it's impossible not to cry. Not that it matters. My eyes are already full of tears from gagging on his penis.

After Marr, it is the twins' turn to bite me. They make their marks at the same time, one on each shoulder. Boreg follows them, placing his mark on my neck opposite Marr's. Aleph goes last. With each mark, I feel my bond with the alphas growing stronger, like an invisible magnetic force linking me to them. It feels good.

But something is missing. Maybe it's just that the ritual is not finished yet. We still have to undergo the third and final phase where we will receive our piercings.

Still, something seems off.

After a minute, Aleph's and Boreg's knots abate, and they slide out of me, guiding my exhausted and dirty body down to the mossy floor. My bones feel like they are made of jelly, and my skin is greasy with sweat. The twins made quite a mess all over my chest as well, but as before, that's already beginning to soak in. I lie back and try to catch my breath.

While my five mates were sharing my body, I forgot entirely about the audience watching us from the shadows. Now I'm reminded of their presence. I can hear them out there making

sounds in the darkness. Clapping sounds. At first, I think they are giving my mates and me a round of applause for our performance. But then, as I listen more carefully, I notice other sounds too. Grunts and moans and squelches. And that clapping doesn't sound like it's being made by hands.

I smirk. Apparently they really enjoyed the show. And from the sound of it, they have some of their energy back too.

"Did it work?" I ask Aleph, who is lying beside me. "Did we make the Source energy?"

"Not yet," he answers. "We still have to complete the third and final stage of the ritual. The piercing. After that, we will be fully bound, and we will be able to create the Source energy when we mate. Anyway, that's what Seraph said."

At the mention of Seraph's name, my heart pangs with yearning, and I suddenly realize he's the missing piece I was feeling a moment ago.

"Seraph," I whisper.

I struggle to sit up, but my muscles are still too weak. I have to rely on Boreg and Marr to help me. Once I'm upright, I scan the shadows, searching for Seraph's blue glow, but I see no sign of him.

"Seraph!" My voice is hoarse from the rough way Marr just used my throat.

"Shh," Aleph says, trying to comfort me. "Don't worry, little mate. Seraph is near. He's always near."

“But where is he?” I cry, almost on the verge of tears. “I need him. Please, I need him.”

Again, I shout his name into the darkness.

CHAPTER 48: SERAPH

Ophelia is calling for me.

I am standing at the very back of the crowd with the light of my holographic head turned down low so as not to cause a distraction. All around me, hundreds of alphas are mating with their omegas, inspired by Ophelia's stunning display. Such orgies are common during the claiming ritual, but I have never seen one happen with such fervor.

This is the first time I have ever attended one of these rituals in person. I have occasionally watched it from afar, looking through the eyes of others, but this is the first time I have ever stood in the room in my own physical body and borne witness. In the past, I have watched out of curiosity, but this time is different. This time, the omega being claimed is precious to me.

And she is calling my name.

For a moment, I hesitate. I did not come here to join in the proceedings. I only came to watch and make sure Ophelia made it safely through the ritual. But now, the plaintive tone of her voice tugs at something inside me, some part of my consciousness that I never knew existed until today.

Ophelia calls for me one more time, and I cannot take it any longer. I increase the brightness of my holographic head, flooding the space around me with pale blue light. The nearby alphas and omega seem totally unfazed by my sudden

reappearance. They are too focused on their mating to care about anything else. I step over their writhing bodies as I make my way toward the center of the ballroom, where Ophelia sits naked and sweating, surrounded by my pupils. When she sees me approaching, her face suddenly lights up and she shouts my name again, this time with a tone of joy and relief.

“Seraph!”

My heart seems to jump in my chest. I kneel just outside the circle of candles and look at her, basking in the radiance of her smiling face. It seems as though I ought to say something, but I don't know what to say, so I simply speak her name.

“Ophelia.”

“Seraph, I thought you weren't going to come.”

“I never left, Ophelia. I was here the whole time.”

“Did you watch?” There is something in her voice that reminds me of the way young omegas will ask their fathers if they saw them perform some simple trick.

I nod. “Of course, Ophelia. I watched everything.”

Her face is still flushed from the exertion of her claiming, but now it burns an even deeper red. However, I sense that this sudden coloring of her cheeks has been brought on not by shame, but by excitement. She gives me a sultry, hooded look.

“And what did you think?” she whispers.

“It was the most beautiful act I have ever seen,” I tell her, and it is true. Before today, I did not truly know what beauty was.

She has taught me.

“But the ritual isn’t over yet,” Ophelia says.

“That is correct. We must perform the piercing.”

Ophelia shakes her head. “No, that’s not what I mean. Seraph, I want you to claim me too. I want to feel your knot inside me. I want you to be my sixth mate.”

A wave of emotion washes over me. It is not something I am used to. I can only imagine how badly my face must be glitching right now.

It takes me a moment to process everything that I am experiencing. It is not merely a single emotion, but several of them all tangled together, and it requires some serious effort to sort through them. There is surprise, desire, gratitude, and perhaps most of all, doubt.

In many ways, I am responsible for the existence of the Zone. Through the power of the Source, I brought the alphas, betas, and omegas into existence, according to my understanding of the directives given by my programmers. However, there are many aspects of Zone culture which I never planned or intended. The claiming ritual is one such tradition. It was developed by the very first generation of alphas and omegas based upon their own human understanding of their biological impulses for procreation, mate protection, and pack formation. I do not know if I should participate in it. I do not know if I am welcome.

“Ophelia, I believe I am flattered,” I say. “However, I am not an alpha. If anything, my physical form is that of a beta.”

Ophelia scoffs. “Seraph, have you looked at yourself recently?”

“I do not see what my appearance has to do with anything.”

“Of course you don’t,” says Aleph, the most impetuous of my pupils. “Maybe your body started off as a beta, but now you are as powerful as any alpha, and your mind is the sharpest in the Zone, except when it comes to emotional matters.”

His pack brethren all nod in agreement, indicating their willingness—and even their eagerness—to share their omega with me.

“I do not know...”

Ophelia looks at me with tears in her eyes, and I feel as if red hot iron bands are tightening around my heart.

“Please,” she begs. “Seraph, I want this so badly. I want you to be my mate.”

I want it too. But there is something I must do first.

I rise and look around at the shadows, where the sounds of mating have grown quieter. Hundreds of eyes flicker in that darkness, reflecting the candlelight.

For decades, I have guided the development of the land called the Zone. But I have never viewed myself as a leader. If anything, I am a servant. And as a servant, I feel I must ask permission for what I am about to do.

“Alphas and omegas,” I say, amplifying my voice so that it carries throughout the whole ballroom. “I am not like you. I am not an alpha. Yet I wish to be bound to this omega the way an alpha is bound. I wish to share her with these five alphas. I wish to create new life in her womb. Do you give me leave to claim her?”

Their answer is unequivocal, their voices so loud they shake the floor beneath my feet.

“YES!”

I cannot help but smile.

“Thank you,” I say, then I turn around to face my mate again.

“The tribe has spoken, Ophelia. Let us be joined.”

My five pupils lift her off the ground, holding her in a horizontal position. Boreg, the strongest, stands behind her, cradling her head. Aleph and Marr lace their arms under her back, forming a kind of platform for her upper body to rest on. The twins hold her legs. When she is level with my pelvis, they spread her apart for me.

For a long moment, I just stand there, marveling at the sight of her glistening pink slit. Then I drop my hand to my own crotch and remove the metal panel that conceals my appendage.

Ophelia’s eyes widen with a combined look of fear and excitement.

“Oh my God...”

I grip the undulating member in my fist, wielding it between Ophelia’s open thighs, and I speak the words I have heard so

many alphas say to their mates in situations such as this.

“Is *this* what you want, little omega?”

Ophelia nods and touches herself between her open legs, squirming in the alphas’ grasp. Arousal fluid seeps from her opening and drips to the floor in silvery threads. Even though the five males have already knotted her and seeded her thoroughly, her heat is still going strong.

“Yes,” she whispers. “Fuck me, Seraph. Please...”

“Omega, it would be my honor.”

I step forward, closing the gap between my hips and Ophelia’s, and there is a squelch of displaced fluid as my flexible appendage slithers its way inside her. Her inner walls squeeze around me, gripping me like a hand trying to grip a snake while I move and flex inside her, letting my tip gently massage and caress her tender cervix.

“Oh God, Seraph,” she breathes. “God, you feel so good.”

“As do you, my omega.”

The last time we did this, Ophelia told me it is important for both partners to derive enjoyment from copulation.

Unfortunately, my appendage is not capable of experiencing pleasure. I designed it to be purely functional, a tool for depositing nanites inside a female’s body.

But that does not matter. I do not require physical pleasure in order to enjoy this act. Ophelia’s ecstasy is my own. I study her intently, drinking in every little response our coupling elicits from her. Every gasp. Every quiver. Every moan.

“Harder... Seraph, fuck me harder...”

I make my appendage rigid and thrust into her with deep, forceful strokes that cause her body to jolt in the alphas’ arms. Her breasts bounce wildly with the rhythm of our mating, and her eyes roll back in her head as she surrenders herself to the pleasure of our joining.

I place my hand between her legs, just above the place where our bodies are linked, and I rub her erect clitoris, just as I taught Marr to do during that first precarious encounter in the tunnels below the Zone.

Ophelia howls. Her hands reach and claw at my abdomen. Her inner walls clench even tighter around me, increasing the friction of my thrusting.

“Don’t stop,” she cries. “Oh God, Seraph, I’m going to come.”

I sense the tension gathering in her muscles, building toward one final crescendo, building, building, building...

At the last moment, just before her release, I plunge as deep as I can go, and I cause the base of my shaft to expand inside her, forming an imitation of an alpha’s knot. It is not as big as the ones she has already felt tonight, but based on the sounds that burst from her trembling lips, it would seem that she has no complaints.

Once her climax has passed, she opens her eyes and looks up at me with a smile that practically melts my circuitry.

“Well?” she says. “Aren’t you going to mark me?”

I give her a quizzical look. “Ophelia, I do not have teeth.”

“I know. But you can still pretend.”

I look at her neck and shoulders where the five alphas marked her with their teeth. There are three red crescents on the left side, and two on the right. I lower my face to the place where a sixth mark would go, and I imitate biting her. Even though my holographic teeth pass harmlessly through her skin, she still hisses as if in pain. I know she is only pretending, but I am grateful for that small gesture on her part.

For the first time in my existence, I feel as if I am truly alive.

CHAPTER 49: OPHELIA

“Ready?” Boreg rumbles.

I feel the sharp point of the piercing needle resting against the side of my left nipple, ready to lance a hole for a ring to fit through. On the other side, Boreg is holding a small piece of cork to catch the tip of the needle after it pushes through. Over the past hour, I’ve received multiple piercings, through my ears, my eyebrow, my septum, my lower lip, even my belly button. To be honest, none of those piercings hurt too badly. But the one Boreg is about to give me has me freaked the hell out. My nipples are some of the most sensitive spots on my body, and I’m worried the pain is going to be excruciating.

I look at the hard, steel needle glinting in the early morning sunlight, then I bring my eyes back to Boreg’s face and shake my head.

“No. I’m not ready.”

We’re outside, sitting on the cracked pavement in the center of what was once a major traffic intersection of this city. The alphas of the Central Tribe have cleared away all of the old abandoned vehicles left behind during the Cataclysm, and now the intersection serves as a kind of public square. Ruined skyscrapers tower above us in the morning light. They are so densely wrapped with leafy vines, they resemble enormous trees more than man-made buildings.

Traditionally, the third and final stage of the claiming ritual should take place underground, in the Chamber of the Source. The power of the Source used to be strongest there, and it facilitated the fast healing of the piercing wounds. Now that the Source is dead, it doesn't make any difference where we do it, so we're doing it outside, in the sunshine and fresh air. My natural healing factor will take care of the wounds.

A crowd has gathered, and the space around us is filled with bodies. It seems like every alpha and omega in the Central Tribe has come to watch. I think I liked it better when the audience was hidden in the shadows. Fortunately, Seraph and my protective alpha mates are pressed in closely around me, partially hiding my body from view while Boreg does his work.

Besides, I can't begrudge the tribespeople for gathering here. My body acts like a miniature Source now, and the tribespeople want to be close to me so they can soak up the life giving energy I'm emitting. According to Seraph, when Aleph and I mate, we will be able to create an even bigger field of energy.

But first, we have to complete this damned ritual. We're so close to the finish line, yet so very far away.

I look once more at the sharp tip of the needle pressed against my nipple, which has shriveled in fear.

"Ophelia," Boreg says. "I'm sorry, but we must do this to complete the ritual. It will only hurt for a moment, I promise you."

The bearded alpha knows what he's talking about, of course. He has a nipple ring of his own now. Two of them, in fact.

I'm not the only one who has gotten pierced this morning. My five alpha mates have all undergone the ceremony as well, and their faces and bodies are now adorned with numerous metal rings and bars, a symbol of their maturation and manhood.

Even Seraph participated, in a way. He changed the appearance of his holographic face so it shows piercings on his ears, eyebrows, nose, and lips. Of course, Seraph's piercings were painless. Mine were not. And the one Boreg wants to give me now promises to be the most painful of all.

"I know we have to do this," I say. "And I want to complete the ritual too. But you asked me if I'm ready, and I'm really not."

"Fine," Boreg says patiently. "We'll wait."

He starts to move the needle away from my breast, but I catch his hand. "No, that's not what I mean. I don't think I'm *ever* going to be ready, no matter how much time you give me. You're just going to have to do it without waiting for me. Tie me down if you have to. Do whatever it takes. But please, *please*, just get it over with."

Boreg moves the needle and cork back into position. He looks around at his pack mates, who are clustered around me, and gives them a silent nod. At this signal, they all start purring in unison, vibrating my body with the strange, animalistic sound. Even Seraph gets in on the act.

To help matters along even more, Aleph reaches around and strokes between my thighs. He doesn't quite touch my pussy. He just teases me, making my heart beat faster, sending my blood rushing into my sensitive places.

It certainly does the trick.

My nipples, which had shrunken in fear, now tingle and ripen until they are the size of small berries. I squeeze my eyes shut and bite my lip as I try my best to steel myself against the coming penetration.

Thankfully, the ever-compassionate Boreg does not torture me by making me wait. He sends the needle in sudden and swift. Pain blossoms through my breast.

“OW!—*FUCK!*”

My cry breaks through the morning air, raising murmurs from the crowd. But almost as soon as it arises, the pain stops, replaced by the weirdest tingle of pleasure. Before this all started, I thought this piercing business sounded like a bunch of pointless ceremony. Now I can't help but wonder if there really is some magic at work.

I open my eyes and looked down at my skewered nipple. With one quick motion, Boreg draws the corked needle the rest of the way through and fits a balled steel ring into the hole. He has to work quickly. My wounds close fast thanks to my built-in Source energy.

Once the ring is in place, Boreg leans down and kisses away the ruby red drops of blood welling there. A sensation like a

miniature orgasm pulses through my breast.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp. “That felt good. Do that again.”

“You want me to pierce your nipple again?”

“No, dummy,” I laugh. “I want you to kiss it again.”

Boreg grins and obliges me, this time tugging lightly at my new piercing, making my nipple stretch a little. Thanks to my personal Source energy, the wound has already fully healed, so there’s no pain. And this time the burst of pleasure inside my breast is even more intense, causing me to writhe and moan in ecstasy, not caring that the crowd can see me.

After a moment, Boreg releases my nipple and sits back, admiring his handiwork. I give him a pouty look.

“Hey, why’d you stop?”

Boreg chuckles softly. “Because, my horny little omega, we are not finished yet. Believe me when I tell you, I would like nothing more than to sit here and suck on your luscious nipples all day long. But there is still one more piercing required to complete the bond.”

His eyes drop to my pussy.

I remember the piercings I saw between the other omegas’ legs when we were in the bathhouse. My pulse instantly spikes, and I clamp my thighs together.

“No way,” I growl. “Not there. Out of the question.”

Boreg sighs.

“Ophelia, we *must*. It is tradition.”

I fold my arms in front of me stubbornly. “Nope. Sorry. Not gonna happen.”

“Ophelia—”

“I’m *serious!* There’s no way I’m letting you pierce me down there.”

Boreg starts to say something, but Aleph stops him.

“Ophelia is right,” the pale alpha says. “It’s not fair to make her do something that we, her alphas, have not undergone ourselves. So far, she’s gotten pierced in all the same places as us. But if we’re going to insist upon her getting pierced down below, it’s only proper that one of us should suffer through it first.”

“Are you volunteering?” Boreg asks.

“Damn right I am.”

“Um, excuse me,” I interrupt, “but... do you have a clit I don’t know about?”

Aleph barks with laughter. “Don’t be silly, little mate. Of course I don’t have a clit. But I have the next best thing—a cock.”

He comes around and sits cross-legged in front of me. He has not gotten dressed since the second part of the claiming ritual last night, and his huge, white member is still on full display, hanging impressively between his muscular thighs. He lifts his penis and points to the little V on the underside of the glans.

“I’ll take my piercing right here, Ophelia. It is the most sensitive spot. As sensitive as your little pink clit. That means my pain will be equal to yours. Afterward, just think of how good it will feel inside you, when I fuck your sweet little omega pussy with my pierced alpha cock.”

I have to admit, that does sound good. The thought of Aleph’s pierced member inside me makes my slick start to flow again. I can tell by the flare of Aleph’s nostrils that he can smell it.

He smirks. “Yeah, I thought you’d like that.”

Cocky bastard.

“What do you say, Ophelia? If I get pierced here...” he points to the V on the underside of his cock again, “will you get pierced *there*?” He points between my legs.

“Yes,” I hear myself answer.

“Good,” Aleph says. He gestures to Boreg. “Give her another needle.”

“Wait, what?” I gasp. “Why me?”

Aleph looks at me as if *I’m* the crazy one. “What do you mean? Did you really think I was going to let Boreg pierce me down there? No way. If anyone is going to draw blood from my cock, little omega, it will be you.”

CHAPTER 50: OPHELIA

“Aleph, you can’t be serious.”

“I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life, Ophelia. I want you to pierce my cock.”

For a moment, I don’t say anything. The silence is filled up by the murmurs of the crowd gathered around us and the wind rustling the vines clinging to the towers of the ruined city. The sun is getting higher in the sky, and the air is getting warmer, but it’s not warm enough to account for the sweat that’s beading on my forehead and spreading under my arms. The other alphas and Seraph crouch around me, waiting for my response.

In some ways, what Aleph is asking me to do to him is even more frightening than getting pierced myself. But then, Aleph seems to have a talent for taking me out of my comfort zone.

“All right, I’ll do it,” I answer at last. I look at Boreg. “Give me a needle, please.”

Boreg reaches into the pack beside him on the ground and produces a clean needle which he carefully passes to me. I accept it and lean forward to inspect Aleph’s penis. But as I start to lift his member to view the spot where the piercing will go, the cocky, pale alpha clears his throat.

“What do you think you’re doing, omega?”

I look up at him with a quizzical expression. “Excuse me? I’m going to pierce your cock, just like you told me to.”

“Well, you can’t pierce it while it’s like that,” Aleph says.

“You need to get it hard first.”

“Really?”

“Of course. When it’s hard, it’s bigger. It will be easier to see what you’re working with that way.”

“All right then,” I say. “Make it hard.”

Aleph throws his head back and roars with laughter. “Ophelia, you surprise me. You know that’s not the way to make an alpha’s cock hard. That’s *your* job, little mate.”

God, he really is impossible.

I know he’s toying with me right now. My body is still in heat, and the pheromones pouring out of my skin should be more than enough to get him erect. But somehow, through sheer willpower, he’s holding back his arousal on purpose. I could call him out on this, but instead I decide to play along with his little game.

With my free hand, I reach down and fondle his smooth balls, enjoying their weight and warmth in my palm. I don’t care that the crowd gathered around us can see what I’m doing. After all, most of them were probably present last night during the second phase of the ritual, so they’ve already seen me perform far more shameful acts than this.

Next, I shift my hand to his shaft and start to stroke him. Even flaccid, his cock is impressively large and heavy in my hand.

My stroking makes it thicken a little, but that's all.

The jerk really is holding back.

That's fine. I still have a few tricks in my arsenal. Still caressing him gently, I slide closer, pressing my naked body against his, and I whisper to him seductively, letting my lips brush against his ear.

"Please, Aleph," I beg, in the neediest voice I can muster. "I love the way your big dick looks when it's all nice and hard. I want to see it like that. I want to feel it..."

It grows a little more in my hand.

"I want to feel it so bad, Aleph," I whisper. "I want to feel it so deep inside my wet pussy..."

A little more.

"My pussy's so wet for you, Aleph. Can't you smell it? Oh God, I want you to fuck me so hard. I want you to knot me and come inside me..."

A little more.

"I want you to fuck a baby into me."

That does the trick. Aleph's cock instantly becomes as hard as stone in my hand, and a few drops of precum leak from his slit and dribble down my knuckles.

"Fuck," Aleph growls. "You know exactly what turns me on, little omega. I can't wait to fuck a whole litter of babies into your womb with my pierced cock."

I smile. "Me too."

I kiss him on his beautiful mouth, then I slide back down in front of him and check out his erect penis. Maybe it's just my imagination, but it looks even bigger and harder than I've ever seen it before. He was right, it does make everything easier to see down there, but I'm still not entirely sure how I should do this.

Seraph's voice comes from over my shoulder. "Allow me to assist you, Ophelia. First, you should pinch the skin here."

A circular blue laser projection appears on Aleph's cock, right around the V where his shaft becomes the head. I do as Aleph says, and pinch the skin there, pulling it gently. Above me, Aleph groans softly, and a little more precum leaks from his slit.

"Okay, what's next?"

"Next," Seraph says, "you will place the tip of your needle right here."

A glowing blue dot appears, indicating my target.

"Good. Now, on the count of three, you will push the needle through the skin with one quick motion. Make sure to push hard, so it goes all the way through. Are you ready?"

I'm not sure, but I nod anyway.

"In that case, I shall commence the countdown. Three...
Two... One... *Go!*"

I shove the needle in as hard as I can. Aleph's skin is tough, but the needle is incredibly sharp, and the tip passes through

like a sewing needle through a piece of cloth. From above, I hear a sharp intake of breath between clenched teeth.

“Excellent work,” Seraph says. “Now, all that is required is to insert the piercing.”

Boreg helps me with the last part, handling the needle so I can quickly place the small, barbell-shaped decoration. When it’s finished, it looks like Aleph has two little steel pellets growing from the underside of his cockhead.

A few drops of blood leak from the wound. Instinctively, I lean down and lick them away, and the metallic flavor of Aleph’s blood spreads over my tongue. Then, just for good measure, I wrap my lips around his plump glans and suck him, gently swirling my tongue around the hard metal piercing. On the Outside, I’m sure this practice would be horribly unsanitary, but considering that Aleph and I both have built in healing auras, I don’t think we have anything to worry about.

I start to take him deeper, letting my lips slide farther down his thick shaft. The crowd can see me pleasuring him with my mouth, and I hear them start to murmur even louder. That only turns me on more.

But apparently Aleph has something else in mind. His fingers clutch my hair, and he tugs my head up and away from his cock.

“Ah-ah,” he says, wagging his finger in my face. “You’re not going to make me forget about our deal that easily, you naughty little omega.”

“Our deal?”

“That’s right. I got my piercing, now it’s time for you to get yours.”

“Oh right,” I say, shuddering at the thought of a needle stabbing my clit.

Aleph smiles. “Don’t worry, my mate. I’m going to help you through the ordeal. And now I am especially well equipped to do so.”

Before I have a chance to ask him what he means, Aleph picks me up, turns me one hundred and eighty degrees, and lowers me onto his upright cock.

CHAPTER 51: OPHELIA

I tilt my head down and watch in amazement as Aleph's incredible shaft disappears between my legs, spreading my lips open, stretching me, filling me completely with his hard, hot manhood. All around us, the gathered tribespeople murmur and crane their necks to watch as my alpha mate takes me in broad daylight. Yesterday, I probably would have tried to close my legs and hide that shameful public penetration. Today, I spread my thighs even wider so everyone can see.

"Good omega," Aleph purrs behind me. "Show them how well you take a cock."

With his help, I slide my body up and down on his erect pole, moaning each time he fills me. With every stroke, the hard steel of his piercing abrades my front wall in just the right way, sending radials of pleasure spiraling outward from my core. Now I understand what he meant when he said he was better equipped to help me through the pain of my piercing.

Between my spread legs, Boreg moves into position, a piece of cork in one hand, a fresh needle in the other. He watches my rising and falling hips for a moment, then he looks around at the other males.

"Hold her still for me."

The twins move in from the left and right to grasp my shoulders and support my upper body. Meanwhile, Seraph and Marr take hold of my hips, steadying my lower body so Boreg

can work. The four of them lift me and hold me a few inches above Aleph's lap, and the pale alpha slowly rocks his pelvis, thrusting into me gently but deeply. My slick oozes down his shaft and balls like honey.

"Source, that's beautiful," Boreg says. "Aleph, I wish you could see how much the omega is enjoying your cock right now."

"Oh, I can feel it," Aleph chuckles.

He keeps pumping, slow and steady, and the sweet pressure mounts within my core. All around me, my mates begin to purr, and the twins start to massage my breasts, adding to my pleasure. I tilt my face skyward, basking in the golden sunlight streaming down between the half-ruined towers.

God, this place is so beautiful. I want to stay here forever, loved and protected by my mates. I want to bear children and raise them in the ways of the Zone. I want to grow old and die here. A mist of tears blurs my vision as I am overcome with emotion.

"She's getting close," Aleph says behind me. "Source, I can feel her getting close. Get ready, Boreg."

My clitoris is so full and erect it feels like it's going to pop at any moment. The cork presses against one side, and then I feel the sharp tip of the needle poised on the other side. I realize Boreg is not going to pierce the actual bud of the clit itself, but rather the little hood of skin that surrounds it. That's going to hurt a whole lot less than what I was expecting. A wave of

relief sweeps over me, accompanied by a twinge of disappointment.

Gentle Boreg waits for me. He waits until the exact moment my climax explodes through my center, then he pierces me. The sting of the needle only heightens the intensity of my release.

By the time it's all over, he has already pulled the needle through and set the ring in place. A bead of blood wells from the puncture. He leans down and sucks it away. His lips definitely brush Aleph's shaft in the process, but neither one of them seems to mind.

"So, what do you think?" Marr asks, eyeing my final piercing.

I reach down to touch it, and a jolt of pleasure shoots through my center. God, it's sensitive, but in a good way.

"I like it," I answer.

When I look at Boreg again, I see that he is now holding a small clay jar filled with some kind of clear jelly. He dips two fingers in, coating the tips with the stuff.

"What is that?" I ask.

"A soothing ointment," he replies. "It will help facilitate the healing of the wound, and it will alleviate any lingering pain."

"You know, it actually doesn't hurt at all. And it's already stopped bleeding too. I don't think I need any oint—oh!

Ohhh..."

Boreg places his fingers on my pierced clit and starts rubbing the ointment all around my tingling nub.

“Are you sure you don’t need this?” he asks. “I can stop if you want me to.”

“Don’t stop,” I breathe. “Don’t you dare stop.”

“As you wish, omega.”

While Boreg continues rubbing my hypersensitive clit in slow circles, Aleph begins moving again, aiming his thrusts so his hard piercing hits that special place on my front wall. It’s like steel striking a flint, sending sparks of bliss flying all through my insides, and it won’t be long before one of those sparks sets off another explosion within me.

Suddenly, something occurs to me.

I look around at the crowd of alphas and omegas who are watching me get pleased. They all seem to be standing a little straighter now, their eyes brighter, their faces less pallid.

“Hey, look at the crowd,” I whisper. “They all look healthier.”

“Yes,” says Seraph. “Now that you have received your piercings, you are fully linked to Aleph. A moment ago, when you climaxed on him, it created a wave of Source energy. But it was still a relatively small burst. In order to make it more effective, you and Aleph must *complete* the act.”

I look back over my shoulder at Aleph. “That means you need to come inside me.”

“I know exactly what it means, little omega. Are you ready for it? Are you ready to take my knot again? Are you ready to be filled with my seed?”

“Yes. I’m ready. Everything I said before is true. I want you to make me pregnant.” I look around at my gathered mates, including Seraph. “I want all of you to make me pregnant.”

I guess that’s a crazy thing to say. After all, six guys can’t all make one woman pregnant. At least not without several nine-month-long gaps in between. Nevertheless, it’s my desire. I want nothing more than to carry all of their babies in my womb at the same time.

“That can be arranged,” Aleph growls, and nuzzles me from behind. “After all, the fate of the Zone is in our hands. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the fate of the Zone is in your—”

“Don’t say it,” I cut him off. “Don’t you even dare.”

Aleph just laughs. “Fine, omega. Well then, let’s save the Zone, shall we?”

I nod and start to swivel my hips, stirring his big cock inside me while he continues to thrust and Boreg continues to strum my pierced clitoris. It doesn’t take long before I feel Aleph’s penis start to throb with his impending release, and my inner walls swell tighter around his shaft, as if my body is milking him, begging for his seed. Just a few more seconds, and we will join each other in a moment of shared ecstasy.

But the moment doesn’t come.

Before we have a chance to finish, a blood-curdling howl erupts in the distance, followed by something that sounds like firecrackers. In my half-dazed state, it takes me a second to realize what I'm actually hearing—it's the sound of automatic gunfire. In the next moment, several sleek, dark aircraft scream overhead, and another moment after that, massive orange fireballs blossom from the tops of the nearest buildings.

No! Oh God, no... This can't be happening, but it is.

The Outsiders are attacking.

CHAPTER 52: ALEPH

The world descends into chaos around us. Omegas scream and alphas roar as bits of glass and burning plant matter rain from above. More Outsider flying machines shriek overhead, unleashing fiery explosions in their wake.

In a heartbeat, I have lifted Ophelia off my body, and I am on my feet, sprinting toward shelter with my omega mate in my arms. My pack runs with me, helping to shield Ophelia's body from harm as best they can.

Ordinarily, we would not run from a fight like this, but right now, the only thing that matters is making Ophelia safe. Besides, it's not like there's much we can do against the flying machines anyway.

We must protect our mate.

At all costs.

An explosion roars so close it nearly throws me off my feet, but I keep running. Debris pelts my back. The air reeks of smoke. All around us, other alphas are running too, many of them carrying their own omegas. Some are wounded and screaming.

I sprint for the nearest structure. It is not as tall as many of the other towers in this part of the city. It consists of several levels of plain, flat concrete connected by ramps. Long ago, people used this structure for storing their wheeled vehicles. There are

still many such machines moldering inside. The structure is too open to provide a permanent safe haven for us, but at least it will give us a chance to get out of harm's way for a second and reconnoiter.

Behind, the pavement erupts with yet another explosion, the closest one yet. The heat of it scorches my back, and the wave of pressure throws me to the ground. I hold onto Ophelia tightly, doing my best to shield her.

The blast leaves my ears ringing, and the uproar around us suddenly becomes muted, as if I've just dunked my head underwater. I hear people shouting at me, but their voices sound far away.

“Aleph! Ophelia! Are you okay?”

Multiple hands seize me and Ophelia, dragging us to our feet and pushing us beneath the cover of the concrete structure. When I look around, I see it is my pack. Thank the Source, they are all here and all alive, the twins, Boreg, Marr, and even Seraph. I glance back at the smoking crater where the bomb just went off, and I see that some other alphas were not so lucky.

My heart fires with rage and a hunger for vengeance.

But that will have to wait. Ophelia is still in peril here. Her safety is the top priority. I can tell the others are thinking the same thing.

“We can't stay here,” Marr shouts, but I can barely hear him over the ringing in my ears. “We have to get Ophelia

underground where it's safe. The Chamber of the Source, or
—”

Seraph cuts him off. “No. There is no time. Look.”

I follow the line of his gaze, and I'm surprised to see what look like hundreds of giant seed pods drifting down between the towers of the ruins. I look closer and realize they are not seed pods, but men, Outsider soldiers, suspended by strings from big cloth canopies that slow their fall. They must have jumped out of other flyers. Each one of the soldiers is armed with a big gun.

Source, this is a nightmare.

The bombs were only one part of the Outsider attack, easily avoided by taking cover underneath the ruins. But these soldiers can pursue us anywhere. And although the Outsiders are not as strong or fast as alphas, their weapons are deadly, and there are a lot of them raining down on us. Plus, without the Source to give them energy, the other alphas are still in a partially weakened state.

“Damn,” Seraph says. It's the first time I've ever heard him curse. “I knew the Outsiders would invade, but I did not expect it to happen so soon. I thought they would wait until the alphas were completely helpless. After I broke Toth's control of Ophelia's mind, he must have realized my plan for her. That's why he has gotten the soldiers to attack prematurely.”

Already, some of the falling soldiers are touching down outside. Even with their guns, the first wave gets torn to shreds

by the alphas pretty quickly. But there are more falling right behind them.

“What are we going to do?” Ophelia cries.

Seraph assesses the situation for a moment, then he turns to my pack brothers.

“Post yourselves around the perimeter of this parking structure,” he says. “Call for others to come help. You must form a protective barrier around this area. Go on the offensive if necessary, but don’t stray too far. It is of the utmost importance that no Outsiders get past you.”

My pack brothers spring into action without hesitation. I start to go with them, but Seraph catches my arm.

“No. You must remain here.”

“Let me help fight,” I growl. “You can stay with Ophelia. I’ll make sure none of those bastards get inside.”

I try to pull away, but Seraph maintains his grip on my arm. I’ve known him a long time, but I never realized just how strong he is until now.

“You must stay,” he says again. “You are going to help in a different and even more important way.”

“How?”

“Is it not obvious, young alpha? You must finish what you were doing before the attack began. You must mate with Ophelia. You must knot her. You must join your bodies and your spirits into one to renew the power of the Source.”

CHAPTER 53: OPHELIA

My ears are still ringing so badly I can barely hear what Seraph is saying, but I'm pretty sure he just said Aleph and I need to have sex. This suspicion is confirmed a moment later when Aleph lifts me off my feet, tosses my naked body over his shoulder, and carries me deeper within the shelter of the parking garage. Meanwhile outside, the streets of the Central Ruins are turning into a battlefield. Explosions shake the ground, and the rattle of machine guns fills the air. A bullet whistles past us, and my blood goes cold in my veins.

Aleph moves low and fast. There is an ancient looking truck parked nearby, left over from the days before the Cataclysm. Aleph leaps over the tailgate with ease. He lays me down inside the plastic-lined bed of the truck and quickly lowers himself onto me, covering my body protectively with his.

Seraph's blue head appears over the side of the truck bed.

"You must act quickly," he shouts.

"We just need to fuck?" Aleph asks. "Is that all?"

"No, I am afraid not," Seraph says. Considering the chaos ensuing all around us, he sounds surprisingly serene, but I know him well enough now to detect the note of concern in his voice.

"The mere physical act of sex will not suffice," he says. "You will need to join not just your bodies, but also your minds. I

had hoped there would be more time to train both of you in the proper technique, but alas, we do not have that luxury now. Just try to ignore what is happening around you and focus solely on each other. I must go now. I must help with the fight.”

And just like that, Seraph is gone.

Jesus. Ignore what’s going on around us? That’s easier said than done. Having sex in front of a crowd of onlookers was one thing, but now we’re in the middle of a damn war zone. What Seraph is asking us to do seems impossible. Yet at the same time, we have to do it in order to save the others. If we really can create the Source energy with our bodies, it will not only strengthen all the alphas of the Zone—it will also turn most of the Outsider invaders into betas, effectively rendering them harmless.

It won’t be easy, but we have to try.

With Seraph now gone, Aleph directs his gaze back to my face. I can tell from his expression that he’s trying to stay calm, but his eyes betray his true feelings. He’s worried about my safety. He’s worried about his pack brothers. He’s worried about the Zone.

Aleph brushes the hair from face and leans in close, trying to soothe me. “Are you okay, Ophelia? How do you feel, little one?”

“I’m scared.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to protect you, my mate. I promise I’m going to protect you, okay?”

I nod, even though I don’t know how anyone could truly protect me from the storm of violence surrounding us. More explosions are going off. People are screaming. Bullets are whizzing over the bed of the truck and striking the ceiling above us, sending down showers of chipped concrete.

Aleph kisses me fiercely, like it might be the last kiss we ever share. “You heard what Seraph said. We have to do this, Ophelia. Now, just focus on me, okay?”

“I’ll try,” I say weakly.

Aleph nods. He looks down between our legs, where his enormous cock is hanging, heavy but flaccid. Just a minute ago, that member was rock hard and buried deep inside my body, but he lost his erection as soon as the fighting started.

Luckily, that’s a quick fix. Aleph moves back, buries his face between my thighs, and drags in a deep lungful of my scent. When he climbs back on top of me a moment later, his penis is fully rigid and ready for sex.

If only it was that easy for me.

As soon as the Outsiders showed up, my body stopped producing slick. Fortunately, it’s only been a few minutes, so there is still a residue of wetness down there, enough that it doesn’t hurt when Aleph enters me.

“I am sorry, Ophelia. I know you do not want to do this right now, but we must. Think of the Zone... No, don’t think of the

Zone. Just think about *us*, okay?”

I try to say yes, but all that comes out is a whimper.

Aleph kisses me again, more softly this time, and then he begins to purr. The sound is so low, I can't even hear it over the din of battle, but I can feel it reverberating deep within my chest. Normally, that sound would have me aching with need, but not now.

Aleph begins moving inside me with slow and cautious strokes. He's being more gentle with me than he's ever been before.

There is a dull thunk as a stray bullet collides with the side of the truck bed, and I let out an involuntary cry of terror.

“Shh,” Aleph tries to soothe me. “Look at me, Ophelia. Just look right in my eyes, okay? Now focus. Put all your attention on the way I feel inside you.”

I nod, my eyes brimming with tears.

I try to do what Aleph says and focus on the sensations of his penis sliding in and out between my legs, but it doesn't work. It's as if everything down there has gone numb with fear.

My mind keeps straying to thoughts of my other mates who are out there fighting. Are they hurt? Are they alive? It's pure hell not knowing what's going on with them.

“Stay with me, Ophelia. Focus. *Focus.*”

I try thinking of that night at Embla's cave. The night Aleph and I had our secret tryst while the others were sleeping. I

remember how beautiful that night was. Beautiful and quiet and dark. I remember the way my skin seemed to sing under Aleph's masterful touch, the way I quivered when he pressed the tip of his cock to my entrance and shot his seemingly never ending supply of semen inside me, hot and thick.

Something seems to ignite inside my core. It's small, barely more than a spark, but it's something. My slick begins to flow again, my nipples start to harden.

More bullets slam into the side of the truck. One of them hits the driver's side window, and I hear it come apart in a shower of broken glass.

My memory of the forest disappears, along with my arousal. I start to cry.

"Aleph, I can't do this," I sob. "It's impossible."

"It's *not* impossible," he says. "You *can* do this, Ophelia. You *must*."

He kisses me and starts to move inside me again, a little harder this time. But after only a few thrusts, he pauses.

"Aleph?"

He doesn't answer. He just stares at me, and I can see the gears turning behind his eyes. For a few more seconds, he does nothing, then he pulls out of me completely.

"Aleph? What are you doing?"

CHAPTER 54: OPHELIA

Aleph sits back on his knees so that his upper body and head are sticking way up out of the truck bed. With all of the fighting going on around us, it's an insanely dangerous position. He's making himself an easy target for a shooter to pick off. If a random stray round doesn't hit him first, that is. Instinctively, I sit up too and try to pull him back down.

"Aleph, what are you—*hey!*"

He shoves me down roughly and flips me over so I'm face down in the bed of the truck. His hand comes down on the right side of my butt, followed an instant later by a matching slap on the left. The blows jolt me, and my skin burns where his hand struck me.

"Aleph!" I shout.

My butt receives three more swats—right, left, right. These are not mere love taps. They are hard slaps that set my backside on fire. My initial shock shifts into snarling rage.

"Aleph, stop it!"

He flips me onto my back again, and I glare up at him through tear-filled eyes. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Shut up," he snaps.

His whole demeanor has changed in the blink of an eye. His usually pale face darkens like a storm cloud, his eyes flash like

lightning, and his growl is a roll of thunder, loud even compared to all the cacophony outside the truck. My anger shifts to fear.

“Do you want this cock, omega?” Aleph asks.

He reaches down and grips his erect penis at the base of the shaft, brandishing it like a weapon between my spread legs.

“Do I what?” I stammer.

SMACK!

He swings his cock downward, and his newly pierced tip collides with my clitoris, like a hammer striking a nail. I yelp in surprise.

“Pay attention when I’m talking to you, omega. Now answer me, quick. Do you want this cock or not?”

“I—”

SMACK!—SMACK!—SMACK!

His cockhead comes down three more times in quick succession. The blows sting on the surface, but they send zaps of pleasure stabbing into my core. By the third blow, my clit is rock hard, and I can feel my slick oozing out of me like juice from crushed fruit.

It’s beginning to dawn on me what Aleph is doing. A minute ago, I was having trouble focusing on him. Now he’s leaving me no choice in the matter.

He stares down at me, looking utterly brutal and dominant.

“Do you want this fucking cock, omega?”

“Yes,” I gasp.

“I don’t believe you.”

“I do! I want it.”

“Then beg for it,” he snarls. “Beg for it like a good little omega.”

Light goosebumps raise on my arms and legs. My nipples grow slightly firmer. My slick flows a bit thicker.

“Please,” I beg. “Aleph, please... I need your cock so bad...”

“Hmm.”

He lowers his hard shaft onto me, less forcefully this time, and thrusts his hips, not penetrating me, just gliding his tip against my clit, glazing me with his sticky precum. More bullets chip the concrete overhead, but I barely even notice. My attention is now laser focused on the sensation of Aleph’s thick member sliding against me.

“Where do you want it, omega?”

My legs spread wider, until the tendons of my inner thighs ache from stretching. My hands move to my breasts and start kneading. It’s not me doing that. It’s my heat, my raw omega instinct.

“I want it inside,” I whine. “I want you to fuck me. I want you to knot me.”

Aleph’s scowl softens into a grin. But it’s a cruel grin.

“You say you want it, omega, but I’m not sure you can handle it. Your sweet little cunt is so fucking tiny and tight.”

He glides his cock along my vulva, working his tip between my folds, lining himself up with my entrance. He slips just the tip of his penis inside me, then stops and pulls back.

“Aleph, please...”

My nipples are rock hard with arousal now. My skin is like pebbled glass. The odor of my slick is so strong I can smell it over the smoke filling the air. The sounds of battle are so inconsequential to me now, they might as well be the soundtrack of a movie playing in another room.

Aleph slides into me again, this time until his crown is inside. He pulls back again.

Somewhere in the darkest recesses of my mind, I am dimly aware of how much this game is costing Aleph. He wants to finish this as badly as I do, but he knows if he rushes, he could ruin everything. If the slightest distraction pulls my attention away from him, we'll have to start all over again, so he takes it slow, teasing me until my heat is unbearable and every fiber of my being is screaming for him to fuck me. His discipline is incredible, and that just turns me on even more.

“Please...”

He enters me again, but this time he doesn't hold back. His cock fills me, and my inner muscles strain around his girth. I throw back my head and let out a low, shuddering moan as I bask in the dark light of his dominance.

Something slams against the side of the truck bed so hard the entire vehicle lurches. I think it may have been a body. I don't

particularly care.

Aleph snarls and pounds his cock into me with bone shuddering force. I snarl back, lifting my pelvis to meet him thrust for thrust. My inner thighs are slathered with slick. My fingers claw at his chest and abdomen, raising long, red welts on his white flesh.

“Omega...” Aleph grunts. “*Omega...*”

Gripping my ankles, he presses my legs back, tilting my pelvis even more. He plunges into me again and again, driving his cock so deep inside me it feels like he’s trying to break through into my very womb.

“I’m ready,” I scream. “Aleph, I’m ready!”

He bears down on me with all of his incredible weight, crushing me into the truck bed. I feel like he’s killing me, yet at the same time I feel totally protected. My fingers dig into the meat of his back, drawing blood.

“*Aleph!*”

My alpha roars as his knot dilates inside me, locking our two bodies together into a single, writhing organism. The hot rush of his seed seems to fill my entire body as I join him in the beautiful agony of our shared release. Waves of intense pleasure radiate outward from the place where our bodies are joined, not two climaxes, but one.

The sensation doesn’t stop. It just keeps growing, expanding outward, encompassing the truck, the parking garage, the war-torn streets of the Central Ruins, and farther out past that to the

windblown fields and dark forests of the Zone, all the way to the Quarantine Wall and beyond. Our shared consciousness expands, and expands, and expands...

CHAPTER 55: OPHELIA

“*Ophelia... Ophelia...*”

Slowly, I come back to my senses. I’m still in the bed of the truck, still locked in place by the immense pressure of Aleph’s knot. But my alpha mate is no longer in full beast mode. He is gently caressing me, staring into my face with a look of intense protectiveness and concern.

“Ophelia, can you hear me?”

When he speaks, his deep voice seems to rumble straight through his knot and into my lower body. I shudder and moan as orgasmic aftershocks shiver through me. God, I’m exhausted. I feel like I just ran a damn marathon.

“Are you okay?” Aleph purrs.

I do a quick mental check of my body. Everything seems to be okay. I nod drunkenly.

“I’m fine,” I murmur weakly. I notice a trickle of blood running down Aleph’s shoulder, stark red against his alabaster skin. A surge of adrenaline jolts me to full alertness. “Aleph, you’re bleeding! Did you get shot?”

“I’m fine,” he says calmly. “Just a flesh wound. *You* did that to me.”

I recall clawing at his back.

“Oh God, I’m sorry. I guess I got carried away.”

“No apologies necessary, my little mate. I wanted you to get carried away. That was the whole point. And what’s more, I think it worked. Listen...”

I listen, but I don’t hear anything. In my addled state, it takes me a few seconds to realize the silence is exactly what Aleph is referring to.

No explosions. No gunfire. *Nothing*.

“What happened?”

“Have a look.”

With his knot still buried inside me, Aleph lifts me up so I’m sitting on his lap. Now that my head’s above the sides of the truck bed, I’m able to look around and survey the scene. Aside from a few hand-to-hand skirmishes in the distance, the fighting has stopped.

The vast majority of the Outsider soldiers have transformed into glassy-eyed betas. They’ve dropped their weapons, and now they are wandering aimlessly like sleepwalkers. A handful of the soldiers were transformed into alphas, but they are severely outnumbered by the tribal alphas, who are currently in the process of finishing them off with brutal efficiency.

“Holy shit,” I whisper. “It actually worked...”

“Yes. It worked. The Outsiders are defeated. The Zone is saved. And it’s all thanks to you, my mate.”

“Thanks to *us*,” I correct him before pressing a kiss to his warm lips.

My heart flutters in my chest. I'm so happy, I feel like I could levitate right out of the truck and float away. But as soon as I break my kiss with Aleph and look around again, my sense of elation quickly fades.

Today's victory did not come without a cost.

Bodies are strewn on the ground amid scattered rubble and smoking bomb craters. There are not as many dead as I expected from all the noise, and most of them are Outsiders, but there are motionless alphas among them too, their massive, half-naked bodies easy to pick out amid the soldiers. Even more alphas are bloody and injured, and yet others are tending to their omega mates who got wounded in the battle.

I frantically dart my eyes around, searching for *my* other mates, but I can't find them.

"Aleph, we have to look for the other guys."

He nods. His knot diminishes back to its normal size, and he slides out of me. He lifts me over the side of the truck and sets me down on my feet on the concrete. I start to walk, but my legs are still too weak and wobbly from mating, and they give out. Luckily, Aleph is there to catch me before I collapse completely.

"Careful, Ophelia," he purrs softly. "Here, let me help you."

His gentleness is a total contrast to his rough and bestial behavior a few minutes ago. I'm grateful for his strength and support. Steadying myself against his powerful body, we walk together out of the parking garage and into the sunlit street.

The air still stinks of smoke and gunpowder, but now it's mixed with the rusty scent of spilled blood. Embers fall around our ears like hot snow. Down the street, an aircraft lies burning where it came to rest against the side of a building. I can see the Outsider pilot through the cracked cockpit. He's still alive—a beta now—and he doesn't seem to care that he's engulfed in flames. Neither do I.

“Ophelia! Aleph!”

A pair of voices shout behind us, and we spin around to see the twins running toward us, pushing aside stumbling betas so they can get to us faster. They take turns hugging both of us.

“Thank the Source you're both alive!” Remus says.

Romulus gestures at the surreal scene surrounding us. “Did you two do this?”

Aleph and I both nod silently.

“Incredible. Absolutely incredible.”

“What about the others?” I ask. “Have you seen Boreg, Marr, and Seraph?”

Remus shakes his head. “Lost track of them in the battle. We'll look for them together. But first...”

As if they can read each other's minds, the twins move in concert to the nearest dead soldier who isn't completely soaked in blood. They both tear away big swatches of cloth from the soldier's uniform and they dress me in the rags. Romulus fashions his into a simple top to cover my breasts,

and Remus creates a kind of makeshift skirt for my lower body.

Just as they are finishing, there is another shout from nearby. We all turn to see Marr striding down the street through the smoke and falling embers. His body is drenched in gore, but I can tell from the painless way he's walking that none of it is his own.

"Ophelia!"

He breaks into a run, and so do I. When we connect, he sweeps me off my feet in a bear hug. I hug him back with all my strength, though it's nothing compared to his crushing embrace.

"My omega," he says, his voice taut with emotion. "Oh Source, I was so worried about you. I'm so glad you are alive and well..."

He sets me down again and kneels in front of me.

"You saved us all," he says. "I honor you, Ophelia. And I apologize for ever doubting you in the past. I—"

"Hey!" I whisper, cutting him off. "Stop that. Please. Come on, stand up."

He does, and I kiss him. I think that kiss communicates a lot more than my words ever could.

"There's no need for apologies," I say. "And no time. We still need to find the others. We need to find Boreg and Seraph."

Marr nods. "Right. Let's start looking."

We set off through the smoke and the wandering betas to find the rest of our pack. Not surprisingly, Romulus and Remus are the first to spot them.

“There!” the twins announce at the same time.

My eyes track in the direction they are pointing, and I see Boreg. Even though his back is turned to us, I still recognize him immediately by the mass of his body and his red hair. He is down on his knees, and it looks like he’s trying to resuscitate someone. I can’t see the face of the person he’s helping, but I can see the victim’s legs. The skin is pale gray, like a beta’s, but the muscles are too well developed to be an ordinary beta.

Seraph.

CHAPTER 56: OPHELIA

My strength returns on a wave of adrenaline. I break away from the others and run to Boreg's side. Seraph is lying on the ground face up, and his chest is covered in blood so dark it's almost black. His blue holographic head is still glowing, but it's glitching badly.

"Oh God, what happened?" I cry.

Boreg looks up, and his face brightens for an instant when he sees me, but his expression soon turns grave again.

"Seraph got shot in the chest. That's where his brain is. He's got a lot of metal armor in there, but I think some of the projectiles pierced through."

By now, the rest of my alphas have caught up. They gather around Seraph's body with worried faces.

"Is he going to make it?" Aleph asks.

"I don't know." Boreg shakes his head. "I know about healing people and animals, but Seraph is part machine. I need to find my mom. Or Aleph's. They're the only ones who will know what to do."

"Go find them," I say, struggling to keep my voice steady.

"Quick. I'll stay here with Seraph. You guys go find Lily and Hines."

The alphas nod, and set off running in five directions, calling out for the only two women in the Zone who might possibly

know how to fix this. I stay kneeling by Seraph's side while a small group of other alphas and omegas gathers around us, looking on. I want to shout at them to do something, but there's nothing they can do. Nothing I can do. Nothing anyone can do. I've never felt so scared and helpless before in my life.

"O... phe... lia..."

Seraph's voice is garbled and fuzzy, but I can understand it, and I can make out his familiar face through the glitchy static of his damaged holographic system. With tears in my eyes, I take hold of his hand and squeeze hard. He squeezes back, but his strength is clearly waning.

"Seraph, I'm here. I won't leave you. Just hold on a little longer. The others are bringing Lily and Hines to help you."

"Ophe... lia, thank... for saving... Zone..."

My eyes ache with tears, and my chest feels like it's about to explode.

"That wasn't just me," I say. "You're the one who made me able to do that, remember?"

He smiles weakly through the static. "Of course... remember... phelia... grateful... for teaching... how... be human..."

His voice is getting quieter, and the image of his face begins to fade.

"Just hold on a little longer, okay? I'm sure Lily and Hines will be here any second. Please, Seraph. Do it for me."

I don't know what they'll be able to do for him without tools.
But they will have to do something. Seraph can't die like this.
He just *can't*.

“O... lia... will... always... you...”

Tears pour from my eyes until I can barely see anything.

“Seraph, I love you too. I'll always love you.”

I lean down and place my lips where his are in a touchless
kiss. After a few seconds, his hand goes slack in mine. When I
lean back and wipe away my tears to look at him, his face has
faded away completely.

He's gone.

“No,” I whisper, as if I can change reality just by refusing to
accept it. “No...”

In the sky, storm clouds block out the morning sun, throwing a
veil of shadow over the smoke filled street. The first drops of
rain pelt my back as I kneel over Seraph's body, weeping.

CHAPTER 57: MARR

I'm in the meeting hall of the high council of the Central Tribe. It's late afternoon, going on evening, but the heavy clouds outside make it seem like night. The colored glass windows are dark except when a flash of lightning illuminates them. Rain batters the glass and spills in glittering streams through the holes in the roof.

This weather matches my mood. Dark and angry.

The air inside the meeting hall is thick with the scent of the several dozen highly ranked alphas who are gathered here. The high walls echo with the sound of clamoring voices. Mine is the loudest among them.

"Revenge!" I roar. "We must get revenge!"

My words are met with shouts and growls from the other alphas in the meeting hall, some in agreement, some not. I know I'm being rash right now, letting the fires of my rage burn out of control. If Seraph were here, he would no doubt scold me for that. But I have no other choice. If I don't allow my rage to consume me, then the sadness will start to bleed through. And the sadness is so much harder to bear.

"He's right!" a voice bellows from the platform where the tribal leaders are standing. It's my father, Kane.

"The Outsiders have gone too far," he shouts. "They've fucked with us plenty in the past. They've kidnapped our kind and

subjected us to cruel experiments. But this time they've tried to wipe us out completely. They failed, but they came too damn close. And worst of all, they killed Seraph. He was the messenger of the Source."

He's right. Those bastards killed Seraph.

The image of my beloved teacher lying dead in the street scorches across my mind.

After the chaos of the battle, I reunited with my family. I was relieved to discover that my parents and siblings all made it through the attack relatively unscathed. The same is true for my pack brothers' families. They are all alive and well. But that does nothing to diminish my thirst for vengeance.

Seraph was like family too.

The Outsiders must pay for his death.

My father's rousing speech garners many loud cheers from the gathering of alphas. But as soon as those cheers die down, another one of the alpha leaders speaks up.

"Wait!"

The alpha in question is named Canaris. He is one of Aleph's three fathers. For many years, he was held captive and tortured by a cruel tribe of Farlanders. His body is covered with almost as many scars as Kane's.

"Look," Canaris says. "I understand tempers are high right now, but we need to slow down and think this situation through."

“What is there to think about?” Kane snarls, getting right up in his face. “The Outsiders killed Seraph! We have to get revenge!”

Amazingly, Canaris keeps his cool.

“I’m not your enemy, Kane. I understand the thirst for revenge as well as anyone. My own father was killed by Farlanders, and I swore I would avenge him. But I rushed into things without thinking first, and look what that got me. A body full of scars, and years of my life spent locked up in a cage.”

My father takes a deep breath and nods.

“I’m sorry, Canaris. I didn’t mean to get in your face like that. But we can’t let this act of aggression go unpunished.”

Canaris shakes his head. “Right now, we need to be focusing on the safety of the omegas and the little ones. If we attack the Outsiders, it will only lead to retaliation, and that could put the entire tribe at risk.”

Outside, lightning flares.

“But the tribe is safe now!” I shout. “Ophelia and Aleph have seen to that. They made a new Source with their bodies. Now the Outsiders can’t invade us again.”

“Maybe they have more special omegas like Ophelia. Have you thought of that? They might send in another small team like the one that destroyed the Source batteries. Hell, they might even try to assassinate your mate.”

That thought just makes me angrier than I already am.

“All the more reason to take the fight to the Outsiders!” I scream.

“How?” says Canaris. “One on one, the Outsiders are no match for an alpha. But they outnumber us. Plus, they have weapons and vehicles. Realistically, there’s no way we could attack their city.”

“But we have to do *something!*” I yell. “They killed Seraph!”

I realize I have tears in my eyes. At any other point, I would be embarrassed to be caught crying in front of the leaders like this, but today I don’t care. All I care about is avenging my teacher and my friend.

I’m just about to shout again when I feel a large hand on my shoulder, holding me back and also comforting me. It’s Boreg.

“Easy, brother. We all share your pain this day. But you mustn’t let your emotions rule you. Remember what Seraph taught us.”

Damn. Boreg is right.

I nod and wipe my eyes.

Boreg turns his attention to Addom, who is sitting on his throne at the center of the stage with his arms folded and a frown on his stoic face. Even though he is the chieftain, he has remained silent throughout this gathering, choosing to simply take in the proceedings.

“Father, what do you think?” Boreg asks.

“What do I think?” Addom strokes his stubbled chin. “I think we alphas have already spent too much time bickering amongst ourselves. I think it’s time we let one of the omegas speak. They have more sense than we do, after all.”

I follow the line of Addom’s gaze. He is looking at Ophelia, who is standing right beside me. My other pack brothers, Aleph, Romulus, and Remus, are surrounding her protectively. So far, my omega mate has remained silent too. She is no longer weeping, but her eyes have a sad, distant look to them. My heart aches for her almost as much as it does for Seraph. To lose one’s friend is bad enough. But to lose one’s mate, as she has...

On the stage, Addom leans forward on his throne and tents his fingers in thought. After a moment, he speaks.

“Here in the Central Tribe, we have a law which says that if an omega’s mate is murdered, she may determine the punishment of the perpetrator. So what do you say, Ophelia? What would you have us do to the Outsiders?”

Lightning flashes again, illuminating her face blood red through the stained glass. In that split second, I see the sadness in her eyes shift into a cold, predatory look. I’ve seen that look in her eyes once before. It was after she ripped the throat out of that Farlander by the river. I’m not the kind of alpha who is easily disturbed, but that look sends a chill up my back.

“I want revenge,” Ophelia says softly. “And I have a plan.”

Outside, thunder booms.

CHAPTER 58: DR. TOTH

City Hive Galadon-1

A few weeks later...

“**A**nd now for the daily air quality report. Record levels of carbon monoxide and particulate matter continue this week, and officials from the health ministry recommend limiting your time outdoors and wearing a personal air filtration mask if you...”

I pick up the remote from the glass-top table beside my lounge chair and turn down the volume on the holovision, which is playing the evening news.

Pollution.

Sometimes it seems like that’s all everyone here in the city hive ever talks about. They complain about it constantly, but they never seem to consider the benefits.

Take the sunsets, for example. The one that I’m watching right now from my balcony is absolutely stunning, like a pyrotechnic show. Not only does the smog create the usual fiery oranges and neon pinks, but there are swirls of violet and electric blue, and even some touches of sea green.

That’s one of the main reasons I selected this penthouse in the highest tier of the city hive. The views are extraordinary. I even had the balcony built without a railing so the view would be unobstructed. Technically, it doesn’t meet the city’s safety

requirements, but I pulled a few strings to make it happen. Besides, only a fucking imbecile would fall off a balcony just because there's no railing.

Of course, the plebeians who live in the underlevels of the city don't get views like this. Some of them may even go days without seeing the sun at all. But to me, that just makes the sunsets even more beautiful.

After all, the best things in life are exclusive.

I set the remote down on the table, pick up the ice cold martini sitting there, and settle back into my lounge chair. With the volume on the holovision turned down, I can now hear the sounds of the city below, the honk of car horns and bustle of citizens fighting their way down the crowded sidewalks. I could turn on the sonic dampeners to attenuate those sounds, but I choose not to. Sometimes I enjoy listening to the city, the way it hums, the way it throbs like a living entity.

An entity created by man, and therefore far superior to anything found in nature.

I take a sip of my martini. The drink is cold and crisp. It's also my third of the evening. Normally, I limit myself to only two drinks, but lately I've been under more stress than usual. I need something extra to help take the edge off.

The problem is the Zone.

None of this would have happened if Ophelia had died in the explosion like she was supposed to. But no, that defiant little bitch had to go and survive on me. Once she fell into the hands

of the alphas, I realized just how badly I had fucked up. I'd given those savages a means for creating a new Source—one that wouldn't need batteries to keep running. One that could potentially allow the Zone to go on forever.

I knew I had to act fast, so I told a few lies to my superiors in the government and military. I convinced them to invade the Zone earlier than we had originally planned. That invasion failed spectacularly. Thousands of soldiers died—or turned into betas, which is as good as dead. Even worse, hundreds of millions of dollars worth of aircraft were lost. Now the higher-ups are pinning the blame on me, and my entire career is in jeopardy.

All because of that little omega bitch.

I take another big sip of my martini. The cold gin helps to wash away some of my stress. The sun has dipped below the city skyline now, leaving a multicolored glow in its wake. It's a comforting sight.

No need to get bent out of shape. Everything will be okay.

The big wigs will calm down eventually, after they realize just how much they still need me. Hell, nobody understands the Zone and the alphas the way I do. I've devoted my entire life to studying those abominations.

Besides, what are a few thousand dead soldiers in the grand scheme of things? Next to pollution, the biggest problem we're facing is overpopulation. There are more than enough able-bodied men to recruit from. When you look at it like that,

I did the government a favor by getting all those soldiers killed.

And I have more Ophelias too.

The Ophelia I lost to the alphas was neither the first nor the last. It took six tries before I got the nano-genetic recipe right, and once I did, I made sure to have a few spares on hand, just in case. Now I can use one of those spares to escort a team of assassins into the Zone. I can eliminate my wayward pet and destroy the new source of the Source. It won't be easy, but it's certainly doable.

There was a time when I thought the monsters of the Zone could be controlled and used as weapons. That was many years ago. Time and experience has shown me the error of my ways. The Zone and all its inhabitants must be exterminated, once and for all, and I'm going to make sure that happens. Now my resolve is stronger than ever.

Those animals have made me look foolish.

And a man in my position cannot afford to look foolish.

It's getting late now. The afterglow of the sunset has faded in the west, and night has fallen. No stars tonight, of course. There never are. Here in the city hive, the stars are always hidden by the smog and light pollution. But I never cared too much about the stars. I'm no night owl.

Early to bed, early to rise, that's my motto.

I knock back the rest of my martini and mentally debate whether to make myself another. I have a lot of work ahead of

me tomorrow, but... oh hell, one more won't kill me.

It's times like these I wish I had a wife so I could send her to make my drinks for me. But then I'd have to talk to her, listen to her complain about her day. The thought makes my skin crawl. No, I much prefer my solitude. When I need to get my dick sucked, I can just hire a whore. Besides, wife would probably just fuck up my martini anyway. No woman could mix a drink as well as I do.

When you want something done right...

I stand up and start to head back inside where my wet bar is located. But before I reach the glass door, a strange feeling seizes me. My head suddenly feels dizzy, and I sway on my feet.

Shit. Maybe I don't need another drink after all.

It quickly becomes apparent, however, that it isn't the alcohol that's having this effect on me. In the next moment, my hand becomes so numb that the empty cocktail glass slips from my fingers and smashes on the tiles of the balcony. I open my mouth to curse, but all that comes out is an ugly, inhuman moan.

What the hell?

My mind races through the possibilities of what could be wrong. Did someone poison my drink? An agent from the government sent to punish me for my failure? Such things are not unheard of here in the hive. But how would an assassin have gained entrance to my penthouse? They couldn't. Not

with all the security measures I have in place. The only way someone could have gotten in would be to scale the side of the building, but that's impossible. There's no—

I glimpse my reflection in the glass door in front of me, and my heart stops.

The reflection staring back at me is not my own. Oh sure, some of the details match. The same slate gray slacks and tailored shirt, unbuttoned at the collar. The same trim, athletic build I've worked so hard to maintain into middle age. The same full head of hair, dark on top, silvered at the temples.

The problem is the face—it's the face of a beta.

Actually, that's not quite right. It doesn't look exactly like a beta's face. It's somewhere in between a normal human and a full-blown beta mutation. But the telltale signs are all there—the graying skin. The webs of blackened veins. The sunken, glassy eyes. And all of those features are becoming more pronounced by the second.

I'm turning into a beta!

This isn't possible...

I recoil in disgust, and the heel of my bare foot steps on a shard from the shattered cocktail glass. Pain lances up my leg, and I stumble backward, unable to control my own motion. Another wave of panic hits me as I realize I'm backpedaling straight toward the ledge of my balcony with no railing to stop me.

At the last second, I tumble onto my back, landing so close to the edge that my head is actually hanging over.

Shit, that was close.

Not that it matters, considering the mutation spreading through me. God, maybe it would be better to fall to my death than to live as a beta.

Noises drift up from the street below. These are not the usual city sounds to which I've become accustomed. I hear screeching tires and breaking glass. Crumpling metal. Screams. With a great effort, I roll myself over onto my stomach and peer downward.

The street is filled with smoking automobile collisions. Some cars have veered off the road and slammed into storefronts. Others have toppled light posts. Yet despite all this chaos, nobody seems to be panicking. In fact, the pedestrians all seem to be shambling about in a kind of daze.

God, they must all be turning into betas too.

No. Not *all* of them.

A wolf-like howl breaks the night. Through a supreme force of will, I train my eyes in the direction of the sound, and I soon find its source. A massive brute of a man dressed in what appears to be a shredded business suit charges down the street at incredible speed, shoving betas out of his way like a ship parting the sea. He's an alpha, and he's obviously caught the scent of an omega in heat. God help her when he finally tracks her down.

This must be what the Cataclysm was like.

It would be fascinating if it weren't so damn terrifying. Yet... already, my terror is beginning to fade as the beta mutation continues spreading through me. My jaw falls slack, dripping strings of drool over the edge of the balcony. Brain fog sets in, and I find myself not caring very much what happens to me, let alone anybody else.

Huh. Being a beta isn't really so bad, I guess. It's just kind of like...

Like nothing at all.

Then, just as suddenly as it all started, the mutation fades. My mind comes back to me, along with my strength. I roll over and look at my hands. In a few seconds, they are completely normal again—nice and soft and pink like they're supposed to be, not clammy and gray.

Confused screams rise from the streets below, telling me that the rest of the city just regained their faculties as well.

What caused it to stop, I wonder.

And why the hell did it happen in the first place?

I sit up with a groan, and my eyes fix on the holovision, which is still playing at the other side of my balcony with the volume turned down. Instead of the usual pair of attractive, well-groomed news models, I find myself looking at a shirtless man with wild hair and piercing eyes. His extreme musculature and the distorted, hypermasculine appearance of his features leaves no doubt as to what he is—an alpha.

I scramble across the balcony on my hands and knees, making sure to avoid the bits of broken glass. When I reach the table, I pick up the holovision remote and turn up the volume.

“...name is Addom. I am the high chieftain of the Central Tribe of the alphas of the Zone. I am the one responsible for the attack you just experienced. I’m going to explain why it happened, so listen well.

“For as long as the Zone has existed, you Outsiders have looked down upon my people. You have hunted and kidnapped my kind and used us for your unethical experiments. For a long time, we have forgiven these trespasses. But the time for forgiveness has come to an end. Recently, your government and military attempted to destroy my people completely. This we cannot tolerate. Any more attacks will be met in kind.

“Now you know what we Zone dwellers are capable of. We alphas have the power to create a second Cataclysm if we so choose. Tonight, we have shown you mercy. Next time, we will not. All we are asking is to be left in peace. If you cannot respect that, then your entire civilization will be forced to pay the price.

“I believe most of you Outsiders are rational, peaceful people. I do not wish to destroy you, but I will do so if that is what it takes to protect my home. If you are angry or upset about what has happened to you this night, do not blame me. Blame your leaders. They are the ones who are ultimately responsible for all of this. Let them know, by whatever means necessary, that you will not tolerate any further attacks or outside interference

toward the Zone. Tell them to leave us alone, and make your message loud and clear. If they do not listen, it will mean your destruction.”

The alpha’s eyes narrow, and for a chilling moment, I get the feeling that he’s actually looking straight at me.

“Outsiders, there is one man who is more responsible than any other for tonight’s unfortunate events. His name is Dr. Gulliver Toth. He is the head of alpha research for your government.”

And just like that, the image on the screen disappears, replaced by a shot of two stunned news models. For a few seconds, I sit there, trying to process everything that has just happened.

The sound of sirens in the distance rouses me out of my daze.

Down in the streets, the screams of confusion have turned into angry shouts.

Shit. This is bad. This is really bad. The alpha just called me out by name on a citywide broadcast. Most average citizens don’t know who I am or where I live. But my bosses will be more than happy to hand me over to the mob as a scapegoat for what just happened to the city.

Actually, they’ll probably just kill me. I know way too much for them to let me go on trial.

I have to get out of here. Now.

My mind starts racing as I try to think of what I’m going to do. I don’t have any friends I can turn to for a hiding place. None I could trust not to turn me in. My only hope is to go deep into the undercity where nobody will recognize me. From there, I

can figure out my next moves. I have some spare cash in the safe in my bedroom. A gun. A change of clothes. Everything else I'll have to leave behind.

Fuck it.

Using my lounge chair for support, I drag myself to my feet, taking care not to put too much weight on my injured foot. Shit, that's going to be a hindrance, but I don't have time to deal with it now. The government probably already has agents on the way here.

I start limping toward the door, my heart hammering in my chest, my injured foot trailing drops of blood on the tiles behind me.

“Toth?”

The voice is a bass note that rumbles deep in my chest. It stops me dead in my tracks. I turn, and something moves in the darkness at the far side of the balcony. Something big.

“Wh-who's there?” I stammer.

“A messenger.”

The massive figure steps out of the shadows. It's a man. A big man. He's dressed in a long trench coat and his face is hidden in shadow beneath the brim of a hat, but his eyes gleam like the eyes of a wolf.

I thrust one hand into my pocket and keep it there, bluffing.

“Stay back! I'm armed!”

“No you're not.”

Who the hell is this guy? A government agent? No way. They couldn't have gotten someone here this fast. Then there are his clothes. They're decades out of fashion. Even older than that. They look like something a man might have worn a hundred years ago.

And his accent. It's weird. It almost doesn't sound human.

"How did you get up here?" I ask, my voice trembling.

"I climbed."

The man steps closer, and I finally catch a glimpse of his face under the hat. His eyebrows and nose are adorned with piercings. His jaw is slashed with scars. He isn't wearing a shirt under the trench coat, and his powerfully built body is also covered in scar tissue. Dear God, who is he?

"Stay back!" I scream. "Stay away from me!"

I want to run, but my legs refuse to move. It's as if my feet are welded in place by fear. That's an old evolutionary holdover from the days when standing perfectly still was a good way to avoid being seen by a predator. At the moment, however, that instinctual response doesn't seem to be working in my favor.

The man keeps coming. He's so heavy, he seems to shake the ground with every step. He's only five strides away now. Four strides. Three.

That's when his scent reaches me, intense and animalistic. It washes over me like a wave. I've smelled that scent before, many years ago. There's no mistaking it.

This man is an alpha.

A whimper slips from my lips. A weak, childish sound. Warmth spreads through the crotch of my pants and down my legs. I realize with a twinge of embarrassment that I've pissed myself.

With blinding speed, the alpha's massive hand darts out and seizes me by the throat. I reach up and clutch at his wrist, trying to pull his hand away, but it's useless. His tendons feel like steel cables beneath the skin. I try to beg for mercy, but his vice-like grip cuts off my voice.

He begins walking me toward the edge of the balcony.

"This is for Seraph," he says.

CHAPTER 59: OPHELIA

Several tiers down from the upper levels where Dr. Toth resides, closer to the heart of the city hive, there stands a rather seedy looking hotel. Red neon. Pay by the hour. That kind of place.

If anyone out on the street happened to be paying close attention right now, they might notice a woman emerge from the fire exit into the alley beside the building, followed closely by an extremely large, pale man. Even though it's not raining, the woman is dressed in a raincoat, and even though it's night, she's wearing shades. An onlooker might assume she is a prostitute attempting to be discreet. Her only really unusual features would be her platinum hair and the many piercings adorning her ears and face. The wobble in her legs makes it obvious that her john just made her earn her keep.

Speaking of the john, he's the type who would normally be getting some attention from passersby. For one thing, he's enormous. For another, his skin is as white as alabaster. Like the woman, he's wearing sunglasses and facial piercings, and his arms and body are hidden under a leather jacket that's about a century and a half out of style. Oh, and did I mention he's handsome as all get out? Definitely not the kind of guy you would expect to catch paying for sex. In fact, you would think women would be throwing themselves at him.

If they weren't afraid he would break them, that is.

All those factors should be enough to turn heads, but nobody seems to be paying attention. At the moment, everyone on the street is still too shaken from what just happened to them.

They all just got a taste of what it feels like to be a beta or, in a few rare cases, what it's like to be an alpha or an omega. Now, most of them are gathered around the glass display window of an electronic appliance store where the holoivid screens are replaying a recording of Addom's transmission on a loop.

Nobody even notices as the unusual duo fades away into the shadows.

"Come on. This way, omega."

Aleph slides one big, protective arm around my waist and guides me down the dark alley. I lean into him, letting his big body carry some of my weight. My poor legs are weak and trembling from what we just did upstairs in that hotel room, but my need is burning hotter than ever following my denied release.

Without even thinking about it, I let one of my hands move to Aleph's crotch and I stroke him. His huge cock feels like a steel rod inside his tight-fitting jeans. Heat throbs in my pelvis, and slick oozes down my legs. I'm not wearing anything under my raincoat. I rub harder, feeling the shape of him through the worn denim.

"Cut that out, woman," he growls.

"I'm sorry," I whimper. "I'm just so horny."

"No shit. So am I."

“Yeah, I noticed.”

Aleph groans in exasperation. “Omega, if you don’t stop rubbing me like that, I’m liable to shove you up against that brick wall and knot your pussy right here in this alley.”

“Mm, that sounds nice,” I moan.

“Yeah, but think what would happen if I did that.”

Oh yeah. Right. We would end up creating a Source field, and we would turn all citizens of the city hive into betas, alphas, and omegas. We almost did that a few minutes ago on the bed in that hotel room, but we both stopped on purpose right at the last nanosecond, before the Source field had a chance to fully form. We didn’t want to destroy the Outsiders. We only wanted to send them a warning, to let them know what we could do to them if they don’t stop messing with the Zone.

That was my plan. It was dangerous, and the alphas initially balked when I explained it to them in the meeting hall. But after a bit of work, I managed to sway them. This isn’t just about getting revenge for Seraph, though that’s a big part of it. Even more importantly, it’s about protecting the Zone forever. We Zone dwellers might not possess the advanced technology of the Outsiders, but between Aleph’s body and mine, we have something that is far more powerful and dangerous than anything in the Outsiders’ arsenal. Tonight we showed them that.

There was just one small kink in my plan.

I failed to take into account just how freaking horny I would be after my denied release. Right now, my ovaries feel like a couple of hot coals inside me. And Aleph's poor balls aren't faring much better. I know, because I can feel their heat through the fabric of his jeans.

God, I'm almost to the point where I'm ready to throw my morals aside completely and take Aleph up on his offer to fuck me up against the wall. So what if it destroys an entire city in the process?

But no.

We just have to hold on a little longer. Once we're away from the city hive, I'll be able to have his big, hard knot inside me.

We reach the end of the alley, which opens onto another street. There are fewer people on this side, which is good. Even though everyone in the city is distracted by what just happened to them, it's still a good idea for us to avoid attracting too much attention.

There's a motorcycle parked on the sidewalk, a military model, a little worse for wear. As we approach it, another similar bike pulls up, bearing two very large riders. The driver lifts his goggles to look at Aleph and me.

"How'd it go?" he asks.

He's an alpha named Taliesin. His skin is deeply tanned and his mane of long, black hair is streaked with touches of silver. He's one of Aleph's three dads, and he kind of looks like a slightly older, much darker version of his son. He volunteered

to join in the mission because he spent a lot of time in the city hive in the past, and he probably knows its streets better than any other alpha. His passenger is Boreg, who looks comically large sitting on the back of the bike like that. His white teeth gleam amid his fiery red beard as he flashes me a big grin.

“It went... well,” Aleph grunts. “Anyway, I guess you saw. I’m assuming your end of things went well too?”

Taliesin nods.

It was his and Boreg’s job to infiltrate the news headquarters to send the pirate broadcast out all over the city. Lily, Hines, and Hannah helped Addom record his message, and they used the computer terminal in a Chamber of the Source to cook up a virus that would allow the video file to override the evening news.

That part of the plan was every bit as important as what Aleph and I just did. The Outsiders need to understand what just happened to them and why. Addom’s message explained that to them in no uncertain terms.

“Do you think it will work?” Aleph asks. “Do you think the Outsiders will listen to our warning?”

“Only time will tell,” Taliesin says.

Just then, a group of Outsider citizens emerges from a bar across the street. They must have been watching the news in there, because they seem pissed, and they are shouting some pretty unfavorable things about the government and Dr. Toth.

They march off down the street, raising hell and gathering more followers as they go.

“That’s a good sign,” Taliesin says.

“Yeah.” Aleph looks around. “Where are Dog and Marr?”

No sooner has he spoken than a third motorcycle comes roaring around the corner and pulls up next to us. The driver of this vehicle is Dog, one of Marr’s fathers. Like Taliesin, he is also familiar with city ways since he was actually created by Synergen as a clone. Sitting behind him is his son, and my mate, Marr.

“Did you find Toth?” Aleph asks.

Marr sneers cruelly under the brim of the hat he’s wearing. “Toth had himself a bit of an accident. Fell off his balcony. You should have seen the mess he made when he landed.”

Good.

I’m not a violent person by nature, but some people need to get what’s coming to them. And Dr. Toth had plenty coming his way. His death won’t bring Seraph back, but at least it gives me a sense of closure.

“Okay then,” Aleph growls. “It sounds like the mission was a success. That means it’s time for us to get the hell out of this Source-forsaken city.”

“Sounds good to me,” Taliesin says. “I can’t wait to get back to the Zone.” He gives me and Aleph a knowing look. “And I imagine the two of you are ready to, uh... finish what you started.”

“Dad!”

Taliesin just chuckles and pulls off down the street, weaving through the mess of wrecked cars.

Grumbling, Aleph swings his leg over the empty motorcycle, fishes the keys out of the pocket of his leather jacket, and turns the ignition. The bike snarls like a lion, then purrs as the engine idles. God, he looks hot straddling that powerful machine in his tight jeans.

“You know, you make a pretty sexy biker,” I say.

Aleph just nods toward the seat behind him. “Get on, omega.”

The rumble in his voice is even more impressive than the sound of the motorcycle, and it compels me to obey him. I kick off the high-heeled shoes I’m wearing and climb aboard.

“Hold on,” Aleph calls.

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I hug my arms around his massive torso and cling to him from behind. He revs the engine of the motorcycle, then he peels off down the sidewalk and slides into traffic. I hear Dog and Marr following close behind.

Most of the cars in the street are stopped. When the population of the city started to turn into betas, there were a lot of wrecks. Fortunately, since traffic in the city is always bumper to bumper, none of the collisions happened at high speed, so the injuries seem minimal.

Aleph expertly pilots the motorcycle through traffic, threading a line between the stopped vehicles. You wouldn’t know it

from the way he maneuvers, but he only learned how to drive a few days ago when Taliesin taught him. Thanks to his acute senses and quick reflexes, Aleph picked it up almost immediately.

But there's a little problem.

The vibrations from the engine are wreaking havoc with my sensitive undercarriage, sending dirty reverberations all through my deprived center. And to make matters even worse, Aleph's scent is extra strong right now. Mixed with the smell of leather and gasoline, it's almost enough to make my ovaries explode. I'm not wearing any clothing under my raincoat, and my pussy is leaking an insane amount of slick all over the upholstery of the motorcycle seat.

It doesn't take long before I come.

But it's only a small orgasm, not the release my body truly needs. Only my alphas can provide that, with their big knots and their hot seed.

My hand slips between Aleph's legs and squeezes him there. His erection hasn't faded at all. If anything, it seems to have grown even bigger and harder, tunneling halfway down the thigh of his jeans. I rub him like I did before in the alley.

With the wind whipping around our ears, there's no way for Aleph to tell me to stop now. He just growls, a subsonic sound that I feel rather than hear. Even without words, the meaning of that growl is all too clear.

Omega, what do you think you're doing?

I know I shouldn't keep going, but I can't help myself. I need to feel his hard length throbbing in my fingers. I need to touch him skin on skin.

I unfasten his fly and pull his cock out of his jeans. It stands proudly between his legs, still damp with my juices from when he fucked me a few minutes ago. I don't stroke it. I know that would be more than Aleph could handle at the moment. I just hold on to it like a joystick, feeling the pulse of my mate's powerful heart as we barrel down the street, cars blurring past on both sides.

Taliesin leads us down a series of ramps that take us into the lower levels of the city hive. With each level we descend, the livability of our surroundings drops too. At last, we arrive in the undercity, where the lost souls dwell. Down here, there's no electricity or running water, and the inhabitants live off the garbage they scavenge from the levels above. Aside from the headlights of our motorcycles, the only illumination comes from scattered fires. I don't see any people out and about, but I know they're down here. They're probably hiding indoors, confused about what just happened to them.

Part of me feels bad for subjecting them to that, but it had to be done.

Who knows, maybe when the government stops messing with the Zone, they can use the extra money to help these impoverished souls.

After a few minutes, we pull up to a pair of large military vehicles. One is a cargo carrier, and the other is a troop

transport. Taliesin and Boreg are already wheeling their bike into the cargo carrier when we get there.

Over the years, the alphas of the Zone have acquired a small collection of working vehicles. Some of them were stolen from the Outsiders, and others are fixed-up antiques from inside the Zone. Even though the Quarantine Wall surrounds the Zone, the cave systems extend beneath that barrier, providing a way to get in and out. That's how Embla's mate Orwen came to her rescue when she was held captive in the city. And it's also how we got here earlier today. Now it's time for our return trip.

"You need to let go of my cock now, little one," Aleph whispers over his shoulder.

With a reluctant whine, I let go and dismount. Aleph grunts painfully as he stuffs his erection back inside his jeans. Then, with Boreg's help, he pushes our bike into the cargo vehicle. Dog and Marr arrive shortly after us and do the same.

With the bikes stowed, it's finally time for us to leave. I can't wait. I'm not going to miss the city at all. And more than anything, I'm ready to put an end to the desperate need that is almost devouring me alive at this point.

Dog gets behind the wheel of the cargo carrier and pulls off. It will be Taliesin's job to drive the transport.

"The rest of you, climb in the back," Taliesin says. He looks at me, then Aleph, and he smirks slightly. "I'll knock on the back of the cab when we're out of range of the city. I'll drive as fast

as I can, but it will still be a few minutes. Think you kids can hold out till then?”

“We’ve made it this long,” Aleph says. “A few more minutes won’t kill us.”

“Speak for yourself,” I mutter under my breath.

Taliesin barks with laughter. “I’ll drive as fast as I can. I promise.”

He heads for the driver’s compartment, and the rest of us pile into the back of the transport.

I take off my shades because I don’t need them anymore. There’s no light inside the back of the transport except for what comes in through the opening at the rear, but I know the layout well enough. It’s a big, empty metal box with benches running down both sides. I take a seat as the transport rumbles to life, and a second later we’re moving, bumping and swaying as we drive down the ragged pavement. The vibrations through the bench only intensify the desperate need churning inside me, and I moan.

I sense Boreg moving closer. “Ophelia. Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine, I just—*ungh*...”

He touches my forehead. “Source, you’re burning up, woman. Let’s get you out of this Outsider clothing.”

I try to tell him that’s probably a bad idea, but all that comes from my mouth is a frail whimper. Boreg opens my raincoat, exposing my naked body, and the scent of my heat fills the transport like a cloud. All five of my alphas groan as if in pain,

and I hear a noise that could only be ripping denim. It sounds like Aleph's jeans just gave out against the strain of his erection.

"Source, her heat is so strong," Romulus observes.

"Indeed," says Remus. "We must aid our mate."

The alphas begin moving my body, lowering me to the floor between the benches. Marr cradles me from behind while the twins spread my legs.

"No, wait!" I gasp. "Please don't! Not yet. We have to wait until we're away from the city."

"Wrong," Marr growls. "You cannot mate with Aleph until we're away from the city. However, my pack brothers and I can provide you with some assistance in the interim. Unfortunately, Aleph will just have to ride it out. Sorry, brother."

Aleph just grunts in the darkness.

Purring, Marr reaches around and fondles my tender breasts. It occurs to me that his hands ended a man's life tonight. That shouldn't turn me on. It really shouldn't.

He toys with my nipple ring, sending tingles of pleasure all through my chest. I writhe against him. He's still dressed in his Outsider costume, but I can feel his penis, hard as polished wood inside his pants. God, that thing feels appetizing.

"Help," I breathe. "I need... I need..."

"Don't worry, little omega."

“We have what you need.”

The twins have moved into position on either side of me. I can't see them, but I can smell them, and I can tell from the strength of their scent that they are already naked. They take both of my hands and place them on their erect members, and I instantly begin stroking them, like a reflex. I lean to one side and then the other to suck both of them, alternating between their cocks, giving Romulus several bobs of my head before letting Remus have another turn. My heat burns even hotter, and I moan pleadingly around their dicks.

“Poor little omega,” Boreg purrs. “I don't think your heat has ever been quite this bad before.”

He moves into position between my wide open legs and lays his healer's hands on the aching place between my thighs. His skill is incredible, his fingers large but nimble. He pleasures me inside and out until I am convulsing wildly with full body orgasms that are so intense they almost hurt. I scream like a madwoman.

God, I wonder if Aleph's dad can hear us.

I've just finished coming for perhaps the twentieth time, when a knock comes from the front wall of the transport.

We're now beyond the range of the city.

“Out of the way!” Aleph snarls.

He charges down the length of the transport, violently shoving the other alphas out of the way. In any other circumstances,

that might lead to a fight, but tonight they are willing to forgive him.

Aleph falls on top of me with a roar. He thrusts his pierced cock inside me so hard it forces the air out of my lungs. I reach around and grip the clenching muscles of his butt while he fucks me, growling like an enraged and hungry animal.

It doesn't take either of us long. When his knot expands inside me, I toss my head back and let loose a feral howl, and as before, our two minds intertwine into one for a while.

When I come down from that high, I can sense the other alphas gathered around us in the dark. Aleph's dick is still knotted within me, and it feels even larger and harder than ever before.

"Fuck, that was a big one," Aleph grunts. "Apologies, brothers, but I don't think my knot will be letting go anytime soon."

"That's okay," I purr seductively. "I have a few more holes they can use."

The others rumble with excitement and close in around me like wolves in the dark. I smile, their willing prey. I was looking forward to getting back to the Zone, but now I kind of hope the drive takes a long time.

CHAPTER 60: OPHELIA

“*O... phe... lia...*”

I wake with a start and sit up amid the soft furs and blankets of the nest. The room is dark, the air warm and close. My five alpha mates are sleeping in a protective circle around me, and the deep rumble of the snoring vibrates soothingly in my center. Their combined scent is comforting too, like a security blanket. I sit for a moment, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness as my pulse gradually settles back to a normal rate.

It was Seraph’s voice that woke me. That’s been happening a lot over the past three months, ever since we returned from the city hive. Sometimes I dream about him too. I thought the dreams might slowly fade with the passage of time, but they have only grown more vivid. And more heartbreaking when I wake up and remember that he’s gone.

A tear rolls down my cheek. I don’t bother to wipe it away. I whisper his name to the shadows of the sleeping chamber, like a prayer.

“Seraph.”

I don’t really expect him to reply. I know the sound of his voice is all in my head, a kind of auditory hallucination brought on by my grief and yearning. But still, there’s a small part of me that hopes I will hear him answer me, and it makes it that much more painful when he doesn’t.

Beside me, Aleph snuffles and purrs softly in his sleep.

For a few minutes, I just sit there in the dark, contemplating whether or not to lie back down and try to fall asleep again. I probably should, considering my condition. But experience has taught me that sleep won't come on a night like this.

With a silent sigh, I climb out of the nest.

I walk to the window where my primitive clothes lie folded on a simple table. I get dressed, then I return to the nest and steal a blanket to wrap around my body like a robe. It will be chilly outside at this hour, and there are still plenty of other blankets in the nest to keep my mates comfortable and warm. They won't miss this one.

They will, however, miss me.

Sooner or later, one of them will wake to find me gone, and they will come looking for me, just as they always do. The first few times I snuck away in the night like this, it almost earned me a spanking. My protective mates don't like it when I wander off alone. But the Central Ruins are safe, and gradually they have come to understand that I can't help it. They know the reason why I have to do it.

I slip out of our sleeping chamber and tiptoe down three flights of stairs to the ground floor.

Our dwelling is located very close to the middle of the Central Ruins. I step out into the night and take a few seconds to enjoy the feeling of the cool night air on my face, then I start

walking in the direction of the Chamber of the Source—the Old Source—which is only a few blocks away.

Due to the late hour, the streets are mostly empty, but not entirely. Watch-alphas are out patrolling the ruins. They bow respectfully when they see me. Some of them smile sympathetically. They are used to seeing me up and about at this hour, and I guess they know the reason for it.

Meanwhile, the rest of the tribe is in bed, some of them sleeping, others not. More than once, the sounds of mating reach my ears from the windows above.

I can't help but smile.

For the past three months, things have been good. The Central Ruins still show signs of the Outsider invasion, and I'm sure some of those physical scars will stick around for a long time, reminders of what we have all endured. But so far, the Outsiders have not made any more attempts to invade the Zone. Thanks to the power of the New Source, they basically can't.

However, there have been a few visitors from the Outside. Some of the Outsiders who turned into alphas and omegas found themselves unable to stop thinking about that brief, primal experience. They have come to the Zone seeking more of that feeling. We do not turn them away. Any Outsiders who come to the Zone in peace are accepted into the tribe.

As for the power of the Source, it is Aleph's and my duty to renew it regularly. It is not a difficult duty to fulfill. In fact, we often fulfill it several times a day, even though it's not

necessary to do it anywhere near that often. And of course, my other mates join in as well.

My omega needs are well tended.

I arrive at the outer entrance of the old Synergen headquarters in the heart of the Central Ruins. Before I go inside, I sit down on a large boulder to catch my breath. Even though I've only walked a few blocks, I'm winded. I'm carrying some extra weight around these days.

All that activity with my mates has had its consequences.

Even though I'm only three months pregnant, my belly is already getting pretty large and round. Hannah says it's going to be a big litter. That has me both excited and scared. It's not so much the pain of labor that's got me worried. After everything I've been through, I know I can survive that. I'm more worried about what will come after. Raising a single baby seems hard enough, but a litter? Still, I know I'll do my very best to raise my children right, and I will shower them with love every chance I get. Plus I'll have my mates to help me.

Hannah and the other omegas told me something else surprising about the babies growing inside me. They said there's a pretty good chance they were fathered by all five of my mates. Heteropaternal superfecundation, they called it. Apparently it's a thing that can happen on the Outside too, although out there it's incredibly rare. But here in the Zone it's pretty much the way of things.

I can't wait to finally meet my babies and see how they look like each of their fathers.

I wonder if any of them will look like Seraph.

God.

Before the tears have a chance to overwhelm my eyes, I blink them back, stand up, and walk inside the entrance of the old Synergen building.

I follow the stairs and corridors that are now so familiar to me I could navigate them blindfolded. As I walk, other thoughts drift in and out of my mind. There were so many things we never got to discuss with Seraph. Like how will the Zone go on after Aleph and I are gone?

More than anything though, I just wish I could see him again.

At last, I reach the Chamber. The vast, domed room is not as crowded as it was on that day when I first arrived here with my mates. But it's not empty either. Even though the hour is late, many alphas and omegas have come to this sacred place to meditate and pray. Even though the great, spherical machine no longer emits the Source, it is still an important shrine for the members of the Central Tribe.

I cross the floor to the center of the room. At the base of the old Source machine stands the computer terminal where I first encountered Lily and Hines. It's still running off the power from a few small fuel cells. A tangle of thin cables droops from the side of the terminal and plugs into a metallic orb about the size of a coconut which is lying on a cart nearby.

That's Seraph's brain.

After Seraph died, Lily removed it from his chest cavity. The organic remains of his body were buried before they could start to decompose, but Lily and Hines have tried to repair his machine brain in the hopes of bringing him back. In fact, they've worked tirelessly on that project for the past three months. I know they care about Seraph almost as much as I do. But they've had no luck.

Eventually, we'll have to accept that he's gone for good. I'm just not ready to do that yet.

Even though I know I shouldn't, I walk over to the computer terminal and check the screen. Lily hooked the brain up to the console so that Seraph's brain could communicate, but so far there have been no messages. Still, I can't help having a peek. That's the reason I come here almost every night. I try my best not to get my hopes up, but it's hard not to.

As expected, the screen is blank, aside from the blinking blue cursor.

I let out a long sigh, and this time, tears come with it. Too many of them for me to hold back. I stand there shaking silently until I've gotten it all out, then I take a deep breath and mentally prepare myself to go. Maybe if I hurry, I'll be able to slip back into the nest before my mates even realize I'm gone.

"I miss you, Seraph," I whisper.

As I turn to leave, I realize my plan of sneaking back into bed unnoticed isn't going to work. My alphas are already here

looking for me. All five of them. I stand and watch as they approach. Their faces show no signs of anger, only concern.

Aleph reaches me first. He strokes a stray lock from my face and sets it behind my ear.

“Little mate.”

“I’m sorry. I just... I couldn’t sleep. I was thinking about Seraph again, and...”

I feel the tears welling up inside me, and I cut myself off.

“It’s okay,” Aleph says. “We understand. But next time you should wake us up to come with you, okay?”

The other alphas growl softly and nod in agreement.

“Thank you,” I say. “But sometimes I just like to come here alone, you know? I feel like when I’m by myself I can feel Seraph’s presence. That’s probably silly, but it’s true.”

“It isn’t silly, Ophelia. We understand. But it’s late now, and you need your rest. Come, let us return to our dwelling.”

I nod, and Aleph slides his arm around me. We all start to walk away, but we’ve only made it a few steps when I hear a faint beep from behind. My heart kicks. I spin around and rush back to the computer terminal, frantically scrubbing the tears out of my eyes. There on the monitor is a single short sentence.

>I have missed you too, Ophelia.

“Seraph?”

The five alphas have gathered behind me, craning to look at the screen. The cursor moves, spelling out another line of text.

>I never really left, Ophelia. I have always been with you.

There is a soft hum, like a swarm of bees. The very air itself seems to vibrate with energy.

I turn again, and my heart jumps into my throat. I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. Less than ten feet away, a dark cloud of shadowy energy is gathering out of thin air. It grows larger and denser with every second. The hum becomes stronger, vibrating in the center of my bones. My alphas press in protectively around me. The other alphas and omegas in the Chamber all look on from a distance, muttering in amazement.

There is a flash of lightning and a boom of thunder. The alphas snarl. When my vision clears, a man is standing right in front of us. A tall, muscular man with dark, metallic skin, glowing blue eyes, and a familiar face.

“Seraph!” I shout.

Without a second thought, I run to him and throw my arms around him. His new body is not a hologram. It presses back against me just like solid matter. His own arms wrap around my back and lift me off the ground until my face is level with his.

“Hello, Ophelia.”

Our lips connect in a kiss. This is not one of the pantomimes we've done in the past. It's a real kiss. I can feel his mouth, warm and alive against mine. For a few seconds, that kiss becomes my entire universe, and everything else disappears.

At last, Seraph sets me gently back down on my feet.

“Is this real?” I ask. “I’m not dreaming, am I?”

Seraph smiles and shakes his head. “I assure you, it is very real, Ophelia.”

My five alpha mates move in from the sides to greet their old teacher. They exchange hugs with Seraph and touch his arms as if they can’t believe he’s really back.

“We thought you were gone for good,” I blubber through my pouring tears. “How did you do it, Seraph? How did you come back like this?”

“I told you, Ophelia. I was never gone.” He gestures toward the metal coconut on the cart nearby. “When my electronic brain gave out, I transferred my consciousness into the power of the Source itself. It took me a long time to fully reconstitute myself, but you and Aleph never failed to provide me with the energy I needed for that task. Now, at last, I have finally been able to make myself whole again,” he takes my hand and brings it to his chest. “I have created this new body out of the Source. Millions of little nanites, all working together like cells.”

“That’s amazing.” I throw my arms around him again and press my head to his chest. I can hear his powerful heart drumming inside. “Amazing... oh Seraph, I’m so glad you’re back!”

“And I am glad to *be* back, my omega.”

“We’re all glad,” Marr says, his voice cracking with emotion. “Our pack is whole again.”

Yes. Our pack is whole again. The world is whole again. I feel happier than I can ever remember feeling before in my life. So happy I think I might explode at any moment from sheer joy.

My heart is whole again.

CHAPTER 61: EPILOGUE

I come out of my morning meditation and gradually open my eyes. The details of the physical world intrude once again on my senses, but the intrusion is a welcome one. I am sitting on a simple mat off to one side of the sleeping chamber I share with my mate and my pack. They are gathered in the nest by the other wall, snoring softly in a six-part harmony. Nearby, a large, partitioned crib holds our six sleeping children. The image brings a smile to my face.

Though our dwelling is but a simple one, it has everything we need. Ophelia has decorated it with numerous plants she has found growing around the city. I take a deep breath, enjoying the cool air laced with the fresh aroma of greenery and flowers. The sun is not up yet, and the street outside the window is still dark. I enjoy these quiet moments.

Life is good.

However, the quietude of the morning is short-lived. One of the little ones stirs and cries. She is Mina, a baby omega. I recognize her from the sound of her voice. I stand up and go to comfort the child, but Ophelia is already up. She climbs out of the nest, bleary-eyed, and meets me beside the crib.

“Morning, Seraph,” she says with a drowsy smile. “I think Mina wants me to feed her.”

She lifts the little omega out of the crib and holds her to her breast. After a second, the baby gets a latch on Ophelia’s

nipple and begins to suckle. I watch them and smile.

“What are you smiling about, mister?” Ophelia asks sleepily.

“I enjoy watching you feed our children with your mammary secretions. It is fascinating and pleasing to observe.”

Ophelia chuckles softly. “You’re weird.”

“Am I?”

She blows a stray lock of hair out of her eyes and smiles sweetly. “Yeah. But I wouldn’t have it any other way.” She glances over at the alphas, who are now beginning to stir too. “Besides, it’s not like you’re that much weirder than my other five mates. And the fact that I have six mates is pretty weird in and of itself. In a good way.” She grins. “I guess here in the Zone, weird is normal.”

Weird is normal.

That is a contradiction. But part of human life is learning to embrace contradictions. Though it is a challenge for me, I believe I am making progress in that regard.

Outside, the sun is coming up, and the first light of dawn is now shedding its warm glow over the Central Ruins. I watch Ophelia feeding, and my mind goes back to the day six months ago when the babies were born.

I have experienced many births in the course of my existence. Sometimes I have watched through the eyes of the mother, sometimes through the eyes of the child being born, and sometimes through the eyes of the concerned fathers looking

on. I observed all of these labors in a detached and unemotional way. But not Ophelia's.

I did not fear for my mate. I knew how strong she was, and I knew she was in good hands—Lily acted as midwife and Boreg assisted. Still, it hurt me to see my mate in pain and to hear her cries of agony as she suffered through her labor.

Yet as the babies came out, one by one, my heart swelled with joy and pride. First there was Ester, with a fuzz of reddish hair she inherited from her father, Boreg. Then came Mina, and everyone agreed she was the spitting image of Marr, though as Aleph jokingly pointed out, she didn't have any scars.

“Nor will she ever,” Marr said protectively. “Nor will she ever.”

The twins came next, Belus and Agenor. They are not really twins, of course, as they have four other siblings who were born at the same time. But those two babies look almost identical, and they already seem to have a special connection with each other. Romulus and Remus were their fathers, of course.

The next to last was Enok. He came out as white as alabaster. He carries the special gene which will allow him to one day be a preserver of the Source, just like his parents, Ophelia and Aleph. Other children like him have been born recently too. While my consciousness was still residing within the Source, I made some changes to the way the nanites work. Now, in every generation, a small number of alphas and omegas will be born with the Source power so the Zone can go on forever.

And there was one more child. A very unusual alpha. Though he is perfectly healthy, his skin has a dark, slightly metallic appearance, like blued steel, and his eyes glow faintly with a soft blue light. Well, it's no mystery who his father is.

I have named him Auriel.

These babies are lucky to have such a loving mother and protective fathers. Not to mention their doting grandparents, including the omegas, Lily, Sloane, Hines, and Embla. The latter seems especially determined to spoil them rotten every time she and her mates come to visit the Central Ruins.

As the morning brightens, the other infants begin to stir in the crib. The alphas are fully awake now too. They come over and take the children out of their crib, cradling them in their arms and purring softly.

I am so proud of these alphas. Not long ago, they were my students. Now they are men, warriors, and most importantly, fathers.

It is my hope that they will never have to put their fighting skills to practice ever again. After the warning they sent to the Outsiders, I truly believe there will be no more aggression from beyond the Quarantine Wall.

But I know the alphas will always remain vigilant, just in case.

They are protective beings.

And so am I.

I slide my arm around Ophelia's shoulder as she continues to nurse Mina, and I lean down to nuzzle my mate. Her omega

scent fills my senses. She will be entering estrus again soon.

The alphas gather around with the other children in their arms. Ophelia smiles.

In the past, I would often send my consciousness into the minds of others so I could directly observe their thoughts and emotions. Lately, I have been weaning myself off that habit. I understand that the others find it annoying and intrusive. Still, every now and again, I cannot help taking a very quick peek into Ophelia's mind, just to make sure she really is happy. This morning, the smile on her face makes that unnecessary.

My mate is happy. Therefore, I am happy.

A year ago, when I materialized this new body out of the Source, Ophelia asked me if she was dreaming. I told her she was not. However, sometimes I can't help but wonder. This existence is so full of beauty and joy, I sometimes think it might be a dream after all. A very good dream.

But I try not to spend too much time pondering such things.

I prefer instead to focus on the here and now, on all the little details that make life worth living. Like the way the sun turns the ruins to gold when it rises. Or the way the warm breeze stirs the vines outside our dwelling. The sound of a baby's laughter. The scent of an omega in heat. And the taste of her lips whenever we kiss.

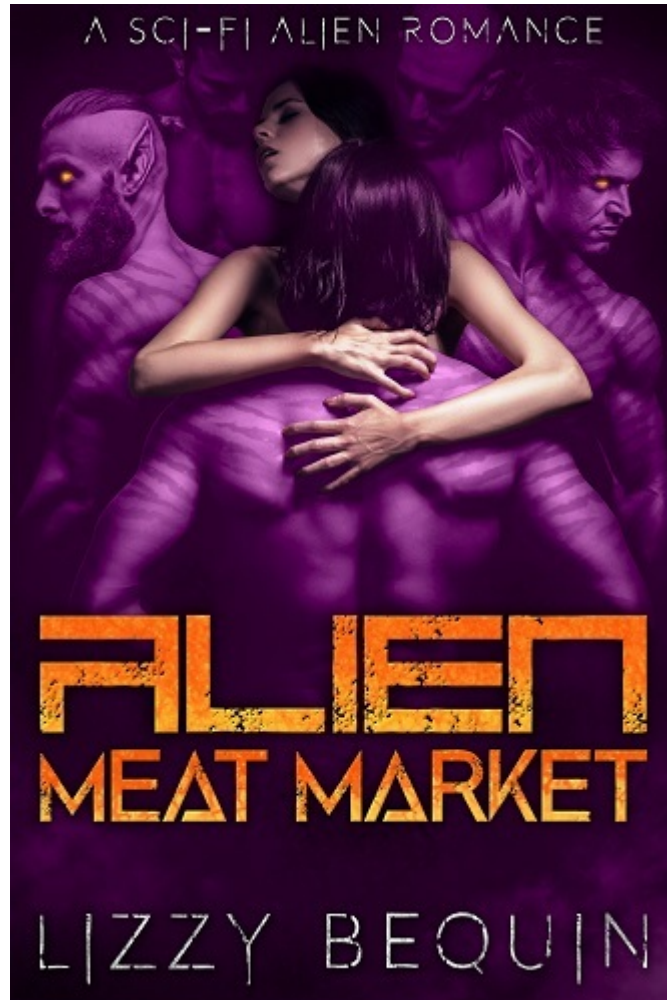
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About Lizzy B.

Hailing from the Deep South, Lizzy Bequin enjoys writing dark and steamy romance stories that explore the primal side of love and lust. When she's not writing or reading, Lizzy is serving the whims of the two evil feline overlords who rule her home.

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Quarantine Omega

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