
FIRST
ALI HAZELWOOD


FIRST

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First

After the End
Book 1

Ali Hazelwood



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Prologue

Excerpt from *The Alpha and the Omega: Historiographical and Sociological Considerations*
Written by: Author Unknown

Alphas and Omegas are the building blocks of life on Earth. The beginning and the end of the DNA strands that encode society. Upon meeting a new individual, we notice their designation first, whether through scent and pheromones, physical appearance, or other identifiers. (For instance, there is evidence of old cultures in which Omegas were required to wear garb that denoted their status. See Hollingsworth's treatise for a more thorough exploration of the topic.) Determining a person's designation will lead to assumptions about their life, preferences, and future.

A common misconception is that Omegas were created for the rest, refreshment, and pleasure of Alphas. In my opinion, this is highly reductive. The Alpha temperament is aggressive and dominant; therefore, in today's highly militarized society, Alphas tend to occupy positions of command. These traits are complemented by the Omega nature, which is contemplative and peacekeeping and effectively knits people together.

Communities are fastened by Omegas but protected by Alphas. Does that mean Omegas are inferior? This is a matter of constant debate, one unlikely to be settled anytime soon. Where one falls on the debate is often informed by their view on a controversial and not widely accepted notion: it did not use to be this way.

Ancient Terran societies were technology rich and well-documented, but most records were lost in the Great Natural Catastrophes and then again in the Artificial Intelligence Disruption. Therefore, historians have been unable to agree that several millennia ago, all humans were Betas, that the neurochemical variations that produce other designations did not take place, and that the rhythm of life was not dictated by the ebbs and flows of mating cycles, such as the ruts of Alphas and the heats of Omegas.

This is a radical notion, and even those who advocate for the Default Beta Hypothesis do not have conclusive evidence for it. Some (see Hollingsworth, again) argue that it was caused by a random genetic mutation that affects development at the embryonic stage (although the Alpha/Beta/Omega trimorphism only appears once a person reaches their late teens, following the process of presentation). Others (see Anand) believe that when scientists locked themselves in laboratories to find a cure for the diseases decimating the dwindling population, they created a microorganism that changed the entire organic makeup of the species.

Regardless of their origins, designations tend to be constant: Betas of all genders are sexually neutral; Omegas of all genders can be identified by their scenting glands and are highly fertile; Alphas respond to Omegas both hormonally and anatomically. Betas and Alphas each make up a little over forty percent of the population, with the remaining fifteen percent being Omegas. Given the relative scarcity of the latter, it's not surprising that Beta/Omega pairings are fairly rare and that many Alphas raise objections to them.

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Chapter 1

THE GENERAL

Gabriel

My sword slides out of the Alpha's abdomen with a lurid squelching sound.

Around me, the battle swirls on, plasma blades clashing against metal armors, bones shattering, shrieks of pain swallowing grunts of effort, but I ignore it. My fighters know how to defend themselves from a surprise attack, even one in which they are vastly outnumbered—if they didn't, they would have fucked off to Valhalla a long time ago. So I leave them to their fun and crouch to inspect the lifeless body crumpled on the stone floor of my operations suite, where a viscous blood puddle is already seeping into the grout lines.

I am flooded with instant irritation. At myself. "Fucking hell," I mutter.

"Everything okay, General?" Martia, my deputy commander, asks, winded. She quickly finishes strangulating the Alpha man wedged under her armpit, drops him, then wipes a sweaty blond curl off her forehead. "Did they get you?" She pouts. "Do we have a boo-boo on our hands, Gabriel?"

I grunt my displeasure. "I fucked up."

Her eyebrow lifts, and she glances around the room. The fight has wound down, and the ground is now strewn with the corpses of Alpha soldiers. "Killer's remorse? That's new."

“I meant I should have just broken their necks. Goddamn bleeders.” Now the stench of iron will linger around the suite for days, and this is where I take all my fucking meetings. In petty retaliation, I wipe my sword on the head of the closest body—when it comes to soaking up blood, there is nothing as dependable as hair—and once the memory-alloy blade has returned to its more compact original form, I sheath it in my back scabbard, then ask, “Who the fuck were these assholes, and how did they get into a high-security zone?”

It’s a fair question, especially considering that the raid interrupted a private council between me and three of my closest aides, one I called to discuss the latest string of increasingly bold attacks. And yet, an uncertain silence stretches across the bloody room, until Martia starts talking in her report voice. “It was ten Alphas—nice round number, and twice as many as the last group, which is…flattering, maybe? Six of them men. They barged in and headed straight for you, General, so we can easily infer who they were after. I believe you and I each killed four. Ivar got one—”

“Two,” Ivar corrects her, looking profoundly bored. My brother, who also serves as my chief political advisor, may be a skilled fighter out of necessity, but he finds physical violence beneath him. Deviousness, scheming, Machiavellian plots—that’s how he prefers to take care of his enemies. Typical Omega.

“My apologies. Ivar got *two*, which leaves none for Bastian. Bastian, did you try to get any, or did you just quietly step out of the way to avoid blood spatters?”

“This is a new shirt,” Bastian says primly.

“I know it is, because I *bought* it for you. So Bastian got zero, and—”

“Thank you, Martia,” I interrupt. “I am delighted to discover that you are able to count to ten. *Who are they* is what I asked.”

“Right. And I ignored that part of the question because, just like every other time, the attackers are wearing cheap, unmarked armors and using

low-grade weapons anyone could buy on the black market."

"Next time, *I don't know* will suffice."

Martia snorts and mumbles something unflattering about my ability to deal with uncertainty, and I consider forgetting that she's my oldest and most loyal friend and reminding her of our respective ranks.

But Bastian interjects: "This might be a clue." With the tip of his still-immaculate leather boot, he rolls the corpse of an Alpha woman. On the inside of her arm is a shapeless brand, as though someone meant to mangle the flesh to hide the mark underneath. A tattoo, possibly. "Just big enough to cover the Larsen symbol," he muses.

Larsen.

I've been wondering when that name would come up.

"And as for how they made it past the retinal scans, Gabe, as an expert in military strategy," Ivar says drily, "I think this may have something to do with it." He bends to pick something up, then lifts his arm, showing something amorphous and red-smeared.

Bastian gags in revulsion. Martia's muttered "*fuck*" echoes through the room. That's when I realize that Ivar is fisting a clump of light-brown curls, still attached to a head. A gaping-mouthed, severed head. Open-eyed, too, because the lids have been ripped off. Yet a quick glance around the room tells me that none of the bodies have been decapitated.

"Who the fuck…?" I step closer to the head. The incision starts at the base of the throat—a clean, almost-surgical job, fresh enough that bloating and decomposition have yet to set in and the features remain recognizable.

And I *do* recognize them. They belong to a young Beta soldier assigned to guarding the entrance to the tactical wing. In the three years since I first became general of the northernmost stronghold, I have walked past him hundreds of times. If I ever knew his name, I no longer recall it. I do, however, remember that his rank-insignia ceremony happened just a few weeks ago. Both his parents were present, and they were so proud of him

for becoming a member of the engineering army, they were weepy through the whole service.

A couple of hours from now, someone will show up to their quarters to inform them that their son is dead.

I close my eyes. Take a deep inhale, trying to stave off the anger. When it sweeps me anyway, I take a step closer to Ivar and take it out on him. Through gritted teeth, I say, “Two weeks ago, after they sabotaged the shields and four engineers were killed trying to patch them up, I told you that if we didn’t act soon, something like this would happen—”

“And I stand by everything I said back then, Gabriel.” Ivar’s eyes hold mine steadily. My older brother is my right hand. The most brilliant mind out of the tens of thousands of people who seek refuge from the elements in this stronghold. It’s thanks only to his strategies that common-born organizations like the military—and I, as its general—currently hold more political power than ever in recent memory.

At the moment, though, I don’t give a fuck. “Seven attacks, Ivar. And that’s only from the start of the year. At least two dozen victims. Two weeks ago, I petitioned the council to bring House Larsen to justice—”

“And I told you not to, because I know how the council thinks. They will never side with the military over the high-born, not unless we have incontrovertible evidence that House Larsen is behind these illegal strikes. If we overplay our hand and act without solid proof, all noble houses will see it as overreach and rally behind Lord Larsen—”

Before my brother can finish his speech, I pin him to the wall and unsheathe the dagger at my hip, pressing it to his throat. The outburst immediately brightens my mood. Ivar might hate violence, but sometimes it’s just what a situation needs. *Typical Alpha,* he’d say. And he’d be right.

“Gabriel, I’m simply telling you—”

“I know. Please, continue *telling* me why I have to let these bastards come into *my* home, kill *my* people—”

“Gabriel,” Martia says, wrapping a hand around my shoulder. “Ivar is right. None of this is his fault.”

I ignore her, because I’m not done. “During the last Low Tide, they were directly responsible for the death of seven of my best mechanics, some of whom had been doing their job for longer than I’ve been alive, and one of them was our uncle.”

“General Agard.” Martia’s switch to my title is a very unsubtle reminder that my days of dealing with issues however the hell I please are over. I’m no longer a recruit who enlisted because the military was the only way to prevent my family’s starvation. I run the fucking thing now. “Can you be reasonable for a goddamn second?”

“Not exactly what I’m known for,” I say, eyes on Ivar. But he is remarkably unconcerned for someone who’s a single deep breath from a slit throat. I take a step back from him and return my dagger to its sheath, just in time for the automatic doors to slide open. A dozen soldiers barge into the room, ready to protect us from an attack that was over about five minutes ago.

“Better late than never,” I bark, exchanging an eye-roll with my brother.

Excuses and apologies are offered by one of the commanders, followed by a detailed account of the victims killed by the attackers before they reached the operations suite. While Martia deals with them and oversees the removal of the bodies, I take a few steps to the side and inhale deep breaths, trying to subdue the roar in my ears—the one that snarls at me to clutch the hilt of my sword and go to House Larsen’s headquarters and run my blade through each loathsome member. Instead, I lay my palm against one of the west-facing portholes, letting the cool carbo-glass ground me.

The windows are as tall as two men, thick-framed and imposing. During Lows, sunlight streams through them and across the raw stone and steel of the stronghold’s floors. But the tide rose weeks ago and has lingered several feet above the highest cliff in the Northern Lands ever since. All that can be

seen beyond the glass are the fish swimming by, disturbing the hazy blue patterns filtering inside, casting shadows over my bloodstained round table.

We haven't seen the sun in nearly two months. The lamps embedded in the wall's recesses provide the illumination we need, but the artificial light radiating from them is dim and makes my skin itch. When I was a child, a High this long was unheard of. Now it's the norm.

And that is why commoners like me finally have a seat at the table. When every human life is at the mercy of the tides, power is the means to protect oneself and one's own. In the Northern Lands, safety can only be found within the stronghold. It has flood-proof structures sealing the stone from the ingress of salt water and its corrosion: watertight gates and small domes, prediction instrumentation, deluge detection, air filtration, and energy storage apparatuses. The engineering soldiers of the military are the only ones who can guarantee the integrity and upkeep of these systems. We are all that stands between humans of the north and certain death, and our political rise is warranted.

The noble houses, however, are having trouble coming to terms with that. Their riches may be centuries old, but as the sea becomes more hostile, their financial power will continue to ebb.

When I became general, my first request to the Council of Elders was simple: to tax the Houses and use a reasonable portion of their wealth to fund the upkeep and renovations of the stronghold. The council refused me —unsurprising, considering that most of its members are noble-born. I was ready to take what my military engineers needed by force, but Ivar suggested we bide our time, and he was right. Months later, following a steep infrastructure decline, discontent among the commoners was at its peak. When we re-proposed our tax reform, the council had no choice but to do as we asked.

That's when the Houses realized that their loss of relevance was unavoidable. Their responses ranged from reluctant acceptance to open

animosity, but one by one, they had to acknowledge that the military was their only hope for survival, and eventually, they all submitted to the council's decision and began cooperating with us.

All except for the oldest and most prosperous: House Larsen.

They know, just as well as I do, that what's at stake is the future of the stronghold. What they want is to be in charge and not cede even an ounce of their privilege. What *I* want is to create a place where commoners have the same rights as the aristocracy. Their attempts at sabotaging me and my people to maintain the status quo have been brazen, but I've followed my brother's advice and exercised restraint—not exactly my most shining quality. I told myself that Ivar knows how to exploit a situation to achieve the optimal outcome. His goal, like mine, is to reduce resource inequality within the population and to put a stop to centuries of unchecked greed. He once again told me to bide my time, and I once again agreed.

But I'm all out of fucking patience.

I turn away from the windows to find that the bodies have been dragged away. Feeling more grounded, I join Martia, Bastien, and Ivar at the table.

"All this blood will be a bitch to clean up," Bastian says archly.

Martia's eyebrow lifts. "Says the guy whose job is cleaning up."

"I am the *seneschal* of the general. My job is to see to his household and its affairs, not to scrub blood and cerebral matter from the floors. Not to mention, the disposal of the bodies—"

"Quiet," I say, which has Martia letting out a silent giggle and Bastian's already-thin lips becoming invisible.

"Yes, feel free to keep the newly mated routine for your alone time," Ivar adds. "Back to the matter at hand."

"Which is only a *matter* because you won't let me kill people," I point out darkly.

"You are no longer a low-ranking engineer, Gabriel. The general of the military reports to the council, and his behavior must be beyond reproach.

Which, I would like to remind you, is a *good* thing. Chaos and opacity would create room for dictatorship, which is exactly what nobles like Lord Larsen want. You said it yourself that as general you would protect systems of checks and balances that—”

“I’ve changed my fucking mind.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“And yet, I am going to fucking kill Lord Larsen, and you can’t stop me.” I shrug, and Ivar sighs.

“If you strike now, without proof, you will be perceived as an unstable and volatile general. Killing more people is not going to solve anything.”

I scoff. “Killing people is always going to solve *something*.”

“Said like a fucking Alpha. Societal mores are important—”

“Said like a fucking Omega.”

We exchange small amused smiles, almost against our will. “Gabriel, if you retaliate outside the law—”

“Then find me a legal way. Work your fucking magic. Advise me. Do your fucking job.”

“I have been. I’ve been considering strategically sound plans that won’t lead to the council censuring you and won’t alienate the public. But none of them are surefire, and you’re not going to like the one with the quickest time frame—”

“Do you think I *like* twiddling my thumbs while some piece of shit who’s never even touched a poly-welder kills my people? Out with it.”

My brother winces, clearly already regretting what he mentioned. But after a pained glance at the others, he uses the heel of his hand to clean a few bloody droplets from the holographic console at the center of the table. As the machine whirs to life, he asks, “Did you know that Lennart Larsen’s mating ceremony is taking place in two days?”

I did not, but I still nod. “We strike while they’re all gathered to celebrate and wipe out the whole House. Great idea.”

“For fuck’s sake—no.” Ivar massages his forehead. “Do you even know who Lennart is?”

“You know I don’t make room for that shit.” It’s not wholly true. I remember the names and faces of every person I’ve served with since the day I lied about my age and joined the engineering corps. But that was before my balls even dropped, which gave me little time to spend on anything that wasn’t learning how to repair the water-filtering systems—and to fend off a semiaquatic reptile three times my size *while* I did that. Being a soldier means cutting through problems with my sword. Weighing options, spinning webs, keeping track of family trees and contingencies and liabilities—that’s Ivar’s duty.

“Lennart is the third son of Lord and Lady Larsen.” He fusses with the controls and pulls up the holo projection of a young smiling man who is probably around my age but looks considerably younger. Light-brown hair. Sloped jaw. A curl falls on his wide forehead. “Fourth child overall.”

“Good-looking,” Bastian comments, which has Martia glaring at him—undoubtedly the desired outcome.

“He’s not the heir, is he?” I ask.

“No,” Ivar says. “Not even the spare. Lennart is a Beta.”

“I didn’t know the Larsens came in non-Alpha,” muses Bastian.

Martia snorts. “Moment of silence for what it must have been like, growing up in that House as a Beta.”

“Yeah.” Ivar shrugs. “Well, I doubt his father ever paid much attention to him, but I hear he’s a mama’s boy.”

“And all this matters because…?” I ask, growing impatient.

“Because in times such as ours, everything matters.” Ivar’s hand wraps around my shoulder. “The wise see opportunity in the ordinary.”

“Sure they do. But you’re clearly not going to let me crash his mating ceremony and turn it into a funeral, so feel free to relay to Lennart and his lucky mate my indifference to his upcoming nuptials.” I could not care less.

I do, however, feel a passing tinge of contempt toward whoever would willingly attach themselves to a House so morally bankrupt.

“The lucky mate is Kuznetsov’s daughter.”

That gives me pause.

Sigur Kuznetsov was one of the Northern Lands’ chief engineers, a hero always on the front line when it came to patching up breaches in the anti-flood systems. A selfless man with an impeccable track record, someone who risked his life to protect people on all levels of the stronghold. I worked in his unit when I was in my teens and had nothing but respect for him. I considered him a mentor, and his premature death was a terrible loss for the military. His daughter, however…

Ivar pulls up her holo: it’s low quality, but I can make out a serious girl with freckles and hair that cascades down her back like dark gold. Her eyes are the same dark green as Kuznetsov’s. The heart-shaped face reminds me of him, too. I don’t think she and I ever met in person, but I’m familiar with her. And I wish she would go fuck herself.

“That’s the bitch who didn’t let us attend Kuznetsov’s funeral rites?” Martia asks.

“She is,” I confirm, not bothering to conceal my anger.

“Her name is Sofia Kuznetsov. And there is something highly curious about the union.” Ivar’s fingers drum against the stone table. “For instance, that I didn’t know about this mating until a handful of days ago.”

“Despite the fact that it’s your life’s mission to know shit.” Martia frowns. “Wait. Don’t the Great Houses usually put out fancy notices?”

He nods. “But not this time. The Larsens are keeping news of this mating locked tight. I might never have learned about it if it hadn’t been for two Larsen servants getting high on snail venom with one of my informants.”

“If she’s Kuznetsov’s daughter, she’s a commoner,” Bastian points out. “Maybe they’re embarrassed of her status.”

Ivar shakes his head. “Her mother was a lady. A Beta from House Kellen.”

“Right,” Martia says. “I remember hearing that her marriage to Kuznetsov was a scandal, because she was supposed to marry someone from House Durand. She died a long time ago, right?”

Ivar nods again. “She died nearly twenty years ago, leaving her mate alone to take care of their infant daughter. Who, unlike her Beta parents, went on to present as an Omega.”

Martia laughs once, bitter. “There you have it. If Lennart Larsen, a Beta, is about to mate Kuznetsov’s girl, who is an Omega… they’re not going to want the people to know.” The scorn in her tone is not because of bigotry but simple pragmatism: given the relative rarity of Omegas, losing one to a Beta is going to piss off every unmated Alpha, even more so if the Omega is of noble descent. Not to mention that, for the Great Houses, anything outside the written path—Alphas with Omegas, Betas with other Betas—is rarely considered acceptable.

“Okay,” I say. “The Larsens are becoming better, less judgmental people. I’m still not buying them a fucking mating gift.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Ivar tells me. “The girl is an Omega, but she’s a cold one.”

A deep silence falls. Because cold Omegas are seen as a tragedy. They usually exhibit all the physical characteristics of Omegas, but never manage to fully present as one. *The parts are there, but they malfunctioned*, I once heard someone cruelly put it.

Personally, I’ve always thought it was bullshit, the way cold Omegas are pitied by everyone in society. I’m certain that their condition doesn’t stop them from living fulfilling lives. But to the nobles, who often see Omegas as breeding machines, they are nothing but aberrations. Which is why I say, “There’s no fucking way Lord Larsen is letting his son mate her.”

“Not if Lennart were his successor,” Ivar concurs. “But Lennart is the youngest, and a Beta. This is a love match. He and the girl grew up together. Same age. Best friends. To Lennart’s credit, he’s not as idle as he could be. He works as a healer, and so does his future mate.”

Whatever sympathy I felt for the Omega vanishes as I remember her actions following her father’s death. “Good for them. Clearly, the girl and the Larsen brat deserve each other. Can we please circle back to me cutting off the heads of the entire House…?” I slowly drift off.

Because Bastien, my usually dour, humorless seneschal, is laughing. And laughing. And *laughing*. It’s a strange, unsettling sight, especially in a room painted with blood.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I ask flatly.

“Oh, nothing. I just realized where Ivar is going.”

Martia and I exchange a confused glance. Cleary, we’re not keeping up with the Omegas and their scheming.

“Will you please enlighten us, too?” she asks, as annoyed as I feel.

“There is a law. An archaic, rarely invoked law. One that dates a while back, but it doesn’t matter,” Ivar says. “You’re not going to like it, Gabriel.” A pause. “But you’ll say yes anyway.”

My eyebrow lifts. “And why’s that?”

He leans forward with a grin. His incisors gleam, predatory. “Because this is how we get rid of Lord Larsen once and for all.”

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Chapter 2

THE HEALER

Sofia

It's hard to believe Earth wasn't always like this. And yet, unless the few writings that survived the Great Catastrophes are full of lies, this is the worst possible time to live on this planet.

As a human, that is. Fish are having a fantastic time.

It is said that once upon a time, thousands of years ago, the tides could be predicted with precision, even several years in advance. That even in the most extreme conditions, the water would not rise higher than fifty feet. That dwellings—villages, towns, *cities*—were constructed in places that would never be submerged, and dry soil could be taken for granted. A constant presence. Solid ground.

Now everything is rootless, slippery, ever-shifting.

My mother died when I was still too young to make memories of her, but she enjoyed history. She left behind several holos tucked neatly in a metal box with the House Kellen crest embossed on it. In the vids, I saw more kinds of plants than my imagination could ever conjure, many of which died because they couldn't tolerate the salt water. Not just mangroves and seagrasses, glassworts and salt marshes. Not forests made exclusively of kelp, or stone walls coated in slick, slimy algae and latching barnacles.

Centuries ago, the trees would stand high and proudly reach for the sky. They didn't need to twist and gnarl toward the ground to avoid being swept

away by the next current. And the rhythm of their lives—the rhythm of *everyone's* lives—used to be measured not by the tides but by the light of the sun.

I know that technically hasn't changed. I'm well-read, and my father was a man of science: I *know* the sun appears in the east every morning and sets in the west every evening, that a day is made of twenty-four hours, and that calendars and watches and artificial illumination work hard to keep its time. Still, I've always found the idea of a *day* meaningless. After all, light travels poorly through water, and it rarely reaches us in any significant way when we're submerged. It's the tides that always dictate my sleep, my work, my moods. The Highs mean being stuck inside with recycled, over-filtered, dry air in too-close quarters. The Lows are precious adventures, the scent of salt air, the unique combination of cool breeze and sun against my skin.

The Lows are a good time, but they never last long.

In the past century, engineers have tried to use ancient technologies to prolong them: dams. Submarines. All kinds of watercrafts. But after the melting of the glaciers and the increased cyclones, after the pillaging of the seabed and the shift of the tectonic plates that joined the earth, the ocean is not what it once was. The currents are too strong and unpredictable, and the only hope of survival when they rise is to retreat within the stronghold and pray that the All-father won't let the water-tight sealing system fail.

According to the histories, humanity once tried to understand and change the world by which it was surrounded. It looked with curiosity at its place in the universe, pondered ways to better itself as a species, sought to travel and explore new worlds.

Now it would be great if we just survived till the next Low.

"Everything okay, Healer Kuznetsov?" Ulf asks, pulling me out of my reverie. "You've been staring out the windows and preparing those bandages for a while."

“Yes. Yes, sorry.” With an apologetic smile, I make myself focus on his weathered face. “I’ll have you patched up in no time.”

Ulf is a soldier who has been in the engineering corps for a long time, but I’ve never treated him before. I’ve been seeing him more often since General Agard announced the start of *efforts to ensure that the stronghold be safe at all times and able to humanely accommodate people at all social strata*. Ulf, like most engineers, is enjoying this new mandate and finally getting credit for his hard work. I don’t blame him one bit—in fact, I know that if Dad were still here, they’d celebrate together. Probably get injured together, too.

Hence my presence here.

A few feet away from us, his fellow soldiers are resealing one of the portholes after finding early signs of stress fractures. Not quite a code red, but a situation urgent enough to warrant the dispatch of an early dedicated team here to the north wing.

I wasn’t supposed to come in today. But the stronghold spans miles, so it can take a while to reach the infirmary, and another one of General Agard’s rules is that a healer should always be on site. Since most of my colleagues are currently attending the expansion efforts by the south tower, I volunteered to go into the field.

And *then* I remembered what today is.

I better not get caught, or I’m screwed.

“Something on your mind, kid?” Ulf asks.

I don’t bother telling him that at twenty-two, I haven’t been a kid for a while. “No, no. I always get distracted when Highs go on so long.”

He snorts. “Don’t I know it. And it’s getting worse. My mother said that when she was born, the water wouldn’t even reach the peak of the east tower. These days, it submerges the *south* tower by several feet. Then again, my mother also kept insisting that unsubmerged dry land still existed. Other

continents, she called them. Deep in the south. Lots of odd notions in that woman's head."

I hold back an eye-roll. I had this very argument with Lennart last week, and his reaction was as condescending as Ulf's.

"It's not *that* odd. Some even think that there might be other strongholds like ours, with even more people than in this one." I gently remove the army-blue Kevlar cuisse from his thigh, setting it to the side and uncovering the thin engineering suit underneath. "Isn't it nice, the idea that we might not be alone?" That if we're not happy here, in this stronghold, there might be another place where we could be?

"Hard to believe, with Highs like these… The last one rose so suddenly, it destroyed lots of the expansion progress we made during the previous Low." He sighs, then points at the gash in his leg, just under where his cuisse ended. "And now I'm injured, wasting precious time."

"You're doing great," I reassure him. "I can coat your wound in collagen, but first I'll need to use acid disinfectant on it. We are so low on anesthetic, we've been ordered to ration it for major surgery until we can collect more raw materials during the next Low. The other option is less painful, and it involves tape suturing your cut, but it'll take much longer to heal—"

"I'll take the collagen. I can handle it."

I bow my head to hide a smile. I've been taking care of the engineering soldiers for nearly ten years, first as an apprentice, then as a healer. Not one has ever selected the second option. "Okay, then. I'm going to restrain you, just to make sure that you don't accidentally move during treatment. That'll minimize the scar tissue, and—"

"No need, no need."

Oh, no. He's one of *those*. "Sir, I would prefer if—"

"I'm not new here, kid. I've had way worse wounds. I need no restraints."

I swallow a sigh at the predictable stubbornness of old Alphas. Normally, I would push back and force a harness on him. But none of my colleagues are around, and I know better than to pick a fight with an Alpha when we're alone. "Very well," I say, leaning forward to see to his injury.

He flinches back before I even touch him, eyes abruptly widening in shock. I pretend not to notice because this is a recurring experience for me—an Alpha getting a whiff of my scent and realizing that I'm an Omega.

It's the reason I avoid getting close to people I don't know well as much as possible. Everything about me screams *Beta*, and I'm happy to let them keep assuming that's what I am. After all, I'm tall, and my muscles are wiry. My smell is faint. I don't exude the kind of soft, sensual appeal that elicits an Alpha's protective instinct. Simply put, I'm not like an Omega should be.

And there's a reason for that.

Unfortunately, I can pinpoint the exact moment Ulf realizes the nature of my condition, because his face fills with something that looks too much like pity for my taste, and he no longer meets my eyes.

I *hate* it. So much so, I hide it with a quick smile. "Ready?" I ask, digging into the back of my brown cotton uniform pants. I find my pocketknife and use it to further cut open the fabric of his trousers. "I'm going to pour the disinfectant. It's going to hurt."

"You said that already. And as I told you—"

It all happens really fast, and for the most part, I'm proud of how I react. Ulf may have had *way worse*, but the second the acid pools inside the wound, he screams as though I'm squeezing his bowels out of his body. His leg reflexively extends into a kick, but I fully expected it and easily dodge the hit.

What I did *not* expect is the punch. His fist makes contact with my eye with so much force, I drop backward, first onto my ass, then belly up, the cold stone floor hard against the back of my head.

Well, I think, mortified. *That was a first.*

"I am sorry— Healer? *Healer?* I don't know what came over me! I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay. It doesn't hurt," I lie, deeply annoyed at myself for allowing it to happen.

The man's apologies continue, but I ignore him in favor of lying there for a minute, taking stock of my life. When I finally open my eyes, a familiar face is scowling down at me.

"Oh. Hey."

"Sof," says Lara Larsen. My closest friend. My soon-to-be sister-in-law. "What the hell are you doing on a welding site, today of all days?"

"I'm okay. Thanks for asking, though."

"Please. I beg you. Tell me you're not going to show up to *your own mating ceremony* with a black eye."

I can't tell her that. So I stare up at the ceiling and choose silence.

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Chapter 3

THE JITTERS

Sofia

The elevator speeds quickly toward the residential floors—so fast, I give up trying to get a glimpse through the portholes.

Lara buries her face in her hands. “My brother is going to kill me.”

I pat her shoulder. “Lennart is too lazy for murder, or you’d be long dead.”

“He told me. Yesterday. Last week. He said, ‘Don’t let her go to work on the day of the ceremony.’ And I said, ‘Pfft.’”

“Pfft?”

“Yes. Pfft. As in, *pfft, she’s not going to work. Pfft, why would you even think that?*”

Say what you want about my relationship with Lennart, but he does know me very well. “It was an unpremeditated crime. And a routine shift. If the guy hadn’t—”

“Oh, shut up. This is going to swell.” She lurches closer to poke at my still-pounding cheekbone, and I jump backward with a pained yelp, cradling the side of my face.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s already bruising. Lovely. Just lovely.”

“It’s just a mating ceremony, Lara.”

“It’s your mating ceremony, and it’s in three hours, Sof. Lennart is going to be so pissed. Mom will never speak to me again. Dad won’t either, but that’s *already* the case.”

I doubt Lennart would care if I showed up with kelp smeared on my teeth. As for Lady Sienna Larsen, Lara’s Omega mother, she may belong to the kind of family that prizes composure and appearances above most things, but she’s never asked me to be anything more than what I am. As lacking as that may be.

The elevator shifts and begins to move horizontally, transporting us to the upper floor of the eastern wing, where House Larsen’s quarters are located. Nobles get the prized upper floors, and the common born take what’s left—the poorer they are, the lower. Sunlight is precious and sought after, and it never filters below Level Fifteen, not even during the deepest of Lows.

My mother, a Beta daughter of House Kellen, was raised on the highest floor of the south wing. She would have happily stayed there, I’m sure, if she hadn’t met and fallen in love with my father, who was an engineering soldier. After her parents disowned her for the crime against her lineage, she moved to one of the middle levels with Dad and lived there until her premature death. I grew up in those same quarters and always felt grateful for my circumstances. It wasn’t until the first time Lennart visited me, back when we were teens, that it occurred to me to be self-conscious about my origins. I remember him squinting at my small room, taking in the stacks of holos and the way the bed was not quite long enough for my legs. He let out a small laugh, then asked, “No, really. Where do you live?”

My cheeks burned for weeks, not with embarrassment but with anger at his entitlement. I didn’t speak to him for days, not until he groveled for his words. It was only much later, when he invited me to call on House Larsen, that I realized the kind of luxury into which he had been born.

It was the same wealth my mother gave up for Dad. I sometimes wonder whether she struggled with adjusting to the modest life he could provide, but every time my father talked about her, the depth of his love was so obvious, I just know she never regretted her choices. If true love were a possibility for me, I would do the same. Without hesitation.

After Dad died, Lady Larsen insisted that an unmated Omega—*yes, Sofia, even a cold Omega such as you*—should not live alone. I've been staying in House Larsen's quarters for nearly two years now, and even after all this time, I feel intimidated by the rows of guards clad in Larsen-red armors who stare right ahead as I step out of the elevators.

It's tricky, trying not to be too wide-eyed by the artifacts the Larsens possess. I cannot help marveling at the opulence of the corridors, the mosaics lining the high-vaulted ceilings, the intricate tapestries that hang from the walls, depicting the triumphs of the House. The sight is always majestic, especially on days like today, when a few pockets of sunbeams manage to penetrate through the water. Majestic, yet not wholly pleasant.

But I need to get over it. After the mating ceremony, this will be my home forever. I will become an official member of House Larsen and move out from the staff room next to Lady Larsen's and into Lennart's quarters. The thought should fill me with warmth. And maybe it does, even as I shiver under the cooling vents.

"Where's Lennart?" I ask.

Lara glances away. Keeps walking to her chambers. "Meeting with Father, maybe?"

"Oh. That's odd."

"Yeah. A bit. Maybe something happened."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Father doesn't share with the likes of me. You know how he feels about women—even Alpha women."

"But?"

I know Lara well enough to make out the weight in her voice. The look she gives me all but confirms it. We both greet the guard standing outside her private quarters, but even after we're inside, a shut door between us and the rest of the stronghold, her voice lowers. "When I walked out of the wing yesterday, someone was cleaning up."

"Cleaning up what?"

"Blood. A lot of blood."

I freeze, instantly alarmed. "Like someone was injured? Or intruders were killed?"

She shakes her head. "I heard the servants gossiping. They said someone dragged a body across the stone floor and deposited it at the entrance."

My heart stops. "Is this about—"

"Probably." She grimaces. "The general has had it out for our family ever since he was elected. You know what he did to my brother."

Her voice holds a tenderness she rarely has for Lennart or even Gunner. Like the rest of their family, her unfettered adoration belongs to Gustav—Lord Larsen's middle son.

Whom General Agard killed about two years ago.

Somehow, *that* misdeed went unpunished, clear proof that the law doesn't apply to everyone. All I've managed to glean from snippets of conversations is that Gustav and the general, both Alphas, wanted an Omega. The Omega chose Gustav, and the general's refusal to accept the rejection led to a fight and Gustav's death.

It doesn't sound too far-fetched. I knew Gustav as a brash, impulsive, aggressive man who always made me regret entering any room he was in, but none of it made him deserving of being killed at twenty-four. When I asked Lennart why Lord Larsen hadn't petitioned the council to have the general deposed, he had no answer for me.

But I think I know why. I think it has to do with Gabriel Agard and the way he managed the impossible. Most commoners can only advance so far in the army, but he was quickly promoted through the ranks. The allegiances he built within the military somehow allowed him to convince the lieutenant generals to elect him as their leader at the unprecedented age of twenty-five. The same assembly of lieutenant generals had a long history of accepting bribes from the Great Houses to install pliable, friendly patsies in the highest positions of power. They must have seen something different in Gabriel Agard, something worth more than any payoff.

Being part of the military is risky, dirty grunt work. All soldiers are trained engineers, directly responsible for the stronghold's survival, but the gratitude of the population didn't come with political power—until Gabriel Agard. And despite him being, as many have put it, *an uneducated brute who came from nowhere*, his rule has been surprisingly thoughtful and democratic. Where previous generals extracted as much labor as possible from commoners and prioritized the noble-born, the current general has focused on redistributing resources to the commoners, taxing the Great Houses to restructure the lower levels, and making sure that all children are clothed and fed. Since he came into power, we healers have had more supplies than ever before.

What the general has accomplished is everything my father wished and worked tirelessly for from the inside, and it breaks my heart that Dad died too early to see it with his own eyes.

But General Agard is also a violent, hotheaded, selfish Alpha. He has launched strikes against his political enemies and has killed dozens of innocent guards solely because of their allegiance to a House. Above all, the business with Gustav showed the world how the general sees Omegas: as playthings, his for the taking.

I've never been a fan of the noble-born and their entitlement—in fact, I am mating with Lennart *despite* and not *because of* his background—but

General Agard is cut from the same arrogant, self-important cloth, and while his reforms may be admirable, he clearly considers himself above our laws. And that, I cannot respect.

“Is this about Lord Larson still seeking revenge for Gustav?” I ask Lara.

She nods. “I think so. Gustav was an asshole, but we all loved him. This isn’t going anywhere good. Can you…?” She holds my hands. “Lennart respects you so much, Sof, and I don’t want my little brother involved in any of my father’s retaliatory plans. Will you talk to him?”

My heart softens. “Of course. I don’t want you to lose two brothers.”

“After the mating,” she hastens to add. “Not on the day you actually become my sister.”

I laugh. “You mean, I should do it tomorrow? When I’m stuck being a Larsen, too, and have nowhere to run if your father gets mad at me?”

“Precisely. Welcome to fighting the system from the inside out. You’ll have plenty of time for that, since you won’t have to work anymore.”

“What? No. We’ve been over this.” My shoulders slump. “I’m not going to stop being a healer just because I’m mating. I can do a lot of good.”

“Oh, *I* know that. I’m not sure my mother or Lennart do, so—”

Lara stops right as the door opens, and her mother steps in.

“Oh, there you are. We’ve been looking all over for—” Her eyes trail down my healer uniform, which is wrinkled, and ripped, and splattered all over with not-so-mysterious red stains.

“Sorry.” I grin.

Lady Larsen shakes her head, not quite hiding her own smile. “I bet you are. And that’s why I won’t mention that bruise darkening around your eye. Lara, honey, will you call off the bridal search party I had to quickly put together, then tell the maids to bring in the dress?”

“Yes, Mama.” She presses a kiss to her mother’s cheek and leaves.

With an arm around my shoulders, Lady Larsen whisks me to the sonic shower, and twenty minutes later I sit in front of the circular wall mirror in

Lara’s room as two members of her staff work tirelessly to turn me into something stunning—while tormenting my poor, throbbing cheekbone.

“Not so much blush, Peter,” Lady Larsen instructs. “Her complexion is already rosy as it is. We wouldn’t want Lennart to think his mate is about to faint from agitation. Don’t worry, Sofia, you are already so pretty. And we managed to hide the black eye. Here, have a sip of tea. I had it made just for you.”

I know I’m pretty. Even when my self-doubt was at its highest, I’ve always known that my looks are pleasing. Lennart is obviously attracted to me, and since he’s the only person with whom I’ve ever considered sharing my bed—the only person who has shown interest in doing so, even when faced with my shortcomings—that should be the end of my ruminating.

But being pretty and being a pretty Omega are different things. I’m not petite and soft-fleshed and luscious. Very little about my lean body suggests nurturing abundance and parental welcome, and my muscles have the kind of strength and suppleness that one wouldn’t be surprised to find on any other designation.

For a while, I believed that I would reach puberty and present as an Alpha. Or not present at all and realize that I was a Beta, just like my parents. The older I got, the more likely the latter seemed. And then, in my late teens, my jaw and neck started itching. I knew immediately what it meant, but I didn’t allow myself to believe it until the healer with whom I’d been training confirmed that my scent glands were emerging. Alphas had those, too, but only at the base of their necks. The rough mark throbbing between my shoulder blades clearly identified me as one thing:

Omega.

My perception of my future required some adjustment, but I could embrace it. As a designation, it was highly compatible with my dream job of being a healer. I’d always been nurturing, always wanted to have a family, and the kind of bond that could form between an Alpha and an

Omega who chose each other…I *craved* that. The more I thought about it, the more I loved the idea of being someone's Omega. It was as though so many of my deepest desires were finally clicking into place. I began eagerly awaiting my first heat, which would signal that I had fully presented.

But it never came. Years and infinite medical tests later, my scent hasn't developed. I never matured into my Omega designation. I'll never be able to form a complete bond with an Alpha.

According the world, I am defective. Unfinished. And despite all that, Lennart still asked me to become his mate.

"Here. Spectacular." Lady Larsen finishes braiding a strand of natural pearls through my hair, then catches my eyes through the mirror. "Are you happy?"

Her concern warms my heart. Other parents would be appalled to know that their Beta son was marrying a cold Omega, yet she has never been anything but accepting.

"I am." I reach out to squeeze my fingers around her hand, staring into those refined, delicate features that she passed on to Lennart, almost undiluted by her husband's harsher genes.

"It's normal to feel anxious on the day of one's mating."

I smile. "Yes, I know." According to everyone I've spoken to—and in the past few days, every person I've ever met has sought me out to selflessly bestow their opinions upon me—anxiety, fear, anticipation, eagerness, excitement are all acceptable emotions to experience before the impending ceremony.

The one sentiment never listed was relief, which may not be the hallmark of a happy bride but is what currently overwhelms me. I am relieved and grateful that Lennart decided to take me as his and give me a chance to build the family I desire. He is handsome and intelligent, and he has been loving and supportive toward me since we met while apprenticing under the same healer. He started professing his love at fourteen and first

kissed me at fifteen, on the outside, under the shade of a kelp forest, on the fifth day of a particularly warm Low.

It was a dry, unpleasant kiss. When he told me, “I’m going to mate you, Sofia Kuznetsov,” I laughed in his face, then told him that he was an entire year younger than me and that I wasn’t going to mate anyone I wasn’t madly in love with.

I meant it, too. Lennart was never more than a friend. But after my botched presentation, he was the only person who never looked at me with frustration or disappointment. His affection never wavered. And by the fourth time he asked me to mate him, I said yes.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have. After all, I can take care of myself, even without my father. I could make a living as a healer. But I want the kind of companionship that comes with romantic love and a family. I want to take care of someone and be taken care of, to cherish and be cherished. I want to *not* feel alone. And if that means settling for less than true love, amicable companionship will suffice.

I’ve been open with Lennart about the reality of my feelings. Still, I cannot help wondering whether I’m taking advantage of him.

I bring the tea to my lips, but my stomach is too unsettled, and I can’t manage a single sip. “Lady Larsen?” I ask, not meeting my own eyes in the mirror.

“Yes?”

“I don’t think I’ve thanked you enough.”

“Thanked me? For what?”

“For how incredibly supportive of Lennart’s and my union you have been. I know I am barely an Omega—”

“Nonsense.” From behind, her palms wrap around my shoulders. “You are a well-read, educated girl. There is no such thing as ‘barely an Omega.’”

“But it’s true.” I twist back. “I haven’t fully presented. I might not be able to have kids, and—”

“Hush.” Her knuckles caress my face, loving. Like a mother. “You will be an excellent mate for Lennart. And I cannot wait to have you as my daughter.”

“Even if I—”

“Sofia, stop worrying.” Her expression is stern, but kind. “Plus, who knows? Maybe mating will awaken something in you. Maybe it will trigger the rest of your presentation.”

I frown, skeptical. Cold Omegas are rare, but there are no reports of them being pushed through the rest of their presentation by mating. It’s wishful thinking, and I don’t want her to harbor false hope.

“Come, now. It’ll take us a while to get you into the dress I chose for you. You’ll hate me for it, but I guarantee that it’ll be worth it.”

I force my lips into a smile. *This is for the best*, I tell myself. Then I repeat it over and over, like a mantra. I’ll mate Lennart, make him as happy as I humanly can, and become happy myself.

I rise from my chair and walk with sure steps toward the blissful future I’m determined to create.

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Chapter 4

THE GUEST

Sofia

I look like someone who was born on the upper levels of the keep. Like someone who'd still know what the heat of the sun feels like even on the third evening of a slow-rising High. I look wealthy and beautiful, nothing like the commoner I really am, and it's all the dress's doing.

It's unique, a long sheath that combines strategically placed scraps of silver metal and flowing yards of nearly translucent white fabric. Healers' uniforms are made of rough, thick materials stained dark to hide the blood, which makes this the most revealing garment I've ever worn, bar none. And yet, as I pad my way down the stone corridor, heading to my mating barefoot as is customary, I tell myself that I should feel grateful for the times changing. After all, just decades ago Omegas were expected to attend their mating ceremonies naked.

"What are you thinking of?" Lara asks, reaching out to brush my hand with hers. The walk toward the ceremony is a group affair steeped in tradition—an Omega, surrounded by all the Omegas in their family. Since I have no surviving relatives of any designation and my relationship with most Omegas of House Larsen is practically nonexistent, Lara stepped in to escort me. On my left is Lady Larsen. All around us, House Larsen's omnipresent guards. "I'm so glad you let my mother choose your dress. You look fantastic. Lennart will choke on his tongue."

“It’s a work of art,” I say with a smile, trying not to think about the fact that I didn’t *let* her do much. If we were doing this according to custom, the expense of the mating attire would fall on the Omega’s family, and whatever I could afford would have certainly brought embarrassment upon House Larsen.

I wonder if the dress now officially belongs to me. If it would be okay for me to resell it. When I enter the antechamber of the Larsens’ great hall, I’m still calculating how many new healer kits I could buy for my cohort with the credits. Then I spot Lord Larsen waiting for us, and my heart drops.

He’s an older Alpha with calculating eyes and a stern, judgmental air. The crimson coat he wears is finely woven but practical. He should be too thin to seem imposing, yet his presence never fails to cause me discomfort. Part of it is the way he looks at me, as though he sees me as inferior, but there’s more than that. A persistent feeling that I am unsafe with him.

That *everyone* is.

“Dear,” Lady Larsen chastises him, “you are not supposed to be here. You should be standing next to Lennart.”

He spares a cold glance for his mate, then focuses on me. “I am aware. But I wanted to inform Miss Kuznetsov that her fellow healers have sent word that they won’t be able to make it to the ceremony.”

“Excuse me?” I say.

“There was a problem with the sealing system on the northern wing. Nothing serious, but they’ll have to be on reserve while the engineers work on repairs.”

The healers on my team are like siblings to me. We’ve been on the front lines together and have saved each other’s lives countless times. “Maybe it would be better to postpone, then?”

“Nonsense, Miss Kuznetsov.” The twist of his lips is almost cruel. “My son is quite eager to turn you into a Larsen. You wouldn’t want to make him

wait even longer than he already has, hmm?”

I straighten my back. It seems as good a time as any to make it clear to him that I may be an Omega, but I won’t be steamrolled. “How long will they be detained? I want them to be present. If it’s just a matter of pushing the ceremony a few minutes—”

Lord Larsen leans forward and cuts me off with a low hiss: “That will not be possible.”

“One of my friends was supposed to give me away,” I say between clenched teeth.

“I will step in. I am, after all, to be your father.”

It’s so preposterous, I exhale a laugh. I glance at Lady Larsen, waiting for her to join me. But she and Lara both glance away in silence. Maybe I should have known better than to expect them to stand up to the head of their House, but I’m disappointed. Part of me even wonders if they’re secretly relieved that commoners won’t be at the ceremony. That way, they’ll be able to pretend that Lennart is marrying a noble. A strike—a cold Omega—is acceptable, but the class difference might be pushing it.

I bite my cheek until it bleeds and try to sound firm but polite. “I will go find out how quickly they might be able to arrive. It’s my mating ceremony, and I don’t mind delaying it.”

“Miss Kuznetsov.” Lord Larsen’s expression is somewhere between pitying and amused. “Do you really think you have a say in—”

“Excuse me, my lord.” A member of the guard rushes inside. Lord Larsen turns slowly, ready to snarl at the interruption, but he stops himself when the man adds, “The general is here.”

It might be the first time I’ve seen Lord Larsen truly taken aback. “What?” he asks, eyes flicking away from me.

“General Agard is in the great hall. He informed us that he will be attending the mating ceremony.”

A chilly quiet blankets the room. For several heartbeats, it remains so completely frozen, I can't hear a single breath being taken. Then, in an explosion of movement, Lord Larsen storms out of the chamber, followed by his guards.

Beside me, Lady Larsen's skin is ashen. "Why would he be here? We didn't *announce* the mating. It's a small, intimate ceremony. And to come into our wing after what he did to Gustav—" Her palm covers her mouth.

I feel nauseous at the idea of this woman, who has taken care of me like a mother would, having to face her son's murderer. "I'm going to ask him to leave," I offer.

"No. *No*, that would be— We cannot do that. It would be an incredible slight that would only hurt our House. He is *not* to be turned away. Whether we like it or not, he is the most powerful man in this stronghold." Lady Larsen collects herself, the true rock of the Larsen clan. Keeping the family together. Strategizing. An intelligent, insightful analyst. The kind of Omega I'd like to be. If I were a real one, that is. "He is to be welcomed with open arms."

"Mom." Lara's voice trembles. "Do you think Dad will start a fight with General Agard?"

"No." Lady Larson smiles at her daughter. If it weren't for her wringing hands, she'd look the picture of relaxation. "He knows better. And this is not outside the realm of etiquette. When a child of the Great Houses mates, officials can choose to be in attendance. This is likely simple protocol. Nothing to be concerned about."

I wonder why I get the impression that it's the opposite.

"Sofia. Child."

I nod as she moves closer to me. "Yes?"

Her tone shifts lower. "The veil—keep it over your face throughout the ceremony. Even if the general calls on you or speaks to you directly. Keep it on unless it's absolutely necessary. Agreed?"

“Why?” I ask with a frown.

Her throat convulses. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“But why?” I pitch my voice to match hers, and I try to hide my amusement. “Lady Larsen, the general is not here for *me*.”

Her silence stretches. “No. Let’s hope that he isn’t.”

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Chapter 5

THE SOLDIER

Sofia

I remember the general well, even though I doubt he knows who I am.

We only ever met once, back when I was eleven or twelve, in the first few years of my apprenticeship. He was young, around eighteen. And yet, he had already begun to rise through the military ranks.

After single-handedly preventing the desalination system in the southern wing from going into technical failure, he became an overnight hero. The promotions came so quickly, one after the other, a few were convinced that he was secretly a House's bastard, installed by a noble parent in a position of power and prestige. But it didn't add up. There were private squadrons for that, elite teams that were given tasks that *sounded* courageous but rarely put House members in the line of real harm.

Gabriel Agard, as it turned out, was just the second son of another engineer, one who tragically passed a couple of years prior. And he only ever served in the engineering corps, whose members protected the stronghold from the currents and the breakdown of systems. Those soldiers were very likely to return home in several dismembered pieces—or to not return at all.

It was ten years ago, but he was already a highly ranked official. I recognized him immediately when he walked into the infirmary on his own two legs, right as a new High was beginning to rise. He carried a badly

injured Alpha, one who was losing blood by the gallon and was in dire need of medical attention. We were overwhelmed and understaffed after a long string of field accidents, but the healer who was mentoring me immediately began treating the unconscious man.

Then someone with a deep voice spoke: “I have two options for you.”

I tilted my head up to look at Gabriel and found he had taken off the lower-face mask typical of ranking officers. I couldn’t turn away from his hair—a light blond, almost white, that clashed magnificently with the dark blue of his eyes. His looks were so striking, I would have called him handsome if blood hadn’t been covering half of his body.

Half and counting. The thick, viscous liquid still oozed from a gash on his biceps.

“You can patch me up now,” he said curtly, “or you can mop the floor later. Your choice.”

I flushed. “I’m not… I’m only in training, sir.”

He shrugged, which couldn’t be good for his wound. “I’m not.”

“What…what do you mean?”

“I’m not training to fix bodies. The opposite, actually. Which means that I don’t have the faintest clue where to start. No matter what, you’ll do a better job than me.”

“But I—”

“Miss.” He bent forward, eyes leveling with mine. “I don’t give a fuck. I have hours and hours of work ahead of me. As long as I’m not bleeding, it’ll be fine.”

Before I could protest any more, he sat on the chair closest to me. I got to work, terrified to make a mistake. Gabriel didn’t smile, nor did he pay much attention to me; he activated a holo and studied the map that emerged, something that looked like the outside of the stronghold during a Low. I could tell that the cut had been made by an animal, probably by a tooth or a

claw, and it was far too deep and irregular to repair with collagen. Manual stitches were necessary, which I'd practiced only a couple of times before.

Unsurprising that I accidentally jabbed the inside of his wound. "I'm so sorry," I gasped.

"Don't care," he muttered distractedly.

"If it hurts, I can—"

"You could stab your needle into my flesh with all your might, and it would not hurt a tenth as much as the walrus." As statements went, it wasn't very reassuring. Still, I told myself to take a deep breath, calmed down, and resumed the process.

"Were you on the outside?" I asked, mostly to get my mind off how badly I could mess up.

"Obviously," he said.

"Did you see the kelp forest?"

His eyebrow, light as his hair, rose. "It's impossible to miss."

"Was it beautiful?"

"I don't know. It was there." His expression was quizzical. After a moment, he added, "I've never thought about it that way."

"How so?"

"The outside, it can kill you." He looked at me. My skinny arms. My hyperfocused frown. "It *will* kill you, if you go alone."

"I have been outside only once. But I was too young to remember." I bit into my lower lip. "My father is an engineer, and during the Lows, he has to work, which means no one else can take me. And those expeditions, the safe ones with the tour guides, they're so expensive. My father is saving for them, but he doesn't have the credits yet. He said that he can work for the rest of his life, but he still won't have half the credit that a lord in the Great Houses wastes in a single day." I halted, realizing that I had no idea what this man thought about nobles or income gaps, wondering if I was in trouble.

“Your father is right,” Gabriel said, voice low. Calm. “But it won’t be forever.”

I felt like I was being promised something. After that, we were silent. I finished stitching him up, and he took off without even thanking me, but while I was washing my equipment, someone left enough credits on the table for me to join one of the outside expeditions.

This was years ago. And today, for the first time in over a decade, we are again together in the same room.

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Chapter 6

THE MATING

Sofia

I don’t consider myself a romantic, but mating ceremonies have always held a special charm to me. It’s not about the dresses, or the banquets, or the pretty decorations. What truly warms my heart is the sense of community and cheerfulness that comes from two people and their families joining lives in pursuit of something greater.

Perhaps what I feel for Lennart is not the kind of love usually shared by mates, let alone the bond that exists between an Alpha and their Omega. Still, I hoped that our mating would be a moment for celebration.

The general’s unexpected presence, however, makes it unlikely.

As Lady Larsen escorts me toward the center of the room, where Lennart waits with a small, joyful smile, I try not to look in the general’s direction. I try, but I cannot help peeking, and I’m suddenly grateful for the veil that shrouds my face.

At least the general has the grace to stand on the dais, outside the familial circle, but he brought too many soldiers for such a harmless occasion. They’re all wearing their thin Kevlar in military blue, attire more appropriate for a battleground than a mating ceremony. The Larsens, needless to say, don’t seem very at ease.

His right hand, Ivar, remains close. I know they are brothers, but while they are both tall, that’s where the similarities end. Ivar’s hair is dark and

curly. His skin has a natural earthy glow, lips faintly curved upward in amusement. The general's mask covers his expression, but given the frown lines between his eyes, I doubt it hides a smile.

Gabriel is, first and foremost, a warrior. Someone whose body was honed over decades of fighting to survive and to save others. Ivar is a scholar, leaner and softer. The brawn and the brains, that's what people call the two brothers. I wonder if Ivar would be able to defend himself in a fight. I wonder if Gabriel is foolish enough to start something in a room full of Larsen soldiers. I wonder why the hell they're here.

What do they want?

"You are so beautiful," Lennart whispers, shaking me out of my thoughts.

I resist the impulse to tell him that, given my veil, he can't know what I look like. But maybe he can see through the gossamer fabric. Maybe what he likes are the dark blond waves of my hair and the way they drape over my shoulders and down my back. Maybe it's the shape-hugging bodice of the dress. It doesn't matter *why*—it's a compliment, and I should be glad for it. Lennart is kind. And patient. And handsome, too. Maybe not in the same way as the general, but still. And it's okay if he's not a fighter, because he's a fine healer, which is much more important. At the very least, I owe him my unfettered attention. "Thank you," I say.

I wonder if he's as confused as me by the general's presence, or intimidated. If so, no one would be able to tell, and I'm proud of him for that. He has eyes only for me as he lowers himself to his knees, signaling the start of the ritual. When he takes my hand in his, I order myself to forget about the people around us.

This is the beginning of the rest of our lives, and I should savor it.

I'm gaining a family—with some questionable members, but still.

I will be safe and taken care of for as long as I live.

I might even be able, through House Larsen's connections, to one day raise my own children, and to gain the financial resources to help make change in the stronghold.

I *will* be okay.

So I smile and close my fingers around Lennart's.

The rest of the service goes by quickly. This specific ceremony is a relatively new development. It requires little of us except standing and listening to the officiant. The *real* mating will happen afterward, at night, with the consummation—and, only in Alpha-Omega pairings, with the Alpha leaving a bite mark on the Omega's neck. Before, it *all* used to happen in front of an audience, *during* the ceremony. In families that decide to embrace the tradition, it still does, and I'm relieved that House Larsen is too aristocratic for that, because it worries me.

Sex.

Tonight.

After.

I'm already worried about whether my lack of proper Omega status is going to create any issues in our sexual life. Can I even become aroused? Is Lennart going to hate me if I can't? Am I going to hurt? When I've been alone, when I've asked my body to please help me out and feel *something*, it hasn't exactly been cooperative. The idea of Lennart and me figuring out the ins and outs of sexual intercourse in front of the general's icily furious eyes is not exactly—

"Go with your mate," the officiant says. "The All-father has blessed this union. May it be as fruitful as it is joyous."

I need to *stop* getting distracted during my own damn mating.

"It's done," Lennart whispers as he rises to his feet, light blue eyes gleaming with victory under the shine of the ceiling lights. The crowd around us breaks into claps and cheers.

“It’s done.” I force myself to smile, then stop when I realize that I don’t need to because the veil is still on.

“I will love you more than anyone else ever could, Sof. I already do. I won’t let anyone harm you, and I will watch over you to make sure you’re happy.”

I swallow. “So will I,” I say, hoping he won’t wonder which specific promise I’m referring to. There is a sour, ashy taste in the back of my throat.

“Let’s go. Maybe I can get a few minutes alone with you before the banquet.” His palm wraps around my elbow, a little chilly. Betas’ body temperatures can run a little lower than Alphas’ and Omegas’, and that’s when it hits me.

Lennart is my mate. I am bound to this man. Forever tethered to him. I feel as though I’m falling from something very, very tall.

“Congratulations.” The voice booms from the other end of the room.

The clamor stops. Everyone, us included, turns toward the dais.

Toward the general, who stands with arms crossed, the picture of arrogance and relaxation. “I wish a most happy future to both you and your mate, Lennart. And may your union be as fruitful as it is joyous.” He tacks on the customary greeting robotically, like it’s an afterthought. Like he memorized the phrase two minutes ago, after his brother whispered it in his ear.

Lennart tenses at my side, more with surprise than defensiveness. “Thank you, sir.” He clears his throat, glances at his stone-faced father, and seems to come to a decision. “The mating banquet is about to begin. We would be honored if you joined us.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot.”

Lennart nods, clearly relieved. He bows, then starts to turn around. But he is interrupted when the general adds, “However, I am here to claim my right as general.”

Lennart blinks slowly. I feel a frisson of unease snake through the people surrounding us, a moment of hesitation, but it's hard to interpret. When I glance at Lord Larsen, his usually stern expression seems to have petrified. Next to him, his mate white-knuckles the folds of her gown.

I turn back to the general, disoriented. What is he talking about?

"I claim the Right of the First Night," Gabriel declares.

I hear gasps. Steps. People stirring. The discomfort in the room solidifies into something akin to hostility, maybe even outrage, but Lennart remains by my side, looking as confused as I feel. "The right of… Excuse me, sir?"

"Your mate, Lennart," Gabriel says. There is a faint trace of hilarity in his tone, as if he's enjoying explaining a very simple concept to a particularly oblivious child. As if he knows one single thing better than everyone in this room and has every intention to use it to his own advantage. "Tonight, I will be taking her to my bed."

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Chapter 7

THE LAW

Excerpt from the *Statute Book, Version XII*
(Transcription approved by the Council of Elders)
Section: The Right of the First Night

...And it is therefore to strengthen the bonds between the Great Houses and the military class, to acknowledge that without the leadership of the general of the army, the survival of those who dwell in the stronghold would be impossible, and to offer a symbol of gratitude to those who regularly risk their lives for the civil population, that we grant the general such a right.

In summary, at their discretion, the current general of the army has the legal right to request the presence of the mate of any person of noble birth who lives in the stronghold. This right is limited to the first night following the mating ceremony. Once the mate is escorted to the general's quarters, the general has the right to make use of them for the duration of the night. Examples of use include, but are not limited to sexual, domestic, and other recreational activities. The mate may not be harmed beyond what is reasonable during this time.

The general will return the mate to the rightful spouse the following morning. In the event sexual relations occur, any children conceived and

born of such encounters will be considered the offspring of the mated couple, regardless of their genetic parentage, and they will be raised in the household of the mate and their spouse.

Denial of the Right of the First Night will trigger immediate execution of the individual who raised the objection.

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Chapter 8

THE RIGHT

Gabriel

They knew.

They knew the second I walked inside the great hall in the Larsen wing, with its too-opulent banners and platinum finishings and omnipresent sigils, full to the brim with people who live their lives bathed in the privilege that only wealth and political connections can afford.

They knew. Not everyone, but Lord and Lady Larsen? I could tell from the grim lines on their faces that they immediately suspected. Their eldest son, Gunner, looked very close to reaching for the closest weapon and attacking me—and wouldn't that have saved everyone a lot of trouble? He is, after all, the spitting image of his dead brother. The brother whose killing I sometimes relive in my happiest dreams.

The Right of the First Night is some very dated bullshit. I'd never heard of it before Ivar laid out his unhinged plans to me, but after I went through some of my predecessors' logs, it became obvious that several of them had taken advantage of it. When a particularly exceptional Omega struck their fancy, when they wanted to put a particular House in its place, or whenever they felt like it, they would simply invoke the Right. By the time I was born, the tradition was already being discontinued, but I imagine the older Larsens had a few memories of it.

Lennart and his mate, though, had no idea the custom even existed.

When I walked in, the boy seemed intrigued by my presence. Almost pleased, as though I might be attempting reconciliation or honoring their corrupt family. I have no doubt that the entire Larsen household despises me for holding them accountable and for what happened with Gustav, but for all I know, Lennart hated his asshole brother just as much as I did.

It's nice, experiencing some gratitude every so often.

But even if Lennart isn't an active accomplice of the shit the Larsens have been up to, he still didn't—doesn't—stop his family from attacking my people. I think about the Beta boy's severed head. About his parents' wails when we told them that, given the conditions of their son's body, they would not be able to pay their respects. As I stare at Lennart's crumbling face when he realizes the reason I'm here, a twisted, deeply satisfying sense of vengeance sinks into me.

He took something from me, and I'm going to return the favor.

There are gasps. Flinches. Confusion. I don't blame those wondering why I have decided to saddle myself with a weeping cold Omega for the next twelve hours—one who's sure to be an unpracticed, boring fuck. Lennart, though, remains frozen in place, with an expression of pure, idiotic bewilderment as he turns to his *father* for help. I take stock of the crowd, waiting for someone to voice an objection. It's what I want—an excuse to annihilate this family. The Right of the First Night is law, and I need a member of this fucking family to break it in front of an audience. Then I'll be well within my right to draw blood.

But, despite the shock, they know better than to protest. Fucking Ivar.

"Of course, my lord," Lord Larsen declares. "The Omega will be delivered to your room."

Damn him. Damn him to fucking hell. At least I get to watch him eat the shit I'm shoving in his mouth.

"Intact," Ivar adds, beside me. "Make sure that she is delivered *intact*."

“Naturally.” What a pity that the sneer on Lord Larsen’s face is not a punishable offense.

Ivar and I share a glance, the quirk of his brow vaguely apologetic. He knows I was hoping for an outright refusal and a quick massacre, so he must suspect how irritated I am.

He’s enjoying every second of this, the asshole.

“To ensure that the process runs smoothly and to assist you,” Ivar continues, “the general’s guards will escort the Omega to his quarters.”

At once, Martia and a dozen of her best-trained soldiers march forward —a nice little way of spelling, *Try anything, and see what happens.* Meanwhile, Lennart is still blinking like a dying fish. And the Omega…

I must admit, I anticipated more of a scene from her. Screams. Some tears. But she remains remarkably composed. I watch the sway of her hips as the guards escort her out of the room, the delicate way in which she bends toward the Larsen daughter to ask hushed questions.

Unexpected: her face stayed hidden for the entire ritual—unusual, if not unheard of. But her body, *that* I could see, and she does not resemble any Omega I’ve ever seen before. Narrow hips. An outline of strength. Not displeasing, just different. Her scent, too, is so understated, I truly couldn’t detect it. Had me wondering if she was another of the Larsens’ tricks, until I remembered what she is: cold.

My last look before leaving the hall should be a triumphant smirk toward Lord Larsen, but my eyes cannot help following the girl. “I was promised a fucking fight,” I grumble at Ivar once we’re outside, marching down the corridor that leads to the military quarters.

My brother shrugs. “I was almost sure there would *be* a fucking fight.”

“Yeah? Because Lord Larsen handed the Omega to me on a goddamn silver platter.”

“I never doubted *he* wouldn’t care. But Lennart? He may be a young Beta and not a hotheaded Alpha, but he’s still marrying out of love. Can you

imagine not acting like an impulsive little shit when your family's most powerful enemy takes your mate from under your snotty nose? Where the hell is his self-respect?"

"Maybe he left it back in his crib, since he's a fucking infant."

"Well, having his mate fucked by someone else will make him grow up real fast." Ivar runs a hand through his hair. "For your sake, I hope she's decent-looking under that thing."

"Why?"

"She's a cold Omega. Not your usual type, right? I figured you're going to need some incentive to bring yourself to fuck her. Aside from revenge."

I halt my steps, and so does Ivar. Before he can see it coming, I press a hand on his chest and slam him hard against the stone wall.

"Oh, come on, Gabe. What did I say now—"

"Listen, in a few minutes, I'm going to walk into my room, and I'm going to do things to that girl that would send me to Hel. If it existed." I hold his gaze. "The least we can do is be polite about it."

Ivar laughs, of course. Anyone else would be pissing themselves, but my brother has always been remarkably unintimidated by my strength.

I roll my eyes. "I'm serious."

"Right, sure. I mean—we can be polite about the dry virgin girl you're going to tear to shreds in the same bed where you normally fuck the most beautiful Omegas in the stronghold, but—"

"She's caught in the crossfire," I counter. "Make no mistake, she's the one tool we have against House Larsen, and I'm not going to spare her just because she's innocent. But she's not going to be the butt of the joke."

"What about the fact that she kicked you out of Kuznetsov's funeral?"

I swallow, wondering how the fuck I could have possibly forgotten about that. The girl deserves *nothing* from me.

"Well?"

"You're right," I concede. "Fuck her. Even harder."

My brother laughs, and I squeeze my hand on his shoulder, helping him off the wall.

“The Larsens may not have reacted as defensively as we wanted,” he says as we resume walking. “But this is a slight they won’t forgive. I’ll speak to Martia. Double, maybe triple security. Everything else is already in place. All we need is a—”

“General.” A voice calls from behind us. When I turn around, Lady Larsen is quickly stepping off the elevator. Alone. “A moment, please.”

As far as requests go, it sounds remarkably like a demand.

“You gonna tell her to fuck off?” Ivar asks under his breath.

“I should, shouldn’t I?” But I let out a deep sigh, then say, “You go ahead, Ivar. I’ll catch up.”

“I don’t trust her.”

“Neither do I, but she can do nothing to me.”

By the time Lady Larsen is in front of me, Ivar’s footsteps are fading in the distance. I take off my mask, making no secret of the way I’m assessing her. She is an older Omega, fragile-looking, with delicate features, an expressive face, and a spine made of steel. She reminds me just enough of my own mother for me to nearly experience sympathy—until she says, “You cannot do this, General.”

Here we fucking go. “Lady Larsen, you must know that I *can*, in fact, do this. The Right of the First Night falls within the law. General Niemi, who I believe was deep in your family’s pockets, regularly took advantage of it.” I ignore the way she recoils. “You certainly never complained when *he* took newly mated Omegas for his amusement.”

“I was a *child*. And, sir, with all due respect”—she speaks through gritted teeth, sounding anything but respectful—“Sofia and Lennart love each other.”

Sofia. Right. That’s the girl’s name. “In that case, I shall return her untouched.”

Her eyes shine with hope. “Really?”

“No.” I lean closer. “I will fuck her to within an inch of her life, and tomorrow she’ll barely be able to walk.”

What a pleasure, watching her face fall. “What do you have against my sons?”

“Your sons are hardly the victims here. Not when dozens of members of my army have fallen to an untimely demise because of your House’s strikes. Not when a young man was brutally assaulted to satisfy a noble-born man’s sadistic urges—and you know *precisely* what I am referring to. Not when it is not your son but the Omega who will lie under me tonight.” I hold her eyes. “Over and over again.”

“You have no right—”

“Oh, but I do,” I drawl. “And you should be grateful that she is cold and likely won’t get pregnant from it.”

She spins on her feet before angrily stalking away in a way that would make me laugh, if it weren’t for the night that lies ahead of me.

“Lady Larsen,” I call after her. “A word of advice?”

She stops, but doesn’t turn to me.

“Hold your mate back,” I say. I don’t know what her relationship with Lord Larsen is like, but I’m no fool. Unlike what the noble-born have been telling themselves, Omegas are not glorified birthing machines without political power. “I want the attacks against my soldiers and my leadership to stop, and I want Lord Larsen to stop acting like he’s above the law. I am the general now, and things are changing. The Houses are going to have to give up a portion of their wealth and their constant abuse of power.”

“How dare *you* speak of abuse of power, with what you are about to do to Sofia?”

“My lady, we can both agree that the paltry body of a stunted Omega is worth much less than the many lives Lord Larsen has taken.”

She spins around to face me. “You are as repulsive as they say.”

“I live to meet your expectations, my lady.”

I put my lower-face mask back on and stalk to my quarters, already annoyed by the tearful Omega who surely awaits me.

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Chapter 9

THE NIGHT

Sofia

The bed in the general's quarters must be worth more credits than my team of healers will earn in our combined lifetimes because it is made from wood. As I understand it, wood used to be a commonplace material. But the kind of trees that used to crowd the outside don't thrive in salt water.

There is only one purpose for something so massive and built entirely of a rare substance: ostentation. Whoever purchased the bed must have wanted to show off their wealth. And even though I know little about Gabriel Agard, I simply cannot imagine him wasting credits on *that*. It's a relic from previous generals; I'd bet five years of my life on that.

The rest of the room is wide but sparsely furnished: A handful of chairs. Carpets. One nightstand, free of any clutter. A small armory area. A chest. A table with a holo station.

I've lost track of time, but I can tell that we must be past sunset because even though we're high up enough to get some illumination through the water, no light filters in through the single lancet window that reaches upward to the vaulted ceiling. Thankfully, electric candles flicker low in the dimly lit space, leaving only the farthest corners shrouded in dark. The purring white noise of the environmental controls is at once smoother and quieter than in my quarters.

I hate to admit it, but I love *everything* about this room. Except, of course, for the pair of eyes flashing at me from the shadows.

For a split second, I assumed it was the glint of a light bouncing against a reflective surface. Then I noticed the occasional blinking, the large fuzzy outline surrounding it, and an impression of fangs, and I realized that I was being tracked by an animal. Still am.

Hunted.

This is disturbing. So disturbing, I sit on the edge of the bed, as still as possible, trying at once to make myself invisible and to not let the monster out of my sight. By the time the door opens, I've nearly convinced myself that I should play dead.

The beast can't kill me if I die of a stroke first.

Someone enters the room. Heavy steps thud toward me, then halt. I hear a sigh, then a blunt, half growled "my lady."

"Not a lady," I murmur absentmindedly, unable to peel my eyes from the animal.

"As of approximately an hour ago, you are a member of the Larsen family. *My lady*."

"Ah, right. There is that." I'm trying to open my mouth as little as possible, but my ventriloquism act must not fool the beast, because its stare narrows into a glare.

My skin erupts into a million tiny goosebumps.

"It doesn't seem as though you understand the situation, my lady. Did someone explain to you that when the Right of the First Night is claimed, the Omega—"

If I weren't too terrified to move, I would wave my hand. "Yeah, yeah, for sure. You can do whatever you like with my body for the next few hours."

"I can. Yes." There is a shift in his tone—still annoyed, but also… intrigued? "Do you have any questions about the practice?"

“No.”

“No.” A pause. “You have no curiosity about what will happen to you by my hand?”

“By *your* hand? Not really, no—not to change the topic on you, but are you aware of the monster in the room?”

“The…monster. In the room.”

“Yeah.”

“If you are referring to me or trying to dissuade me from—”

“What? No. I’m sure you’ve partaken of terrible actions and that we all house a monster within us, but I wasn’t going for the metaphorical meaning. There is a real, *actual* monstruous creature. In the corner. Over there.”

I point with my finger. Don’t bother checking whether his gaze follows.

He mutters, to himself, but perfectly audibly, “They forgot to mention that she’s raving mad.”

“They didn’t. She isn’t. And if she is, they also forgot to tell *me*.”

“I’ll be the one to judge.”

I huff. “Sir, there is a green-eyed monster in that corner over there. It’s been waiting to pounce on me like a barracuda for the last quarter of an hour. The real madness, I would argue, is *not* acknowledging its presence.”

“A green-eyed…? For fuck’s sake, are you talking about… Alex,” he calls, his tone considerably softer. “Come here.”

At his command, a large, thick-furred beast with tufted ears emerges from the shadows. It stretches gracefully, erupts in a terrifying yawn, shakes nonexistent dust off its brown pelt, and then slinks toward Gabriel without sparing me a single glance.

Guess you’ve stared at me long enough for tonight, huh?

It occurs to me that it looks like the cats I’ve seen on a couple of occasions, the ones that lived in the animal-sanctuary areas at the end of my level, back when I was a kid. Alex, though, is three or four times bigger than the largest I’ve ever seen. And it looks *peckish*.

Or it did. Before starting to rub against the general's legs, and…

"What *is* that sound?"

"A purr, it's called."

"Is that what it does before murdering someone?"

I am, at last, facing Gabriel. And for the first time, I get to look at him while he looks back at me. And he is certainly *staring*.

Briefly, he seems taken aback. There is a touch of surprise, an involuntary flinch in his features, a searching quality to his gaze that reminds me that during the ceremony, I was wearing a veil. He may have seen holos of me, but when he demanded that I be brought to his room, he had no real idea of what I looked like, and this is his first time seeing my face in person.

The silence stretches. Gabriel swallows hard, tilts his head in a fashion that I cannot decipher, and seems to need a minute to reorient himself.

So I take the opportunity to ask, "Is it a cat?"

"Related. A lynx."

Lynx. Yes. I faintly remember hearing the word, one and a half lifetimes ago. From Dad, who was always telling me about the last history article he'd read. He held his palm against one of the elevator sensors, smiling down as he waited for me to step through the doors. "They're felines," he explained. "The military breeding program has a few, actually. Some are almost domesticated—they can really bond with us. Make for great companions."

"Can I see one?"

Laughter. "I'll see if I can make it happen, Sofia."

I ask, "Does it live here?"

"*She* lives wherever she likes," Gabriel tells me, petting the top of her head.

That doesn't bode well for me. "Does she also eat whoever she wants?"

"You don't need to worry. She has a highly refined palate."

I let out a laugh, and he smiles in return. But then his face hardens, and he asks again, “Do you understand why you’re here?”

I do. I am aware that this is the most powerful man in the stronghold, that he loathes the family I am mating into, and that he has leave to do whatever he wants with me. The lynx may not be what I should be worrying about at the moment.

Why not both? asks a wise voice.

Why, indeed.

But hysterics don’t suit me. I’m a healer, trained to remain calm under pressure. If something terrible is to happen to me, working myself into a frenzy won’t help me avoid it. “I am here because you claimed the Right of the First Night. As for the reason for that…I assume it has to do with whatever pissing contest you’re currently trying to win against Lord Larsen.” I smooth the folds of my dress but keep my eyes locked with his. “It seems much more likely than the alternative, which would be you seeing me across a crowded room, becoming lovestruck, and deciding that you absolutely had to— What are you—”

He moves fast. In a blink he’s towering in front of me, and before I can stop him, strong fingers grip my chin and angle my face toward the light. His jaw shifts back and forth.

“Was it Lennart?”

“What?”

“Was it *Lennart*?”

He doesn’t seem like the kind of man who enjoys repeating his questions, but I have no idea what he’s asking. “What do you mean?”

“The bruise under your eye. Who hit you?”

“Oh.” I let out a breathy laugh, remembering that I washed my face before coming here. “No, no. I was helping one of the engineers repair a porthole in the north wing, and… No. Lennart wouldn’t.”

“Ah.” He doesn’t let go of me, but his grip softens. “You’re a healer.”

“I am. And Lennart is, too. He vowed to do no harm, just like me.”

Gabriel takes a step back. Begrudgingly, maybe. “He is considerably less skilled than you, I’m told.”

“Yeah, well…” I despise false modesty. “Maybe he’ll get there.”

We fall into a still sort of silence, regarding each other, the dramatic difference in our heights doubled by the fact that I’m sitting on the bed and he isn’t. I *should* be quaking in fear. Rationally, I *am* worried. But there’s something about this—this Alpha, this situation, this room, the thick scent that envelops me—that doesn’t quite send my systems into panic.

I *know* I should be scared, but I don’t *feel* it.

That must be why I hear myself asking, “Would you like me to get naked?”

He stares, quiet. Unblinking. Much like his lynx.

“I ask because this dress was very expensive, and I have lofty plans of selling it to replace some of the healers’ equipment. I’d rather you not tear it. I’m happy to disrobe for you. If I’d known that this situation would arise, I would have insisted on something less delicate.” I shrug. “In my defense, this is very out of character for you.”

His lips twitch. “And what do *you* know of my character?”

“A bit. You hate Lord Larsen, and probably the other noble houses, too—and who can blame you? You usually procure your bed partners in less official ways. You don’t appear to be sexually interested in me, not in the slightest, which tells me that all this is to provoke. In my opinion, it will work. Oh, and despite having become general, you still enjoy sleeping on the floor.” His eyes narrow, and I glance at the pallet next to the bed. Just a handful of blankets laid out on the hard ground. “It doesn’t take outstanding observational skills to tell that you prefer a rougher surface.”

“You have them, though.”

“What?”

“Outstanding observational skills.”

“Oh. Well, healing and paying attention do go hand in hand.” I lean back a little, palms flat against the mattress. “So, should I take off the dress?”

His smile spreads across his handsome face. I guess he *is* intimidating, but maybe I’m in shock. That, or there must be something else wrong with me, because my fight-or-flight reflex has *yet* to kick in. “You are *very* forward,” he muses.

“For an Omega?”

“For *anyone*.” He’s not displeased, I don’t think. “Surprised that a dyed-in-the-wool conservative like Lord Larsen hasn’t trained the impertinence out of you.”

“I wouldn’t call asking simple, straightforward questions *impertinence*,” I say. But then I add, reluctantly, “Lady Larsen and Lennart have been keeping me out of his sight. For a while, I think they even managed to convince him that I’d never formed a single opinion.” I shrug, still unsure about whether I should be getting the nakedness thing going.

Maybe the reason is that I’ve never been a procrastinator. Simply put, I’d rather be fucked *now* and get it over with, than spend hours biting my nails.

“You know,” I muse, studying the general, “you’re not too dissimilar.”

“Who?”

“You and Lord Larsen. Maybe that’s why you don’t get along.”

He snorts. “The reason we don’t get along is that he’s a sociopath who would drive this stronghold and all who live in it into the ground, if allowed.”

“He thinks the same of you.” His deep scowl nearly makes me chuckle. “Oh, I’m not saying he’s right. But I’ve been in the room while you were being discussed. Several times. The nobles, they don’t understand—”

“There is nothing for them to *understand*,” he drawls. “They just need to do as they’re fucking told.”

This time, I do laugh. “Do you really think they’ll bow to you, sir? They’re members of the Great House Larsen. The only way this will end is if one of you steps back—or in bloodshed. Bloodshed, I would like to add, that will befall not just the two of you but thousands of innocent bystanders.”

He doesn’t appear to be affected by my words—except for the muscle twitching in his jaw. When he moves, I expect him to finally come for his prize—me. All he does, however, is pull one of the chairs by the bed closer and sit across from me, elbows on his knees as he leans forward. He unlatches his cloak, letting it pool behind his back.

His eyes never once let go of mine.

“How lucky I am,” he says at last, a sarcastic tinge to his tone. “I expected a mediocre fuck and received some fine sociopolitical analysis from a cold Omega who knows very little about the true nature of the events that led us to where we are today.”

A burst of annoyance pops inside me; I tilt my head with acerbic sweetness. “Aw, ‘mediocre’? Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I plan to be hard on *you*.”

“That’s what I heard, and yet…”

Could that be the issue? The reason I’m not bruised and bleeding, pleading for my life in a corner of the room? Maybe General Agard wanted to take me by force to punish the Larsens, but I’m not attractive enough for him to make that happen.

But I don’t believe so. I think that he might *like* this. Talking. Being challenged. The pushback. It’s there, in the tug at the corner of his lips, the fine lines webbing his eyes. “Has Lennart taken you already?” he asks.

“You know how the noble-born are. It’s forbidden to take an Omega ahead of their—”

“Mating, yes. Has he taken you?”

I don’t say, but the general knows the answer.

“He hasn’t, huh? Is that because you’re cold? Likely not pliant enough to take a knot? No children, probably.” A cruel twist in his eyes. “Are you no fun, Sofia?”

The jab hurts, but I smile through gritted teeth. “Apparently. Now that I have failed all the Alphas in my life, what shall I do with myself?”

“What *will* you do with yourself? After I return you, used, soiled, what do you think House Larsen will do? What do you think your beloved Lennart will do?”

“I don’t know, sir.” I lean forward. “All this talk of fucking me against my will, of ruining me just to get back at Lord Larsen, and yet here I am.” I point at myself with a flourish. “Still untouched.”

“And yet eager to be rutted.”

“Someone in this room should be.”

Another twitch of his mouth. His eyes flash with amusement and heat. “Mark my words, Lady Larsen: I am your Alpha tonight. I can make what’s about to happen extremely painful.”

“And I’m going to ask you one more time: is this the part where I take off my dress?”

His eyes drop to my neckline. My breasts. Then the place where my hip joins my leg. And just when I’m about to ask again, he’s right in front of me. Crowding me against the bed. Palms on either side of my knees.

“But what if I want to fuck you in your mating dress, Sofia?” His face is just an inch from mine. His breath, not quite steady. “What if I want to send you home wearing it, stained with my come all over it? What then, hmm?”

All at once, I cannot think. And it becomes even harder when he leans further into me, his nose running up the column of my neck as I try to hold myself as still as possible.

“What the *fuck*,” he murmurs into the hollow of my throat, and I shiver.

“What?”

“I’ve met cold Omegas before. They usually smell like Betas.”

“I don’t?”

“You… *Fuck*.” He inhales again, deeply. But this time, afterward, his tongue licks a stripe at the base of my neck.

I shudder. He does, too.

“You smell so fucking— No one could mistake you for anything but what you are.”

He inches back, face just centimeters from mine. We’re both breathing hard.

“They told you to keep the veil on?” he asks.

I remember Lady Larsen’s words. Nod. “I don’t know why.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“They didn’t want me to see you.”

“Why would they—”

“Because you’re a little too beautiful for your mate’s peace of mind.”

“Lennart is beautiful, too,” I say weakly.

A soft snort. Once again, he nuzzles the hinge of my jaw. “You could do better. You deserve better.”

“Is that what mating is about? A race? Acquiring the best you can?”

“I don’t have the faintest idea about mating. Now, fucking…” His teeth close gently around my throat. A groan rises from his chest. “I take it back. This is going to be nice. It’s going to be *more* than nice.”

“What is?”

“Fucking you. I’ll try to break you in gently. So you’ll be able to take a couple of rounds. Hell, I might need more than that from you.”

I close my eyes, mortified—and warmer than I’ve ever felt. Something pulsates at the base of my stomach in liquid bursts. “I hope you enjoy it,” I manage to say.

Which makes him pull back. Again, there’s that look of surprised amusement on his face. “You hope *I* enjoy it?”

I nod, realizing how weird and backward this sounds, but… “I don’t know if I would be able to enjoy sex anyway. And since I’m only here as a pawn in a game between two Alphas…I understand that I cannot be afforded the privilege of being wanted for myself. But if my body has to be defiled, I’d at least hope for the defiler to enjoy the process.” I exhale a laugh.

He listens to me open-mouthed, eyes all pupils. And when I’m done, he asks, breathless, “What are you doing to me?”

I blink, confused. Then shake my head.

“Where the fuck did they even find you? Are you some kind of—*weapon* that they built to take me out?”

“I don’t understand.”

“The fucking scent. And the face. The tits, and these outrageous things you keep saying, like I haven’t been thinking of putting my knot so deep inside you, you’ll feel in it in your throat—”

A chime interrupts us. A beat later, the automatic doors swish open.

I half expect his brother to walk in, or maybe the head of his guard. Instead, a slight Omega man of average height takes a few steps inside the chambers. From my cage made of Gabriel’s arms, I scan his curly hair and thin lips, unable to place him. “Sir,” he says, “something happened.”

With a deep, displeased breath, Gabriel straightens to his full height. He doesn’t look away from me as he adjusts the ridge of his cock through his combat suit, then asks, “What?”

I feel cold. Empty. As if rudely awakened in the middle of a particularly good dream.

“The drainage system.” The man glances at me. I’ve experienced disapproval before, but I now know what it’s like to be held in absolute contempt. “South wing.”

“Shit. I’ll be right there.” He runs a hand through his hair, stares me down for a few moments, as if trying to figure out what to do with me, and

then simply orders, “Stay.”

I pout. “What if I want to take a night stroll around the military quarters?”

“You will be killed on sight, that’s what.”

I glance at the beast who seems on the verge of taking a nap while lounging at his feet. “Will your…guard cat be here to ensure my continued presence?”

“I told you—she does whatever she wants.”

Alex yawns in response, then begins to lick her paw as her master leaves the room.

“Gabriel,” I call when he’s at the entrance. I was, at least to a degree, responsible for his most recent erection. I think we’re on a first-name basis.

But I still don’t know what it is that prompts me to say, “Tomorrow, when Lennart comes to collect me…if you send me back to him untouched, all this theater will have been in vain.”

He smiles, predator-like. “In that case, maybe I won’t send you back at all.”

My stomach flips. I watch Gabriel cross the threshold with Alex in tow, and tell myself that I’m relieved to be left alone.

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Chapter 10

THE PROBLEM

Gabriel

Ivar meets me on our way to the south wing, a cautious, bracing expression on his face. “How bad was it?”

I shrug, struggling to shift my focus from what happened back in my room. Her words echo through my brain. *Is this the part where I take off my dress?* Reckless. And foolish. And much more fuckable than I could have imagined. That, I might be able to forgive. The fact that she made me laugh…I’m going to make her suffer for that.

“Come on,” my brother continues. “It can’t have been that terrible. I’ve seen her holos.”

“The holos don’t—” I shake my head, still fuzzy from her lingering scent. “I saw her holos, too. It’s not the same.”

“Still. She can’t be *that* ugly.”

“She’s not ugly at all.”

“Then what… Oh.” For once, he seems at a loss for words.

I press my lips together and nod, finding that I have nothing to add either.

“Well,” he says at last, “that’s not new. You’ve been with lots of beautiful women.”

Not like her, I want to snarl, but then what? Ivar would ask for an explanation, and I would have to tell him that I had to force myself to sit

across from her to stop myself from touching her. That leaning closer to her was like traveling through space and time. That I'd never felt as out of control as when her scent was in my nostrils, not even in the throes of a rut.

"Gabe?" Ivar calls. Irritated, like it's not the first time.

"What?"

"I said you don't smell like you went through with it."

Because I didn't. Because I was fucking interrupted. Because she was looking up at me with those gorgeous green eyes and daring me to do my worst. Because she smelled better than any Omega in heat I've ever had—just on the edge of ripe, but unfinished, interrupted. Because I despise the noble-born. They're the scum of the earth, and I have never, not once in my life, experienced anything but contempt toward them.

But now I think of Lennart Larsen, and all I feel is envy. Envy of a Beta, for his cold Omega who doesn't feel *cold* at all.

"Gabe?" my brother is asking.

I turn to him, exhale a breathless laugh, and say, "We have a big fucking problem. And I'm going to need more time."

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Chapter 11

THE DREAM

Sofia

Gabriel's bed doesn't smell like him because, soldier boy that he is, he never uses it. The blankets that make his pallet, however, are another matter. I drag them to the bed after hours of his absence, after trying and failing to open the automatic door and break out, and I quickly fall asleep wrapped in them.

As a cold Omega, my sense of smell has always been abysmal. No more acute than a Beta's. And yet, Gabe's scent stands out. It's immediately distinctive, instinctively recognizable, incongruously familiar. A single sniff, and it embedded in the folds of my brain.

That may be the reason I dream of him.

We're on the outside during a Low, one that has lasted for weeks, so long that the grass has had time to *dry*. The marsh has taken on a musty yellow color, and we lie in it, belly up, letting the sun warm our faces.

He is still the general. He has no time for this. But he snuck away to be with me, and my heart thrashes around my chest as we laugh about someone named Bastian searching for him, about the flock of birds of prey that mistook the engineers for fish, about my colleague who almost mixed up narcotics and vitamins.

The sun paints his skin golden. He reaches out, his hand warm against the skin of my throat, tracing a scar I don't remember getting, and it's like a

dam bursting, ferocious, tender, sending a rush of electric heat and love through my nerve endings. With his palm open wide, he caresses up and down my spine, and I close my eyes to savor every second of his touch, to analyze it and commit it to memory and store it deep within me, where it will stay alive, pulsating, forever. For a while, we are silent.

"You can fall asleep," he murmurs against my forehead. "I'll keep watch."

"Gabriel," I murmur on the tail end of a yawn.

"Yes, love?"

"I'm glad you did what you did."

He chuckles. Another kiss. "Me too, Sofia. Me too."

When I wake up the following morning, I am wet between my legs.

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Chapter 12

THE MORNING

Sofia

The Omega man from the previous night comes to fetch me just a couple of hours after the rise of the sun—which, incidentally, I witness in its entirety from the bed. The servant quarters in House Larsen have no windows, and I've never experienced anything like the play of the light through the water: the eerie blue of the night becomes purple, then indigo, then softens into oranges.

I wonder if it looks like this every day. No way of knowing, because I'll never be back to these quarters.

It's a relief, I tell myself. And for the most part, I believe it.

"My lady," the man says after clearing his throat, just as unhappy with my presence as last night. More, possibly. "I will escort you to breakfast."

"I get breakfast?" I tilt my head. "Is that standard practice?"

"Excuse me?"

"Is it part of the whole Right thing, feeding an Omega after ripping them from the arms of their mate?"

"I wouldn't know, as the general has never claimed the Right before yesterday."

"First time for anything, hmm?" I wink at the man, who appears willing to risk a clog to flush me down the sealing system.

“The general often has Omegas spend the night with him, though,” he adds. “And yes, he does offer them a meal afterward.”

I’m not sure why my stomach drops at hearing that, and I don’t care to investigate the matter. “What a gentleman. I’m Sofia, by the way.” I hold out my hand and try not to laugh at the way he turns his nose up at me. “And as a person who is clearly aware of social mores, I assume you’ll tell me your name any second now…?”

“Bastian,” he says after a long pause, looking like he ate something sour. “I serve the general as his seneschal.”

Have I heard this name before? Yes. Recently. Very recently. But the memory is fuzzy, and I cannot place it. “Nice to meet you, Bastian.”

“I wish I could say the same, Lady Larsen. Follow me, please. And,” he adds, letting his eyes fall to my torso, “I will expect you to return the tunic and pants you stole from the general’s closet. “

I look down at the too-big clothes I have to practically beg to stay on my body and wonder why on earth I would want to steal them. Still, I try to match his gravity. “I shall strive not to disappoint you, Bastian.”

We wind through a handful of austere corridors that have nothing of the opulence I know from House Larsen. At the end of them is a dining room, and Gabriel sits at table inside it. He’s on a bench and not at the head. The moment we appear at the entrance, he glances up and turns off the holo blueprint he’s studying. There are a handful of dirty plates scattered around him, hinting that others were present but recently left. When he gestures for me to take a seat across from him, I ignore the leap in my heart and brush past Bastian. As I do, a whiff of something familiar hits my nose.

I halt.

“The deputy commander,” I murmur, halting in my tracks.

“Excuse me?”

“You smell like the Alpha woman who escorted me here last night. The deputy commander. Are you her Omega?”

His eyes widen. “I thought cold Omegas were supposed to be as bad as Betas when it comes to scents.”

“Yeah. We usually are.” In my experience, at least, I’ve never been able to tell things such as who was mated to whom before today. It’s weird, and I’d dedicate some time to wondering *why*, but Bastian leaves, and I have no choice but to go sit in front of Gabriel.

The morning light slips inside through another window, caressing the handsome, sharp features of his face, painting his hair silver-white, transporting me to last night’s dream against my will. Today he’s not wearing his armor, and yet he manages to look even more imposing than usual. Perhaps because the illusion that his bulk might be caused by something other than muscles is completely shattered.

“You look good in military blue, Lady Larsen.”

I glance down at the shirt, which reaches nearly to my knees. I don’t look *good*. I look tired and disheveled and probably foolish, too. “Everyone here really loves calling me that, huh?”

“It’s your new title.”

“And your new favorite insult.”

He turns his head away, like maybe he hopes that I won’t catch the smile on his lips. I let him think whatever he wants as I glance at the breads and jams laid out in front of me, the basket of pastries, the coffee steaming from the mug.

I usually roll out of bed late and scarf down a protein unit on my way to work. Every night, I take tea with Lady Larsen, and usually there is an assortment of sweet treats to go with it, but this is just too much luxury for me. “I’m not sure I’ve done anything to earn this spread, General.”

“Oh,” he says cryptically, “you certainly did.”

I tilt my head. Study the way he studies me. “Why were you called away last night?”

“Eat.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing to concern you. You didn’t have dinner last night—*eat*.”

“What happened, General?”

“Out of curiosity, have you *ever* done as you’re told?”

“Once or twice. What happened?”

He sighs. I think he’s stopped pretending that he doesn’t enjoy the back talk. “Same old, same old. Let’s call it a random accident. Two engineers were involved.”

“What? Take me there. I can help the healers who—”

“They are now in Valhalla, Sofia.”

My jaw drops. “What were their names? I have a lot of friends among the engineers. Some of my father’s former soldiers practically raised me—”

“They’re fine.”

“You can’t be sure.”

“I can. None of the victims ever worked with your father.”

I glare at him. “You can’t know that.”

“I know *my* army.”

I think about treating his wound ten years ago and think, *I don’t doubt it*. “What went wrong?”

“What a question. Maybe when I send you back, you should ask it to your beloved mate. I’m sure he’d have some great insight.”

“Lennart is a healer. He would *never* do anything like that.”

“What about his father? *Your* new father.”

The words feel like a slap. “Do not *ever* say that again,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “I *had* a father, and Lord Larsen isn’t worthy of being mentioned in the same sentence as him. There is little I would put past that man, including killing engineers in cold blood. But Lennart wouldn’t stand by and let him.”

A short, bitter laugh. “No member of that family has done jack shit to stop Lord Larsen. They all know, and they are all complicit.”

I think about Lady Larsen. Lara. Lennart. They may be spineless, but they wouldn't allow anything like that, I know it. Still, I would love an opportunity to ask them directly. Just to be sure. "Am I allowed to leave?"

Gabriel spends a minute thinking about it, clearly savoring his power over my whereabouts. "Not yet."

"The first night is over."

He leans forward, elbows on each side of his plate. "Is it? Because I feel like I didn't quite…" He drifts off. Freezes. At once, his nostrils widen as he inhales deeply. After a moment he lets out a low "fuck."

"Fuck?"

His pupils are little more than pinpricks. "Do you always smell like this in the morning?"

"I…" I last showered before the ceremony. This morning I washed my face, just like every day. I haven't done enough to work up an odor. "Smell like what?"

"Like…" He shakes his head as if to expel something from it.

I inhale, too, but all I can smell is the yeast of the bread. And, of course, Gabriel's powerful, lovely Alpha scent. This morning, when I woke up in his bed, it hit me even harder than last night. So hard, all I want is to grab his palm and bring it to my face and bite into his wrist. I want to *lick* him and feel his taste against the roof of my mouth. I want to bury my nose into his skin and just *breathe*.

What the hell is wrong with me? Less than a minute ago, we were talking about people dying.

"What's a cold Omega?" Gabriel asks.

"I… Excuse me?"

"You're a healer. Explain it to me like I'm the ignorant fuck we both know I am. What's wrong with a cold Omega, physically? Biologically?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because I'm curious."

I click my tongue, annoyed, wondering whether he's experimenting with a new twisted way to hurt me. But then I hear myself say, "We're just… The development of our Omega sexual characteristics halted abruptly, and no drugs or lifestyle changes were able to restart it." He seems lost in thought. I notice the deep frown on his brow, and wonder what it would take to smooth it over. "Sir? Are you okay?"

He clears his throat. Shifts back, as if to get away from me. "Yes, Lady Larsen."

I roll my eyes. "You know, I've been considering this matter."

"Which one?"

"Whether it's correct for you to call me that. Since my mating with Lennart is not yet complete—thanks to *you*—I don't think you should." A beat. "Yet."

A muscle twitches in his jaw. Still, he smiles. "Yet."

"Are you going to send me back untouched? Or are you here to finish what you started?" I tilt my head. "Or what you *didn't* start?"

"I'm here because I got hungry following my morning sparring session."

Despite myself, I laugh. "I bet you're the kind of Alpha who wakes up two hours before everyone else to train."

"And I bet you're the kind of Omega who stays up two hours longer than everyone else to read."

How does he know?

We stare at each other, and I could swear that his lips are twitching upward.

"Is your seneschal really mated to your deputy commander? Did I get it right?"

"You did. Yes."

Wow. Look at me go. "Does he treat all the Omegas who share your bed like they're fish excrement?"

“What if I told you that there hasn’t been anyone else?”

“I’d ask if you hit your head while sparring.”

He laughs. “I do fuck Omegas. But not in my bed.”

“How so?”

“I find that their scents tend to linger. Overstay their welcome.”

That explains why his quarters smell only like him. “Don’t worry,” I reassure him. “I won’t make the mistake of thinking that being the exception makes me special.” I cock my head in something that could almost be friendly. *Flirty*, Lara would call it. “What really makes me special is that you haven’t taken me, isn’t it?”

It’s his turn to say, “Yet. I haven’t taken you *yet*, Sofia.” I briefly wonder if he plans to wipe the table clean with his arm and fuck me right on top of it in the next three minutes, right before I’m allowed to return home.

For a split second, the look in his eyes has me almost certain he’s considering the same.

“Is that why Bastian wants to feed me to the oceans? Because I’m soiling your room with my scent?”

“Bastian has no say in what I get off to. The reason he doesn’t like you is your unfortunate association with the Larsens—and because of his allegiance to Martia.”

“What does that mean? Why would that make her hate me?”

“Martia and I were engineering soldiers together.”

“I still don’t understand. How would that make her hate—”

“We served under Kuznetsov.”

I pause, surprised and confused. The truth is, I knew from my father that the soldier who would go on to become General Agard had served under him for a period of time. But that was a while ago, and I had no way of knowing if Gabriel remembered or even cared about an old commanding officer. The fact that he did makes me absolutely delighted. I miss my

father. Enjoy hearing him brought up. Relish any opportunity to discuss him. “Why didn’t…?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Were you aware that I was his daughter? Why didn’t you say that before?”

His laughter is of the hollow, angry kind. “There’s no need to pretend, Sofia. This is very disingenuous, even for a newly minted Larsen.”

“I… Excuse me? Pretend what?”

“That you didn’t have us banned from his funeral.”

My mouth falls open. “I didn’t.”

“Lady Larsen spoke to my seneschal herself. She said that you didn’t want us there—”

“Gabriel, I would *never*. When my father died, even if I cared about political allegiances or about what the hell happened between you and Lord Larsen, I would have never prevented someone who cared about my father from… There must have been a misunderstanding. Lady Larsen wouldn’t—”

“I think,” he growls, his icy eyes suddenly inches from mine, “you will find that when it comes to you, Lady Larsen absolutely *would*.”

We regard each other, a heavy silence between us as I try to untangle his words. If Lady Larsen indeed told Bastian something like that, she must have meant well. Perhaps she was afraid that the general’s presence would lead to tensions that might ruin the ceremony.

“I gave her a message for you,” Gabriel says. “A letter. Did she pass it along?”

I swallow. Shake my head. Glance at the large circular window while I massage my sternum to soothe the hollow ache in my chest. “What did it say?”

“It doesn’t matter.” His tone seems to suggest the opposite. “No need to worry your oblivious little head over it, *Lady Larsen*. You are very good at

not noticing what happens around you."

"How dare you—"

"Gabe," someone calls from the entrance.

It's Martia. But I don't turn toward her, and neither does Gabriel.

"They're here," she adds.

"Tell Lennart that he's going to have to wait until I'm done using his mate," Gabriel orders.

I should flinch at the crude words, but they simply don't hurt enough. Maybe I'm too angry. Or maybe it's the idea that it elicits—him really *using* me like an Alpha would an Omega. It makes my belly warmer. Instantly, as if in response, Gabriel's nostrils flare.

"It's not Lennart," Martia says.

At last, we look at her with twin scowls.

"Who did they send?" Gabriel asks.

"Four guards."

"And?"

"That's it."

His frown etches deeper. "You're joking, right? You can't be fucking serious."

"What did you expect from a spineless coward like Lennart?" Martia sneers.

I should object to that. Defend my mate. Say that they shouldn't talk about him like that, but… My head spins, and I cannot make sense of what I'm feeling. It *is* odd that Lennart, with whom I should have spent last night, is suddenly too busy to show up for me.

Even odder is Gabriel's slow, triumphant cheek-to-cheek grin. He stands without a word, heading outside the dining room.

After a moment of hesitation, I run after him.

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Chapter 13

THE RETRIEVAL

Sofia

No one stops me as I follow a few feet after Gabriel, halting when he does in front of the commander of Lord Larsen's personal guard.

"You expect me to hand over an unprotected Omega to *you*?" Gabriel asks. He is unarmed, wearing the thin shirt and pants that soldiers usually put on for physical training—a stark contrast to the commander's red armor and multiple weapons. And yet, it's the guard who takes a cautionary step back.

"She will not be unprotected. As you can see, I have three escorts with me."

"All of whom are Alphas. None of whom are her mate."

I wonder why Lennart didn't come. Maybe he simply didn't know the correct protocol for the Right of the First Night, but he could have found out. He belongs to one of the oldest families in the stronghold and has infinite resources at his disposal. The result is that his absence looks bad. Like a provocation. Like Lennart is playing with fire—and with my life.

How could he?

House Larsen's commander must know that the general would never murder a House's emissary in cold blood. Still, he looks like he'd rather throw himself from the top of the keep than be here. "Sir, I have been personally instructed by Lord Larsen to—"

“I don’t know you. Above all, I don’t *trust* you. Tell Lennart Larsen that the law gives very specific instructions on how to resolve the Right of the First Night. I will hand Sofia Kuznetsov over to him and no one else. Not his guards. Not his brother. Not his parents. Not any other representative of House Larsen. If her father returns from the dead, I might make an exception. Short of that, Lennart will have to come retrieve her himself, as is custom.”

“But, sir, I see her.” The guard is making a last-ditch attempt. “She’s right there, behind you. Maybe we could ask her what she prefers?”

Gabriel looks at me over his shoulder, and my cheeks heat. Even more so when, after staring for too many pounding heartbeats, he orders, “Tell Lennart that I’m not done with his mate yet.” He turns and walks away, giving his unarmored, unarmed back to the Larsen guards with a confidence and a disregard for danger that…

Well. It definitely matches what I’ve learned about him in the last twenty-four hours.

“Gabriel,” I say when he brushes past me, but he doesn’t bother to stop. I have no choice but to follow him back inside the dining room, and when he still won’t wait for me, I close a hand around his wrist to stop him.

Martia is still there, waiting, looking between us, but I ignore her. If she hates me as much as Gabriel implied, she’s definitely not going to come to my aid and help me…

Help me *what*? I’m not certain what I want from Gabriel, at the moment. Permission to go home to my mate, right? There is nowhere else I should care to be. Nowhere else I *could* be. The Larsens are my family now, and I have questions to ask them.

But why does the idea of leaving make me nauseous?

“Gabe,” Martia says, tone bored, “send the girl back. The ball is in the Larsens’ court. Plus, you’ve had your weekly lay, and it won’t…” She

stops. Her eyes zero in on me like I'm a piece of furniture she just bumped into. Her eyes widen accusingly at me, even as she says, "No fucking way."

"What?" I ask.

"He hasn't *touched* you, has he?" Martia takes a step closer, nostrils flaring. "Gabe, why does she smell like you marked her as under your protection, but *not* like you fucked her?"

"Leave us," he orders.

"Gabriel." Martia runs a hand through her short hair. "This is serious. What the hell is going on? Are you really going to return her like the most you did with her was play cards? Is it because she's cold? If you're having issues getting it up—"

"Get. The fuck. *Out*."

A moment later, after several muttered curse words and the least obsequious salute I've ever witnessed, we are alone.

Just me and him, and I am more aware of it than ever. So much so, a shiver rolls through my spine.

"At long last," he says.

"Wh-what?"

"You finally have the grace to look upset and worried by the situation. Is it finally dawning on you? The extent to which you are at my disposal? The fact that I haven't fucked you yet doesn't mean that I won't."

I take another step back, wrapping my arms around my stomach.

"So lovely to see that your reserve of patience and cheerfulness is not infinite."

"Why are you keeping me here?"

"Because your mate has not come to retrieve you. No other reason. Why? Are you doubting my word?"

"He sent his men—"

"He did, didn't he." He leans back against the table, relaxed. "Does he know?"

“What?”

“The treasure he has on his hands.”

“I don’t understand what you—”

“You are very much an Omega, aren’t you?”

I clench my fists and glance away. “I’m not one at all. I thought we’d agreed on that.”

“Did we? Your presentation stalled, sure. But in every other way, you are so stereotypically Omega, they should write manuals on you.”

“That shows how little you know me,” I huff. “I am not submissive, or timid, or—”

“No, you aren’t. But only imbeciles think that those are Omega traits.” The way he looks at me clearly implies that neither of us is one, and I feel a sudden surge of embarrassment. Both Gabriel’s seneschal and his right hand are Omegas. It’s clear that he doesn’t share Lord Larsen’s views on designation. “Nice try, Sofia, but we know better, don’t we? You don’t want to be told what to do. You don’t want to be locked in a room and protected. What you *need* is the kind of completeness that comes with an indissoluble bond. You *need* a family to take care of and who’ll take care of you. You *need* absolute trust, open communication, and unrelenting loyalty. Is that not true?” When I am unable to form a reply, he continues at a lower register: “You need an Alpha. Someone who needs you just as much. Is that not the truth?”

It’s like he’s beaten me. I feel as though his words carved my chest open and scooped my heart out. All I can do now is find a way to go on living without it. “It doesn’t matter,” I whisper, swallowing around the lump in my throat. “I can’t have it.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

No, it isn’t. “How do you even know?”

“Oh, Sofia.” His smile holds no warmth and a lot of pity. “If you focus hard enough, you might be able to piece it together.”

I shake my head, unwilling to go down the road he's trying to lead me to. "I don't care. I want to go home."

It's not what Gabriel wanted to hear. He pushes away from the table and moves closer, coming to tower over me. His arms cross over his chest, likely a tell of his rising temper, but my eyes fall on his shoulder and the biceps underneath. The short-sleeved shirt he's wearing leaves a large portion of his long arm uncovered, and I reach out before I can think any better of it.

His muscles tense, hard as the bricks that make up the keep's walls. He doesn't ask what I'm doing, not with words, but his surprise at me initiating the touch is obvious.

He is warm. He smells…*edible*. I try to inhale subtly, but it's obvious that I'm filling my lungs, and I don't mind him knowing.

"Whoever sutured this wound did a very shitty job," I say, letting two of my fingers trace the jagged line that travels past his elbow.

I half expect him to free himself. Instead, he scowls down at me and snaps, "She did her best."

"And her best was *severely* lacking."

"Her best was fucking perfect."

"If you consider a zigzagging line perfect, sure."

"Considering the situation, she…" He halts. His eyes narrow on my face. "Fuck. Was it you? The apprentice?"

"The one and only." Despite myself, and the situation, I smile.

Gabriel's lips part, as if the knowledge that I treated him all those years ago brings him awe and delight. "It was you," he repeats.

"I guarantee you, my stitching techniques have much improved." My fingers slip lower, tracing a handful of cleaner white scars that crisscross down his forearm. "Even better than whoever stitched these other ones."

"I'm sure you'll have the opportunity to show me very soon. I collect cuts easily and often."

“Yeah, I…” A flash of disappointment slashes through me. It morphs into a disoriented confusion that I cannot interpret, and I bite my lower lip until it bleeds, hoping to hide it.

“What?” he asks softly.

“I…” I look up to meet his eyes. Swallow. Think—unbidden, unbound—that it would have been nice to never stop healing him. To be there every time he was in need of medical attention. To know that I’d be there for his next cut, his next illness, his next broken bone. “My mate is already very unhappy at the idea of me continuing to work. I doubt he’ll let me treat you ever again.” I let my arm fall to my side. My breath is sudden and deep and shuddering. Something is happening to me, something that has to do with Gabriel’s scent and my prolonged presence here, something I cannot fully understand.

“Love,” Gabriel tells me, little more than a whisper. His hand finds the side of my face and wraps around it. “Your *mate* will pay dearly for ever thinking that he could tell you what to do.” For once, his tone sounds more like a promise than a threat, and the kiss he presses against my forehead feels like the stamp of his seal.

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Chapter 14

THE SCENT

Gabriel

Leaving her is about as easy as ripping out my own arm.

However, years of discipline count for something, and I make myself do it anyway. Still, when I join Martia in the elevators to go meet with the lieutenant generals, I'm in a shittier mood than usual. "Any news on last night's explosion?" I ask.

"We're still working on that," she explains, "but there doesn't seem to be much evidence tying it to House Larsen."

"What about the rest?"

"They're being very messy. Our informants have reported that Lord Laren reached out to the heads of the other Houses and tried to rope them into joining forces to overthrow you."

I snort. "He's so fucking predictable."

"Yup. He got shut down, of course. Late last night he dragged Lennart and Gunner to speak to the council. Who reminded them of the concept of law."

"Fantastic." I nod. "That leaves them two options: take it on the chin, or launch another strike."

"And we all know Lord Larsen would never choose the former." She grins. "You gotta give it to Ivar—claiming the Right is having the effect we

hoped on House Larsen. They seem to be getting sloppy and a little desperate, just like he predicted."

"*Ivar* predicted Lennart would object to the Right and give me a chance to kill him on the spot."

"Okay, he may have been overly optimistic on the timing, but we're getting there. Plus…"

I glance at her. "What?"

"It doesn't seem like you mind." At my lifted eyebrow, she elaborates, "Having the girl around, I mean."

The elevator changes direction and begins to move vertically. I turn to Martia, my arms folded on my chest, and wait for her to continue. She has never been one to mince words.

"I have eyes, Gabe. And I've known you for fifteen years."

I suck the inside of my cheek. "Both facts."

"None of this is normal."

"And by 'this,' you mean…?"

She gestures in my direction, entertained. "The way you're letting some Omega you met less than twenty-four hours ago get under your skin while you're at war with your political rival."

"Lord Larsen is no *rival*, just a fossil rotting in entitlement, and his days are numbered. As for the Omega, I first met her long before yesterday."

She frowns. "Did you?"

I don't bother to reply, but my hand lifts to my arm, and I nearly groan in frustration when it encounters Kevlar instead of warm skin. For the first time in my life, I resent my armor. I want to trace the scar she left on my arm. The place where she marked me long before I knew who she was or what she would grow to become. Kuznetzov's daughter, too.

Fuck. She was there all along, wasn't she?

"It's unexpected," I admit.

"What is?"

“Her.” I take a deep breath. Look straight ahead. “I’m going to speak to the generals, and then I’ll make sure everything is in place and that there’s nothing Lord Larsen can do without me finding out. I have a different job for you.”

“Which would be?”

“I need you to make sure Lennart is kept busy elsewhere for the rest of the day. I don’t care what you have to do. Cut his Achilles tendons if you need to.”

“With pleasure. And after that?”

I feel myself smile. “I’m not giving her back, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“For how long?”

Forever. That’s the only possible answer. But I can’t tell that to Martia, because even I know how deranged it sounds. “For however fucking long I want her.”

“Gabe, it’s… You might not have a choice.”

“I *always* have a choice.”

Martia sighs. But then she asks, “Her scent changed. You noticed it, too, right?”

After a beat, I nod.

“It’s so much stronger than even last night. I’ve never seen anything like it. There is something *very* wrong here.” Her throat works. “Think Lennart Larsen is cut from the same cloth as his father?”

I consider the matter. A wave of anger courses through me, but I stave it off. I can be patient, at least for short periods. By the end of the week at the latest, I’m going to give Lord Larsen and his son exactly what they deserve.

“For Lennart’s own sake,” I say, “I really hope he isn’t.”

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Chapter 15

THE GARDEN

Sofia

That afternoon brings a partial Low, one not predicted by the tide watchers. It's something most people in the stronghold barely notice, as the water falls only enough to free the last five or six floors of the stronghold, and it probably won't last longer than ten hours. Still, it's a perfect opportunity for the engineers to take care of some repairs that need to be tackled from the outside.

Gabriel is gone, and from an overheard conversation between Ivar and Bastian, I gather that he's busy with important and probably supersecret meetings. Nearly all the soldiers are focusing on the maintenance work. That leaves me free to roam the military area, which is in the southern wing of the third level from the top. A Beta guard trails after me, keeping an eye on me from a few feet away. I wonder whether she's here for my safety, to prevent my escape, or to protect others in case I become deranged, but there are so few people wandering around the corridors, the second option must be the correct one.

It's for the best because I am developing the mother of all headaches. It must have to do with this new environment, the constant stimulation, the stressful last few days. The military wing is large, and I love studying its severe architecture and cataloguing the myriad of ways in which it differs from House Larsen's lavishness.

Yet here the smells feel almost too intense. The other Omegas I pass are cloying. The Alphas, aggressive and overbearing. Paradoxically, the only place where I'm at peace is Gabriel's room, where his scent dominates and rises above any other. But when I peek in there, Alex is stretched on a sunbeam. Given the heft of her glare, I decide to find another location to spend the afternoon.

My guard recommends a beautiful artificial garden. It's at the corner of the wing, in an area that can be accessed by everyone in the stronghold. It has more windows than I can count, and I cannot stop thinking that if such a place belonged to Lord Larsen, he would have appropriated it and restricted the access to himself and his family. Clearly, Gabriel believes in communal spaces and wants everyone to experience real sunlight. The kind of principles you develop when you weren't raised on the fiftieth floor, I guess.

I spend hours here. I circle the beautiful plants that look like pictures in the old books Dad used to read to me, studying the shapes of the leaves, marveling at the brightness of the flowers. I am, for the most part, on my own, which should be freeing but has me feeling oddly bereft, as though I have misplaced a limb or something equally necessary. Toward the end of the afternoon, though, a redheaded child who cannot be older than four comes barreling down one of the pathways, then stops right in front of me with a quizzical expression.

As much as I adore children, I don't have much experience with them. I've treated some, mostly kids of military members, but when their parents take them to me, it's usually for urgent medical issues, and they tend to be scared out of their minds. To put them at ease, I've learned a single trick that never fails to dazzle: pulling an object from behind their ear.

In this case, I choose a flower.

The trick must delight healthy children as much as the sick because the girl gasps, squees, and says something that sounds like her version of

“*again!*” That’s when a young Alpha emerges from behind a leafy bush. He’s tall and handsome, with auburn hair and brown eyes.

And he says in a friendly tone, “I’m starting to wonder if maybe you’re *not* the monster they made you out to be.” Ivar’s scent is all over him. Even from a few dozen feet away, I can easily pick it up.

I rise to my feet as the man exchanges a nod with my guard, then comes closer.

“This is Marguerite,” he tells me, picking up the child. She must be his and Ivar’s daughter.

Which makes her Gabriel’s niece, I think to myself—for some reason, with an odd pang in my chest.

“And I am Andreas.”

I force out a smile. “Sofia.”

“Oh, I know. Martia and I work together, and she’s been complaining about you for the past two days. And yet, no one will tell me what the deal is between you and the general,” he says, with something I can only describe as a pout. “It’s rough, being surrounded by Alphas. They’re not good at sharing gossip.”

“Oh. Well, my deepest sympathies.”

“No offense, healer, but you can shove your sympathies up your nose. There’s something else I want from you.”

“And what would that be?”

He grins. “Information.”

He leads me to a little play area right behind a giant fern, where we sit side by side on a stone bench and watch Marguerite build castles in a rocky sandbox. “So, you’re Lennart’s mate?”

“You know him?” I ask, surprised.

“A bit. I was born and raised in House Niemi, though not in the main branch of the family. But Lennart and I are both third sons around the same age. There was some overlap.”

“Ah. Well, I’m sure Ivar has already explained the gist of what’s going on.”

“Only the bare bones. Lord Larsen, cold Omega, Right of the First Night. That’s about it.” He sighs. “Ivar’s entire life consists of gathering exploitable information about people and events and circumstances. When he’s home with me and Marguerite, he likes to relax and never shares any juicy stuff. Mostly, we talk about boring property disputes that ended two hundred years ago.”

“Who doesn’t like a good land registry?” I ask dryly.

“Who, indeed. So, how did you meet Lennart?”

“We were both training as healers.” It feels so long ago. “And then we became friends.”

“Love at first sight?”

“Not really. He liked me for longer than I did him. He was nice, but I didn’t really think of him like that. When I ended up being cold, though, he told me that he didn’t care. That I was still perfect to him.” I swallow. It’s strange, sharing such intimate details with someone I just met. But my head feels stuffed with cotton, and I might be running a fever, and there is something soothing about putting my thoughts in order to lay them out for another person. “It was a tough time. I couldn’t figure out my body. I felt like I was disappointing everyone around me. But Lennart was so accepting. When he asked me to be his mate, I accepted.”

“Was that recently?”

“No, not really. Years ago.” I feel myself flush. “I pushed back the mating for a while. I was just very busy with work, and then my father was sick, and after…”

“Not eager?” Andreas asks.

I glance away, a mix of guilt and defensiveness churning through my stomach. “It’s not so simple.”

“I’m sure it isn’t. And what about you and Gabriel? How did that start?”

“How did what start?”

His smile is amused. “Your relationship.”

“There is no relationship.”

“He called the Right of the First Night for the first time in his life. To have *you*.”

“I… Yes, he did. But it’s exclusively to get back at Lord Larsen. It has nothing to do with me.” Andreas scans my face like it’s a book written in the tiniest font. Ahead of us, Marguerite is still piling rocks, and I allow myself to ask *simply* out of curiosity, “Is there anyone else?”

“Excuse me?”

“Gabriel. Has he…ever thought about mating? Or been close?”

“No. God, no.” He laughs. “Can’t you tell? Does he look like the kind of Alpha who has an Omega behind him? Someone who loves him?”

I have to mull it over for a minute. “Not really, no.” Without a doubt, Gabriel is very skilled at taking care of the stronghold. But maybe he needs someone who’ll take care of him—and someone to take care of who’ll give back in a more tangible and immediate fashion than a massive stone structure that hosts tens of thousands of people. Someone who won’t let him wake up earlier and earlier. Someone who’ll decorate his rooms with just a splash of color. Someone for him to talk to about his day. Someone willing to massage the stiffness of his muscles after a sparring session. Someone able to make him laugh—

Fuck. Where are these thoughts coming from?

I *know* where. It’s what he told me earlier. He looked me in the eye and listed every single thing I’ve ever wanted, like I’m more transparent to him than limpid water. And now my brain is twisting itself into thinking that it knows *his* needs and desires.

I really must be ill.

“Can I tell you something?” Andreas asks softly. “As an Alpha?”

I nod slowly.

“You don’t smell cold. In fact, you smell”—he sniffs deeply—“well, for the most part, you smell like Gabriel decided to personally coat you in his scent. But also healthy. Very healthy, if you get my meaning.”

I swallow, then massage my temples, where the throbbing is steadily intensifying.

“You see how this is odd, right?” Andreas asks.

I hesitate. Watch the thin line of his lips. Nod, because things are changing. My body. My mind. What I want and what I need. I don’t know how or why, but I’m no longer the person I was twenty-four hours ago.

And my head is about to fucking *explode*.

“No offense,” I say gently, “but I think this might be a conversation I should be having with Gabriel.” *And with Lennart*, I try to force myself to add. But the name simply won’t come out of my lips.

“No offense taken, Sofia.” His hand lifts to pat my back, but instantly falls back at his side, as if he remembered himself. As if he realized that I belong to another Alpha, and that it would be impolite for him to touch me. “I think so, too.”

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Chapter 16

THE MEETING

Gabriel

I take the meeting Lennart requested in the same operations suite that was stormed just a few days ago. Despite the attempt at cleaning, the stench of blood still saturates the air.

I'm attempting to make a point and hope it will come across bright and clear.

"I don't believe you and I have ever talked face-to-face," I tell Lennart after he sits across the table from me. I can smell the sweat of his palms, see him wipe them over his trousers. "Although I remember you standing behind your mother, back when she was demanding that I leave Kuznetsov's funeral." He glares at me, tight-fisted, and I smile behind my face mask.

"Gabriel—"

"That's *not* how you address the general of the military system that keeps you alive, is it?"

A tic in his jaw. Clenched teeth. His brown hair is mussed, as though he ran his fingers through it one too many times. If anyone who is not a member of the military wants to access this wing of the keep, they need to use a complex system of tunnels and elevators. How convenient that today they were all out of service and only *just* got repaired.

What a stressful few hours he must have had.

“I want her back,” he bites out.

“Her?” I ask, as if Sofia’s name hasn’t been pounding in my veins from the second I first saw her sitting on my bed.

“My mate.”

“Ah. *Her*. Well, then you should have come to fetch her this morning. Now she is asleep.”

He leans forward. “The Right of the First Night, by definition, applies only to the first night. You can’t keep her here.”

“And that’s why I will send her back as soon as she wakes up.” By now I know that it’s a lie, and he must suspect it, too. Sofia is not going anywhere. The certainty has been growing inside me like a weed, taking over every little empty corner.

Lennart flushes. “If you send her back with child…”

For a moment, the desire to slash his throat is so intense, I can almost smell the iron of his blood. “A cold Omega? With child? That’s not very likely, is it?” When Lennart’s expression twists into something carefully blank, I know I’ve struck a nerve. So I continue. “Then again, Sofia doesn’t *smell* so cold lately. Maybe you haven’t had a chance to notice, but I’ve had plenty of opportunities to experience that change.”

Lennart stares, jaw so tense, it trembles. And that’s when I’m certain of it: he has done something to her. I don’t know how, and I don’t know why. But I do know what I am going to do to him once I finally figure it out.

“General,” he says, “when you accepted your mandate, you mentioned wanting to be just and equitable. Do you remember?”

I drum my fingers. “Vaguely.”

“Then explain to me how you went from *that* to violating my mate and killing my brother in cold blood, all because of this war between you and my father—”

“I didn’t kill your brother in cold blood, Lennart.” It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes. “I *punished* him in a way that was appropriate and

proportional to his infraction.” I lean forward, elbows over the table. “You *know* he deserved it. House Larsen—no, the entire fucking *world*—is better without him.”

“You could have sent him to the prisons.”

“I could not. It was not a first offense, or a second, or even a third. After what he did to those Omegas, any other Alpha would not have been given a second chance. Why should your brother—”

“Because he was a *Larsen*.”

There it is, loud and brazen as it echoes in the empty room. The reason I wish I’d slipped and ran my sword through Lennart and the rest of his family when he was a child.

I let the contempt I feel for him wash over me. Then I sit back, slowly take off my mask and smile. “You would like to be treated like a Larsen? Then, Lennart, that’s exactly what I will do.”

It’s a promise.

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Chapter 17

THE DECISION

Gabriel

Once Lennart leaves, my brother enters the room, and I don't waste time with a preamble before announcing, "I'm keeping her."

I feel remarkably serene about my choice. Sofia is not safe with any member of House Larsen. Just as importantly, I want her with me—now and at all times. The rest is just a matter of ironing out the details. Or of killing whoever won't accept my decision.

Ivar, of course, disagrees. "Are you— You cannot *keep* her, Gabriel. She's not a *pet*. It's called the Right of the *First* Night, not the Right of However Fucking Long You Want to—"

"I'm not going to return her," I repeat.

Ivar takes a deep breath. Pinches the bridge of his nose. "We have a plan. A plan that involves provoking House Larsen into an insurrection while acting aboveboard, to convince the council to side with us. The plan doesn't work if you give Lord Larsen a *legitimate* reason for a coup. You already stretched it by holding the girl one more night—"

"I. Am. Keeping her."

"For how long?"

I smile. "How long do you think?"

Ivar claws at his scalp, takes several steps away from where I sit, then abruptly turns around. "Tell you what." He points his middle finger at me.

“You give her the option. Tonight, you go to her and do…do whatever the fuck it is that you want.”

“If I stayed on her the entire night, I wouldn’t be able to do a thousandth of what I want.”

“I don’t—I didn’t *ask*, Gabriel. *All-father*.” He grimaces. “You keep her for the night and do your thing, no questions asked. But *before*, you tell her that she can either go back, or she can stay with you. And if she asks to go back, you let her.”

“I don’t fucking want to let her—”

“Gabriel, damn it.” My brother’s palms are suddenly planted on the stone table. His face is an inch from mine. “If we want any semblance of our plan to work, we need to obey the law. We need to be spotless in front of the council. If she asks to stay with you…then maybe we can massage the messaging. We could argue that you’re removing her from a situation she never wanted to begin with.”

I clench my fists. Release them. “She doesn’t *know* what she wants. They did something to her. She wasn’t given a chance to—”

“Gabriel, this is bigger than your knot. This is about the lives of *tens of thousands*, and last I checked the math, thousands of lives are more important than one. Especially when we’re talking about people you swore to protect.”

I loathe everything about this. Above all, and with every fiber of my being, I despise the idea of ever implying to Sofia that I’m willing to let her go.

But…

“I’ll do it. I’ll give her the option,” I say at last. Just as Ivar’s shoulders sag in relief, I add, “But it’s not true.”

“What isn’t?”

“The fucking math.” I stand to leave. “Thousands of people might be more than one. But all their lives put together do not matter more than

hers.”

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Chapter 18

THE SECOND

Sofia

My headache has gone from bothersome to skull-splitting, and it's not helped by the way Alex stares at me, as though my thighs are sure to be the tastiest morsels she has ever encountered. Luckily, the throbbing in my temples eases the moment the automatic door slides open and Gabriel steps inside his rooms, bringing a fresh wave of his mouthwatering, soothing scent with him.

"No one has come to pick me up, huh?" I ask.

He takes off his mask, revealing a tense expression that I want to reach out and soften with my fingers. Then he begins to unlatch his armor. "Don't take it personally. I made it very difficult for any Larsen to get here."

I try to muster some outrage at the admission that he's purposely keeping me apart from my mate, but all that comes out of me is "ah."

"And even then, you motivated Lennart enough that he managed to make it to my operations suite. He just left."

I should feel some degree of pride at the thought. An ounce of that same gratitude I've always experienced when it comes to Lennart's willingness to stand by me, despite all my imperfections. But whenever my mind goes to him, my chest throbs with an empty, bitter kind of ache that I cannot yet parse.

Without thinking about it, I stand from my cross-legged seat on the bed and walk to Gabriel. “Why is it that I’m still here, then?” I ask out of idle curiosity.

“I told him you were sleeping. He’ll be back in the morning.”

That should upset me, but all I know is that his scent is intoxicating and that I don’t mind remaining close to the source. In fact, I want to get closer. I want to *touch*. “I see.” I come to stand in front of Gabriel and begin freeing him from his breastplate.

He freezes. Breathes deeply once or twice, maybe three times. Then, after observing me working on the latches for a while, he asks roughly, “Who taught you how to do that?”

“Who do you think?” When his hand comes up to help me, I gently push it away. “My father, of course.”

“Ah.”

“And since I heal soldiers, it’s a useful skill.” I move down to his legs. “Except that one time I almost choked an Alpha.”

He snorts softly. “Reassuring.”

“He bitched a lot, but lived to tell the tale.” I look up at Gabriel. Watch him return my smile. He’s down to his blue shirt and pants, and I feel a deep sense of satisfaction at having helped him with this small task. I made my Alpha more comfortable—

What? Not *my* Alpha. Just *an* Alpha.

But this is Gabriel, and he’s *that* good at coaxing my Omega instincts to break through. The compulsion to be of service. Provide respite. I’ve never experienced it so profoundly before, definitely not with Lennart, but there’s a first time for everything.

I don’t know. It’s hard to think, and I’m confused. Gabriel’s scent is so *thick*. Nearly impossible to wade through.

Maybe I *am* ill. Cooking up a fever. “I’m sorry.” I chuckle to myself after realizing that I’ve just been staring at him for whole minutes. “My

head has been pounding. It's like everything… Is it possible that the scents in the military wing are more vivid than everywhere else?"

"No," he says, unsurprised by my ridiculous question. "It's not."

"Right. I must just be sick, then."

He blows out a scoff. "You know better than that, Sofia."

"Do I?" My palm finds one of the glands on my neck. Rubs it in a small soothing motion.

"You're not sick," Gabriel says. "The opposite, actually."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You are…"

He shakes his head. Something unsaid lingers between us, something neither of us can fully acknowledge to the other. Me, because I want it too much, and being wrong would break me from the inside out. Gabriel… I wonder what *his* motives are.

He opens his mouth. Closes it. Shakes his head. "I'll tell you when I'm sure."

"Yeah. Okay." I force myself to take a step back, hating every inch of distance between us. Push down a swallow. "Since I'm obviously *fast* asleep and staying one more night, how will we pass the time?"

Something flashes in his eyes, but he doesn't reply. Instead he pulls up the chair even closer than it was last night, and a minute later, I'm on the bed once more, watching Alex as she settles in for a nap at his feet.

This could be a routine, I think.

Him and me and the night. Or the day—like in my dream. It's right there, the turquoise of his eyes in the sparkling sun. The weight of his scarred forearm resting over my waist. Right there, ready for me to pluck.

Except that no. It's just *not*.

I have a *mate*.

Gabriel *took* me from my mate.

Without asking.

And here I am, wanting to roll in his scent.

While he obviously reads my mind. “Do you want to go back to him?” he asks, locking his eyes with mine.

“What?”

“Do you want to go back to Lennart?”

“Of course. He’s my—”

“Do you want to go back to Lennart?” he repeats, slower this time, and I take it for what it is: an invitation to actually reflect before giving him an answer.

So I do. I wait for a beat, consider the matter, a roaring heat in my ears the whole time.

No, my gut says. *I don’t.* Why would I leave this place? This scent*?* When is the last time I’ve felt this good about something?

But what is the alternative? “House Larsen is my home. I have nowhere else to go. I have no one else. I—”

His blue eyes harden. “Sofia.”

“Nothing has changed,” I continue. “What Lady Larsen did during my father’s funeral does concern me, but there must be an explanation. And she’s the only mother I’ve ever known. Why wouldn’t I want to return? What else do I have?”

“Sofia.” He looks at me like I should be careful, because I’m on the verge of disappointing him greatly. “You don’t need me to tell you, right? You are not so naive as to not realize that whatever is mine is yours.”

I cannot breathe. I think I know what he’s saying, but I may not be grasping the full implications of his words. After all, this is an Alpha who fills his bed—or whatever surface he favors—with Omegas. How long until he grows bored of me? And he exploited an antiquated custom to take me by force, didn’t he? I’m here only because he hates the Larsens, and as much as I agree with his opinion on the noble class, can I trust anything he says? Can I refuse to return home because he smells like the best thing I’ve

ever known? Can I really be so selfish as to exacerbate the conflict between the general of the military and a Great House? It could throw the stronghold into chaos. Not to mention Gabriel hasn't even said that *he* wants me to stay. And here I am, still tempted to agree to his requests.

I just can't. "I have to go back," I say, firm but soft. "Lennart is my mate. I have to go back to him. I owe him as much."

Gabriel is angry. Furious. A brief moment of internal war explodes to his face, then fades into blank, bitter nothing. "Then, Sofia…I'd tell you that I'm sorry, but it would be a lie."

"Sorry for what?"

He stands, dwarfing me with his size, looking down at me with a mix of menace and longing. "If I return you tomorrow, you can't smell like you spent the last two days untouched."

I cock my head, wait for the panic to rise at the realization that this is finally happening. The fear, though, never comes. Instead, a pleasant new warmth spills right below my stomach.

Ever since I presented, my body has always been a known quantity—dependable, predictable, not subject to sudden changes. And yet, without warning, I cannot breathe. "I *am* untouched, though."

"That's a problem I can easily solve." He steps closer.

Something that feels too much like anticipation travels down my spine. "So, you… Are you going to have sex with me?"

He shakes his head. His large body, so close to mine, feels like a mountain of heat and delicious scent. "I'm not going to fuck you until you come back to stay."

Until. Not *if*. "Then what—"

"Close your eyes," he orders.

I blink. "You're not going to have sex with me. You'll just…make it look as though you have?" His silence tells me everything I need to know. "Even if you make me smell like we…I would still be a virgin."

A twitch in his jaw. “You think they’ll check? You think they *care*? For them it’s not about an Omega’s well-being. It’s just about *their* honor and about maintaining ownership of their possessions.”

He’s right. I picture Lord and Lady Larsen. Lara. Every member of the House, including the guards who’ll escort me, servants, other healers—they will all smell the sex and think the general ruined me. And there is nothing I could say that would change their minds.

I should be thankful to Gabriel for wanting to spare me some of it. It definitely makes no sense for me to ask, “If you’re going to ruin me in their eyes, why not take me and get it over with?”

“Is that what *you* want?”

I don’t reply. My mouth is too dry.

“Oh, Sofia.” He sounds amused and unkind. “That’s not what tonight’s about.”

I scowl. “Then what—”

“Lift the shirt. I want to see your belly.”

I do, confused but not quite able to help myself.

“Lie back on your elbows. And close your fucking eyes.”

“Why?”

“Because right now I am your Alpha, and I *just told you to*.”

He’s angry. This time not just at the people in my life but at *me*. I should be scampering to a corner, apologizing and begging him to be gentle with me. I should do exactly as he says.

Instead, I keep my eyes open.

He exhales a single bitter laugh. “You are stubborn and reckless.” But there is satisfaction in his tone. A hint of admiration as his hands reach for his belt and unfasten it.

As a healer, I’ve seen plenty of cocks. Maybe that’s why I don’t gasp, or flush, or let my jaw drop. I remain remarkably steady as Gabriel pulls himself out of his pants, already fully hard. He strokes up and down. Up

again, and down once more. I take stock of his shape and size, lick my lips, and wait entirely too long to realize what is about to happen.

“You’re going to spend on me,” I say.

His hand halts in a brief stutter. Then resumes, faster, grip tighter.

“And then I’ll smell like you. Lennart, and his parents—everyone will assume that you took me.”

“Close your eyes,” he says again. Not evenly.

I tilt my head. “Because you’d rather I not watch?” I let out a startled, though genuinely amused, laugh. The flex of his forearms is impossible to look away from. The sheer strength of him. “That’s a little hypocritical, no?”

“Is that what it is?”

“You’re fine with performing sexual acts upon my body without my permission, yet set boundaries for my participation.”

He huffs, but sounds sincere as he says, “I wish I’d found you under other circumstances.” Muscles seize in his throat. He has a steady rhythm going now. His eyes drift closed, head tips back, and I wonder if this is a sight anyone has ever experienced—a warrior of his caliber lowering his defenses, deliberately leaving himself at my mercy. I could reach for his sword and use it on him. I could have hidden my own weapon to escape. There are any number of things I could do to him when he’s this vulnerable.

I’m interested in none. Or *almost* none.

The heat between my legs begins to pulsate. It’s new and wonderful, and since this is the most aroused I’ve ever been, I’d rather take as much control of it as I possibly can.

“Gabriel,” I say softly.

His eyes open. There is a ruddy flush high on his cheekbones that almost matches the darkening blunt head of his cock. His grip tightens, and while his movements don’t stop, they slow and become stiffer. One hand travels down to squeeze his balls, as if to shore up against something.

“Where?” I ask.

A thick swallow. His expression is at once angry, spellbound, and determined.

“Where on me are you planning to spend?”

The softest grunt. It’s born deep in Gabriel’s throat and dies there, too, but his lips don’t part, nor does he make any real sound. It’s more like a vibration, a purr that travels through his flesh and mine.

“On my belly? Is that why you had me pull up my shirt?”

He’s close. I’ve never seen anyone orgasm, but the stymied breaths and the tightening of his shoulders seem to be Gabriel’s tells, and he’s clearly on the precipice of something.

He’s enjoying this. Touching himself as he stares at my mostly covered body. Filling his lungs with my scent. I’m the one driving his pleasure, and it makes me bold enough to ask, “Wouldn’t you rather come on my breasts?”

The motion of his hand breaks. A low, strangled growl rises from somewhere, and I gasp at the beauty of it. His eagerness and impatience. The power I have over him, even as he seeks to ruin me. Our combined scents spiking.

I bite the inside of my mouth. “I noticed the way you look at them. Yesterday, in the dress. Today too.”

I can almost taste the strain that my words cause, but he continues pumping. His only response is licking his lips, but I begin to undo the buttons of the shirt.

“Sofia,” he whispers. But he doesn’t, really. It’s more like he’s tracing my name on his lips, an awestruck word that edges toward a plea.

“You do like them, don’t you?” I ask when a burst of insecurity shoots through me. “I didn’t misinterpret?”

He says nothing, but I’ve come too far to stop. Underneath, I’m wearing the bralette that came with my mating dress. When I lower both cups, my

nipples are erect and puffy, surrounded by a pink flush.

“Would you like to touch them?” I ask, voice low, and instantly regret trying to sound sultry because what I should have said is *I’d like for you to touch them, Gabriel, I would die if you—*

The first hot spurt lands across my left nipple.

Gabriel’s groans are harsh, at once muted and feral; they fill the room as he continues fucking his closed fist. Rope after rope of white liquid paints across my skin. I watch him—strong neck thrown back, muscles clenched—and think that if the pleasure he’s feeling is a tenth as strong as the one I’m experiencing just looking at him…

Well. I’m happy for him, even if my abdomen is stretched tauter than a bow.

“How does this work?” I ask him when he stops, once his hand has stilled and deep breaths are rolling again out of his chest. “Do I clean up before putting myself back together, or does it defeat the purpose?”

“You—don’t wipe it.” His voice is rough. Shaken.

“Of course.” Slowly, quietly, my trembling hand redoes the buttons of the shirt, the army blue hiding the wetness as it seeps through the fabric.

The scent, though… Every single Alpha and Omega will know.

“I hope you enjoyed it,” I say, adjusting on the bed. Between my legs, I am wetter than I ever remember being. I can feel my underwear slide across my cunt as I squirm to find a comfortable spot, slick and downright filthy.

It’s nice, being swollen and tender. The heat feels good and new, something to be cherished and explored. According to other healers I’ve talked to, it’s not uncommon for cold Omegas to have issues with lubrication. I accepted it as the nature of my body, but I did look into alternatives.

I might not need them after all.

“Did you?” The words stumble out of my mouth.

“Hm?” He sounds distracted. Dizzy and hushed. Still staring at my now-covered chest.

“Did you enjoy it?”

Gabriel’s exhale seems full of disbelief, but his lips twitch. “Don’t you have physical proof of it?”

“I’m sure not all orgasms are created equal.” I glance away. “And I hear that you have a lot of experience.”

A pause. “I do.”

“Was this good, then?”

“It was…” He runs a hand through his hair. Seems to look for words. Settles on “yeah.”

“Good. I’m glad. I liked it, too.”

Again, his Adam’s apple bobs. “I can smell you, Sofia.”

“Okay.”

“I mean, I can smell that you *liked* it.” It takes me a second to realize what he meant, and when I do, my cheeks heat. I’m no prude, but this is not a random anatomical process we’re talking about. It’s *my* anatomical process.

“Oh.” I bite my lower lip again, coming to a decision. After what I just witnessed about his desires, I have no reason to be ashamed of *mine*. And if I’m going back home tomorrow…this may very well be the last time I smell Gabriel up close. Once I’m out of his sight, he may never think of me again. I doubt he’ll decide to visit me in the Larsen wing.

So I go for it. “Do you mind if I touch myself? I’ve never… This has never happened to me before. And it might not happen again.”

His laughter is stupefied, lips parted, breath still coming hard, but he says nothing. After a beat, I realize that I don’t need his permission. I slide my hand down, past the elastic of my underwear, and what I find is…

Oh.

My breath hitches, and my eyes flutter closed. I have experimented before, but with little success. Now every touch feels slippery, makes me shiver and arch a little. Every little caress is *good*, and—

The mattress dips beside me. “Let me help you,” he breathes.

A request. I wonder when the last time was that he made one of those instead of issuing an order.

“With what? Oh.” I’m a little busy with trial and error, figuring out what feels nice and what feels nicer. But the more Gabriel’s scent envelops me, the hotter my blood burns. “I guess you know what to do, right?”

When I open my eyes to look at him, his cheekbones are red and his pupils blown. “You’re going to fucking kill me.”

He’s not very delicate in how he shoves my pants down. Takes them off. Buries his nose into my hip bone and inhales deeply. I let him shift my legs open. “Fuck, you smell perfect.” He grunts. His hand is large and calloused—so much so, I almost expect it to hurt me as it travels up my leg. The hardened patches of skin nearly catch against mine, but the scratch is pleasant, grounding. A testament to the perfection of this moment. It’s me and him surrounded by the almost-silent buzzing of the air converters and life support systems. Back when I still couldn’t read or write, my dad taught me how to distinguish a healthy hum from a near-catastrophic failure.

Right now, everything is alright.

But before touching me, hand hovering above my cunt, he finds my eyes and says, “You may have no way of knowing this, but none of this is normal. None of this has precedents. Not for me.” He waits for my uncertain, fitful nod and then runs his finger against my entrance.

I arch my back, fingers scraping against the blankets.

“Good?” he asks, mouth sliding across my abdomen. “Like this?”

“F-fuck,” I whimper as my bones liquefy. It’s his hands on me. His warmth. His Alpha scent. It’s strong, aggressive, but also right and pretty and aching in a way I’ve never experienced before.

“This is just a taste,” he says, “of what I’ll do to you. When you come back to me.”

“I w-won’t. You should give me all of it now—” My breath rushes out in a gasp as he takes his hand away. I nearly beg him to put it *back*, but when my eyes spring open, I catch him in the act of licking my wetness off his fingers. His pupils shrink smaller than the eye of a needle.

“Good?” I ask, raspy.

He doesn’t nod or agree, and I experience a moment of fear that I might not be to his liking. But as I’m about to ask, he takes off his shirt. I blink wistfully at the knots of scars on his chest, the wounds that I wish I had been there to treat for him.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he says.

I nod, waiting for him to climb over me—and then melt into the bed when I realize that he didn’t mean my *mouth*. His aimless, assured, leisurely licks quickly turn into something greedy and violent. His guttural “*fuck*” followed by a groan, tells me that yes.

This *is* good.

“You *will* come back to me,” he whispers against my skin. “And I’ll punish you for making me wait. And I’ll keep you underneath me for weeks. And you will admit that I was right all along.”

I can’t let myself believe a word of it. So I sink back into the pillow when I feel a shiver run down my spine, and the pleasure crashes into me.

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Chapter 19

THE CONCESSION

Gabriel

Martia and Ivar meet me outside my rooms in the silent hours before dawn.

“Do we have confirmation?” I ask.

“House Larsen is planning on making a move tomorrow,” he says, sounding remarkably awake despite the sudden summons.

“Time?”

“Late morning, according to my sources.”

“Sabotage?”

He nods. “They’re planning to disable the sealing systems in the military wing.”

“But they’ve also been gathering weapons and forces,” Martia adds. “They might be planning attacks on multiple fronts. As you suspected.”

“Make sure we—”

“We have people watching their every move, yes.” She glances at the door I just closed behind me. “What about…?”

“She wants to return to House Larsen, yes.” I don’t even try to keep my tone neutral. I have no doubt that they can smell what just happened between me and Sofia.

“Good,” Ivar says. “That’ll guarantee that everything is by the book, and—”

“It’s not fucking *good*.” I close my eyes. Since punching my brother and thrashing the corridor will accomplish nothing, I reluctantly concede, “But it might be for the best. If they’re still debating whether to retaliate on me for claiming the Right, the state in which I’ll send her back will tip them over.” I run a hand down my face, already regretting every single thing that came out of my mouth. It’s too dangerous. It’s wrong. She belongs exactly where she is right now. She’s finally starting to smell the way she was always supposed to, and fuck anyone who is interested in changing that.

Fuck House Larsen.

If they all end up dead by this time tomorrow, I will dance on their rotting bodies.

“Gabe,” my brother starts, and I recognize the tone as the conciliatory one he uses for requests that will make me want to throw him around a little. “Tomorrow morning, when Lennart comes back for her, you shouldn’t be there.”

He clearly expects a fight. But the knowledge that she’s safely ensconced in my quarters, her lingering taste in my mouth, they must calm the most impulsive Alpha bits of me, because I easily understand his reasoning. “I won’t,” I agree. “I’ll need to meet with the council, anyway. *But*,” I add, “I want someone near her every second she is in the Larsen wing. I don’t give a fuck who you have to bribe or if they have to cut off their own arms and legs in order to crawl through the air ducts and keep a visual on her. She is to *never* be alone, not even for a minute. If something —*anything*—happens to her while she’s out of my sight, I will personally kill the entire chain of command—”

“Yeah,” Martia interrupts quietly, exchanging a long-suffering look with Ivar. “We get it, Gabe.”

I open the door to my rooms. “Make sure everybody fucking does,” I say, before disappearing back inside.

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Chapter 20

THE MOTHER

Sofia

Sunlight filters through the water, bathing Gabriel's bed in a golden glow. I wake up, gradually, and before even opening my eyes, I become aware of the slight change in the hum of the environmental controls. They're whirring at a higher frequency, working more intensely, as always when dealing with a rising High.

There is a warm body next to mine. It was there throughout the night, stroking me, holding me, playing with my hair, pressing kisses in odd, hidden places—the inside of my elbow, the top of my sternum, the dip of my lower back. Once or twice, even my mouth. Gabriel hates sleeping on soft surfaces, that much is obvious. And yet, I suspect he hated the idea of sleeping away from me even more.

With a small, tired smile, I reach across the mattress, expecting to come across a solid stretch of muscles. But when I encounter it, I find it remarkably hairier than before.

So hairy, my eyelids flutter open.

Alex is staring at me with an outraged expression, and I instantly snatch my hand back. "I'm so sorry," I whisper. "I thought you were… You *really* shouldn't eat me. I'm too gamey to be enjoyable and—"

"Lady Larsen," says a voice from behind me.

I roll to my back to find Bastian, who is *also* staring at me.

Clearly, watching me is this morning's official pastime.

With a tug on the blankets to cover my chest, I ask, "What is, um, going on?"

"Your mate is here. It's time to go home."

I sit up. Run a hand through the mess of my hair as I glance around. "Gabriel?"

"The general already left." There is a tinge of pity in Bastian's eyes. A touch of commiseration that could be related to the overwhelming scent of what obviously happened here last night, to his perception that I was forced to do something I didn't want, or to my obvious dismay at Gabriel's absence. Martia's Omega seems to have gone from despising me to feeling sorry for me, and I *hate* it.

I had the night of my life, thank you very much, I want to yell. *I came about thirty times. I feel as if my body really belongs to me for the first time since I presented. Don't look at me like that, you jackass.*

I refrain from screaming at the seneschal. Instead I pull the covers higher and ask, "Is Gabriel okay with me…?"

"His Right has been exhausted. Not only are you free to leave, but you must."

"Shouldn't I wait for him to return?"

"I fail to see why," the seneschal says, that hint of pity morphing into outright condolences.

"Great," I say, sitting up in the bed, trying not to think about last night. About all the things he said. About the fact that when he woke up earlier this morning, he looked at me and decided to leave without feeling the need to exchange any last words.

Do you want to go back to him?

I said yes. That appears to be all there is to it.

"If you'll excuse me," I say, happy with how firm my voice sounds. Bile churns in my throat. "I would like some privacy to change back into

my mating dress.”



Lennart cannot meet my eyes, not for the entire trip from Gabriel’s chambers to the Larsen wing.

I try to excuse his behavior, telling myself that being a Beta makes the situation exponentially worse for him. His inability to inhale my scent, deconstruct its layers, and inspect each note for clues of what was done to me in the last forty-eight hours forces his imagination to run amok, unconstrained by any boundaries.

It doesn’t help that the four guards his father sent to escort us are all Alphas. The knowledge that *they* can speculate with some accuracy on the nature of what occurred fills the heavy silence as we step down the stone corridors.

And there’s the fact that my newfound sensitivity to scents isn’t going anywhere. I half thought that it was a product of being temporarily in a unfamiliar setting, but I find myself able to easily pick up traces that just a few days ago would have been impossible. From the taller Alpha in the group, there is the lingering note of a female Omega on her clothes, as if they were handled by her partner. The older man smells as though he shares quarters with a large family of mixed designations. And Lennart…

“Lennart,” I murmur in the elevator, an attempt at communicating with him as his father’s guards stand behind us.

“Not now,” he bites out angrily, staring straight ahead.

I wonder who, exactly, his rage is directed at.

For the first time ever, I have an opportunity to analyze his Beta scent, which is profoundly *fine*. Not bad by any means, but difficult to muster any feeling over. It’s ever been an issue, since I couldn’t tease apart subtle

smells, but now that my nose is working overtime, all I can think about is how deliciously *perfect* Gabriel smelled, and—

Don't compare him to Gabriel, I order myself.

There was no sign of him as Bastian and his soldiers escorted me outside. When Gabriel offered for me to stay, he was probably just playing some kind of mind game. Drawing a comparison between Lennart and Gabriel is pointless, but if I must, I should just focus on one simple truth: Lennart would never force another man's mate to do whatever it is that happened last night.

The fact that Gabriel didn't *have to* force me—that I enjoyed it, that I asked for most aspects of it—is beyond the point. I will feel guilty about *that* for the rest of my natural life.

The moment we step into Lennart's quarters, I turn to him, feeling a surge of indignation toward this man who swore to love me and protect me forever, no matter what, during our mating ceremony not forty-eight hours ago.

This man who is showing very little concern for my well-being.

After I was taken against my will.

To settle a score between *his* father and the general.

Not only has Lennart not asked me if I'm injured, he also looks actively upset at me, as though he's the real victim of the past two days. "Are you *angry* at me?" I ask.

He purses his lips. "I came to take you back, last night."

"I heard. But I—"

"Was sleeping, yes." He seems to be looking anywhere but at me. "That was not a wise choice, Sofia. My father was enraged. It made it look like you actually *wanted* to be there, with that monster."

My eyebrow lifts. I fold my arms to my chest. "Lennart," I say calmly, "I am going to pretend that you didn't just blame me for having been taken by an enemy of your family. Would you like to start again?"

His laugh is incredulous. “Start again? Do you understand the position you put us in? You made us look like we have no power when facing the general. We used to be the greatest House in the stronghold, and now the other nobles are actively siding with the military over us. My father is going to—”

“Why don’t you talk less about your father and start by asking me how I feel?”

His eyes widen.

When he finally meets my gaze, I take a step forward, letting my rage boil out of me. “I was given no choice but to spend two nights with a man I barely know, and you are concerned about your family’s *reputation* over my safety? You didn’t even ask if I was hurt. I could be bleeding, or traumatized, or in need of medical attention, but you wouldn’t even know that because you care so little about me that—”

“Sof! You’re here!” A flurry of movement bursts into the room, and then a pair of strong arms press me into a soft body.

“Lara,” I say, nearly inhaling a mouthful of her hair and returning her hug.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I…” It feels like I’m meeting her for the first time. Her scent is beautiful, flowery, and zesty. Indisputably Alpha.

All these years of being friends, and I cannot fathom how I missed it.

“Let me take care of you.” She pulls back with a smile. Her hand tugs mine, coaxing me toward the door. “You need a bath. A real one—no sonic. You’ll feel cleaner that way.”

“Lara,” Lennart tells his sister through gritted teeth, “not now. We’re busy with—”

“You may not realize this, Lennart, given that you have no olfaction whatsoever, but Sof needs a bath *now*,” she hisses at her brother. The

subtext is so obvious, he doesn't object to her dragging me toward her room.

And given my current feelings toward Lennart, a break from each other is probably the best for us.

I wonder whether I can confide in Lara. Tell her the truth about what happened. Sure, she's sometimes unable to stand up to her family, but she's always been just as much my friend as Lennart's sister. This may be what I really need—to be told by someone rational, someone who can understand Alpha-Omega dynamics, that Gabriel is a piece of shit, that what he did was wrong, that it matters nothing whether he smells good or doesn't. When the metal door to her room slides closed and she turns to me, I've made up my mind to be honest with her.

But she must have done the same, because she clutches my upper arm, and with her head bent toward mine, she whispers, "You are in danger."

I swallow. "It's fine. It wasn't as bad as you probably think. The general—"

"No, you don't understand. It's my *family* that is the danger." Her eyes are shiny, like she's on the brink of tears. There are dark circles around them, but her expression is determined. "Your scent has changed. Significantly."

"I know. Gabriel and I—"

"No, Sof." She takes both my hands in hers. "Your scent has *changed*. You no longer smell like a Beta. It's like you just went through presenting all over again, only this time for real. Are your glands itching?"

"No," I say automatically. But then my hand finds the side of my neck. "Maybe just a little, but—"

"That's good. It means you're not too close to a heat."

"Close to a what?" Laughter dies in my throat when I notice how serious her expression is.

“Listen carefully. When you left, all Hel broke loose. My father wants a new general to be installed, and he’s going to do something very, very unwise, very soon, and… Honestly, fuck him. That’s not the problem. Not now. Not the biggest one. Sof, Lennart was very…distressed while you were gone. I overheard my mother trying to calm him down. He was screaming. He was worried about you going without a…” She swallows. “Without a dose of something. About something running out.”

“I… What?”

“I confronted my mother last night. I asked her if there was some medication that you needed. I recalled that years ago, back when you still lived with your dad, you used to take that vitamin D supplement because you weren’t exposed to the light enough.”

“The one your mother kept buying for me, yes. But what—”

“I figured that’s what you needed, so I offered to bring it to you in the military wing, but Mom told me that I’d misheard. She ordered me never to speak of it again. But, Sof, I know what I heard. And when I thought it through, I realized that you hadn’t been taking that supplement in years, anyway. I could not understand why Mom would be so cagey, but then Lennart brought you back, and the second you were nearby, I could smell you. It’s like your previous scent but dozens of times stronger. Like everything that you always were just broke through a dam. And you know I love my mother, but I think… Sofia, I think she may have done something terrible.”

She lets my hands go as tears slide down both her cheeks.

I would like to cry, too. Maybe there would be some relief in that. But I am too busy taking in Lara’s words and reconstructing what really happened, the enormity of it, the complexity of such deceit.

Lady Larsen did send over boxes of supplements when I was younger. She cared about my health because I was such a good friend to Lennart, and she pointed out that people who lived on the middle and lower levels often

had vitamin deficiencies. I was a healer in training, and I knew it to be true. So, when she began buying me something that I couldn't have otherwise afforded, I felt only gratitude.

And, of course, I took the pills religiously.

Once I moved to the Larsen wing, she stopped buying the pills for me. It made sense, since I was no longer developing and had access to better nutrition. I can't imagine what Lady Larsen and Lennart may have been referring to, because for the past few years, there were no vitamins. No pills or supplements. There were just…

Our nightly chats. That we always had over tea. Lady Larsen, coming to check on me every night. The feeling of being loved, and valued, and cared for—that this must be what having a mother would be like.

When was the last time I drank that tea? She poured me some on the day of the ceremony, but my stomach was upset from anxiety, and I didn't have any. Not the night before either, because I spent it in Lara's rooms. Nor the previous one. It must have been three or four days ago, which means that if she was giving me some sort of suppressant drug, depending on the frequency and the dosage…

"Lara?" I say at last, feeling eerily calm. I am on the verge of something thunderous, but first I need to be sure.

"Yeah?"

"Will you help me?"

"Anything. *Anything*, Sof." She wipes the back of a hand under her eyes. "I'm so sorry about what she—"

"This medicine, or drug, where would your mother keep it?"

"I don't know. Her quarters, maybe?" She sniffles. "Yes, it has to be there."

"Could you get us access to it?"

Her eyes widen in understanding, and she nods.



Lara and I don’t know how long we’ll have in Lady Larsen’s quarters before we’re interrupted, but we both agree that we’re willing to risk being discovered.

“After all, we are not the ones who should be hiding,” Lara says stubbornly. “I’ll take the washroom. It’s most logical for a vial of something to be there, but that might be the very reason she put it elsewhere.”

We’re not sure what we’re searching for, but I methodically make my way through the furniture in her rooms, opening drawers, rummaging through clothes. The minutes pass, and I find nothing resembling proof of what Lara suspects her mother has been doing.

And then I move to the bookshelf.

Paper is expensive, and physical books are a rarity. Lady Larsen loves to collect them, even in languages that she doesn’t speak. When I lift a large tome to check whether something was placed behind it, I hear the soft shuffle of something floating to the floor.

It’s a thick cream-colored paper, folded twice into itself. An old-school, formal letter. I recognize it, but I’ve rarely seen any, and only for extremely important matters. When I pick it up, I do it gently, almost afraid that it will crumble in my hands.

But it’s solid. Sturdy. Not an antique piece, but new. After I unfold it, I find that it’s not written in the same unfamiliar script of the books. The neat, scratchy penmanship flowing across the paper is easily readable.

Ms. Kuznetsov,

I don’t believe we have ever met, although it’s possible that on a few occasions we both attended the same functions. My name is Gabriel Agard, and I used to work with your father, first as one of his apprentices in the engineering corps, and then as a soldier. I regret not visiting Dr. Kuznetsov

in his last few months, but I was not aware that his illness had progressed to such a critical extent, and my current employment has kept me busy.

I am writing to inquire whether you would reconsider your decision of not allowing my presence, and the presence of my command chain, at his funerary ceremony. Your father was, undoubtedly, one of the most influential figures in my life. With all that I owe him, I would love to pay my respects to—

"Sofia?"

Startled by Lady Larsen's voice, I shoot to my feet, hiding the letter behind my back.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just— Nothing." My fingers are trembling so hard, I lose my grip on the paper, which falls to the ground with a dull noise and calls Lady Larsen's attention to itself.

Fuck, I think.

But why? I've done nothing wrong. *Nothing*. "Is it true?" I ask.

And it must be. Lady Larsen glances at the girl who came in with her, a young maid I don't recall meeting before. "Leave us," she orders. And when we're alone, the first thing she says is, "I don't know what you were told, but before you jump to any conclusions, I want you to know that I never gave you anything that would cause irreversible damage."

Pure rage claws up my throat. I close my eyes, forcing my body to remember the lessons I've learned during my healer training. *Breathe in and out. Calm down. Be in the moment.* As tonelessly as I can manage, I ask, "What *did* you give me?"

"Just suppressants." Her smile is at once sad and unapologetic. "Again, nothing harmful. It's what Omegas take when they would like to postpone their heats."

"When Omegas want to postpone their heats, they take suppressants for a *week* at the most." My entire body is shaking. "You gave them to me for

at least *five years*."

"Yes, well, it was not ideal. Do not think that it was an easy choice. But I was reassured by someone I trust that it would not have long-term effects—"

"By *whom*? Because I am a healer, and let me assure you that I do not recall hearing of anyone taking suppressants for years on end." I wipe my wet cheeks. "How could you? You are… You were like a mother to me."

Her face hardens. "Yes. Well, Sofia, dear, you are *like* a daughter to me, too. But you are *not* my daughter. One day you and Lennart will have children, and you will understand that—"

"He knew," I whisper. *Of course* he did. How could he not?

He knew. He was complicit in all of it.

Lady Larsen sighs deeply. "I love my son. I wanted him to be happy. And you were the key to that happiness. So when you first presented, he grew concerned that you might seek a union with an Alpha…"

"You poisoned me. I thought I—You stole this from me. My ability to feel pleasure, to grow into my body. To *become myself*." I am a healer. I made a vow to do no harm. And yet, every atom in my body wants to leap at this woman and make her hurt. I want to pry her eyes out and eat her heart. Above all, I'm afraid that I *will*.

"It was always going to be temporary," she says. "Just until your mating with Lennart was complete. It would have been a much shorter period if you hadn't delayed it over and over."

I laugh. "You're a lunatic if you think that—"

Abruptly, all the lights go out, and the windowless room drops into darkness. A piercing sound slices through the air, so loud that I feel as though my ears are being slapped.

Lady Larsen screams, "What is happening?" She's just a few feet away, but I can no longer make her out.

“It’s the emergency sirens,” I shout. “They’re activated when the air quality becomes too poor. You have to…”

All of a sudden, I feel too dizzy to stand. I lower myself to a crouch, trying to remember what Dad told me I was supposed to do in moments like this one.

I’m still doing that when the world vanishes around me.

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Chapter 21

THE BATTLE

Gabriel

A few minutes later, on the other side of the keep, three Larsen guards kneel to the floor in front of the Council of Elders. The first has broken bones. The second is bleeding. The third, both.

"I will ask you one last time," the eldest member says, "who asked you to tamper with the life support systems in the military wing?"

"Lord Larsen," the second guard burbles. He's been doing most of the talking because he is the highest-ranking member and has been in Lord Larsen's circle for decades. Also because his jaw is still in working order. "He asked us to s-sabotage the military wing, and the Larsen wing, to avoid being suspected of any w-wrongdoing."

It's nothing the elder didn't already know. "Is that what you were doing when you were caught by General Agard?"

The guard nods, frantic.

"When they were caught, an emissary of the council was also present," Ivar reminds him. "And additional testimony confirms that Lord Larsen has been amassing weapons and—"

"Yes, Counsel Agard. You have mentioned that several times already." The council member looks gravely in my direction, and I'm almost tempted to commiserate with him about how fucking annoying my brother can be.

But I have places to be. “Have we at last met your burden of proof?” I ask, not bothering to hide my frustration toward the Twelve. It’s been a while since I’ve felt it necessary to show any kind of deference while seeking their audience.

The disrespect, luckily, is mutual.

“You have, in fact, provided enough evidence that Lord Larsen is attempting to seize power,” the elder concedes.

I nod once. My cape swirls as I spin on my feet and stalk down the great hall, Martia at my side. There isn’t much time, and House Larsen must be stopped. By now, Lord Larsen surely knows that his sabotage attempts were intercepted. He has no choice but to attack us, and when the battle starts, I’d rather be there with my soldiers.

I’d rather go make sure that Sofia is safe.

“However,” the elder says.

I freeze in my tracks, and so does Martia. We share a disbelieving glance. Before I turn around, I try to wipe from my face the desire to stab every single member. One by one. And make the others watch as they are being skewered themselves.

“Yes?” I growl.

“Do not assume, General, that we are unaware of your scheming. You did all you could to provoke Lord Larsen and the coup he is now enacting.”

“I did all I could to *accelerate* it,” I correct him, and I *think* I see the elder sigh. The one on his right is definitely rolling her eyes.

“Yes. And the council would like to state for the record that we do not approve of your methods.” A pause, during which I wonder for how long Ivar would bitch at me if I just beheaded all twelve members. If it’s less than a week, it might be worth it. “However, General, we must admit that once weighted against Lord Larsen’s, your actions are significantly less objectionable.”

I’d hate to make another premature departure, so I wait for him to finish his train of thought. When he doesn’t, I ask, “Does this mean that I can take my leave and go quash a fucking uprising?”

This time around, his sigh is obvious. Then a thin shriveled hand waves me away. “Please, sir.”

I make it to Lord Larsen just a few minutes after the battle has begun. Finding him and his son Gunner through the throng is easy; with a simple flick of my wrist, I rotate my sword until the tip of it is pointing in his direction. “We won’t go down without a fight,” he roars at me.

I tilt my blade.

Smile.

And murmur, “I was hoping you would say that.”

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Chapter 22

THE FIRST

Sofia

For the second time today, I wake up in Gabriel's bed.

For the *first*, he's all I can see when I open my eyes.

It's too lovely a sight to question. I wait for the bleariness to melt away and take in the straight line of his nose, his white-blond hair, the little scars that cluster at the base of his jaw.

"Hey," I say, wondering if everything that came before was just a dream. My smile is quick, effortless, little more than a reflex. It's just that I'm *so* happy. Happy that he's here, with his scent that always holds me. Even happier that he's sitting on the edge of the mattress and looking down at me like I'm pretty and made of sea pearls. He runs his fingers down my hair with the same attention and precision a soldier would give to sharpening his sword, biceps flexing with every tiny movement. I can't remember ever feeling this at peace.

And yet, there is a small furrow between his brows. "Are you okay?" I ask.

The question makes him laugh. "Are *you* okay, Sofia?"

"Of course. I just slept for…" How long did I sleep for? A *lot*, since it's night. I must have, because we're back to a regular High, and vicious currents swirl outside the window of his quarters. Not even a speckle of sunlight filters in, which means that—

Everything returns to me at once.

The letter.

Lady Larsen.

The sirens.

“Shit.” I drag myself up to my elbows, heart going from nothing to a million beats per minute. “What happened? The filtration system, is it—”

“Everything’s okay,” he says calmly, one large hand drifting to comb through the hair at my nape. “More importantly, *you* are okay.”

“But what happened? The lights went off, and—”

“Lord Larsen tried to sabotage some of the life support systems. He planned to pump poisonous gasses through the air ducts, and we stopped his guards right as they started tampering with the filters. It’s all over, though. There’s nothing for you to worry about anymore.”

My eyes widen. Even soothed by his Alpha scent, I’m alarmingly awake. “Where is he? Lord Larsen, I mean.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Did he escape? Are you looking for him in the stronghold?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Gabriel’s smile widens. “My interest in him is null, at the moment. And I consider our matters settled.”

“Settled? How do you…?” Shit. *Shit*. I can’t believe how slow I am sometimes. “Is he *dead*?”

A simple satisfied nod.

“Did you kill him?”

“Slowly and painfully. His eldest son, too.”

I close my eyes. Cover my mouth with my palm. Find the courage to ask, “Where is Lennart? Did you…?”

“Kill him?” He chews on the inside of his cheek and gently pushes my hand away, finding my lower lip with his thumb. It’s clear that he’s having

an excellent time. “No. Not yet, at least. I’m still debating what to do with him. Of course, you’ll have the final say.”

Thank the All-father, I think. But it hits me that I’m not experiencing the overwhelming relief I would have imagined. “Where do you have him?”

“Sofia.” He clucks his tongue. “Where did you leave those outstanding observational skills of yours?”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand what— Oh.”

The problem is, I like staring at Gabriel a little too much. That’s why I didn’t notice Lennart—who, obviously, is right *there*. Pale, frazzled, but not looking too bad for someone whose family was just stripped of centuries of power. He’s sitting calmly in the same chair Gabriel used last night, less than ten feet from us.

Except that the chair has changed colors. The upholstery used to be a solid blue-gray, and it has now darkened to a deeper purple.

Because it’s soaked in blood.

My stomach drops. I gasp as it dawns on me that Lennart is not sitting —he is pinned. Two very long, thin blades, both looking remarkably like the one Gabriel usually carries at his hip, travel through Lennart’s flesh. One is in his right thigh, the other in the left shoulder, and blood seeps from each wound, slow and steady. Paradoxically, it’s the swords that stave off blood loss: if they were to be removed, he’d need immediate medical attention or risk exsanguination.

And something tells me that Gabriel would not allow me to offer my healing services. Not tonight.

“Help.” Lennart’s voice is a trembling rattle. He breathes fast and shallow, pleading at me with bloodshot eyes. “Sof, you have to—”

“Sofia doesn’t have to do *anything*, especially not to help a pathetic piece of shit who’s been hurting her for years.” Gabriel’s eyebrow lifts. “And what did we say about you talking without first being spoken to?”

Lennart closes his eyes in desperation, a soft whimper leaving his lips.

I turn to Gabriel. Despite everything I've heard about the general, I have never been afraid of him, not really. I'm not sure that *fear* is the right name for what I'm feeling now either. All I know is that something is happening, and I cannot comprehend it. "Gabriel," I whisper, "what are you doing?"

"Don't worry about it." Gently, lovingly, he pushes a few locks back from my forehead. I feel clammy and uneasy, but when I take a calming breath, his scent is like a narcotic, instantly comforting.

Mine must do the same for him because he inhales deeply against my hairline, then says, "Perfect." He presses a lingering kiss against my temple. "Everything about you is *perfect*. And that son of a bitch took it away from me. You see now why I'm considering killing him?"

"Gabriel, I—"

"I know. You're a healer. Do no harm, and all that." His cheek, scratchy with his stubble, rubs against mine. Dips down to my neck and catches against one of my glands, making me shudder. Lara must have been on to something, because the itch is becoming hard to ignore. "But you agree with me that he has to pay for what he's done?"

I swallow. "If I say yes, you're going to kill him."

He seems to ponder the matter. "Not necessarily, no. Let me ask again: should he pay for what he has done to you?"

"Promise me that you won't—"

"Answer the question, Sofia."

I glance at Lennart. His entire body is quaking. He's looking at me like I'm the only thing standing between him and death, and…

Rage surges through me, blinding, brutal. For years, I thought I would never have what I wanted. For years, he stole from me. Voice shaking, I say, "Yes. *Yes*, he deserves to pay for what did to me. I hate him. He's a monster, and I want to watch him suffer as much as I have, and I want him to feel like he's lost everything." A pause. "But I don't want him to *die*."

Gabriel makes a disappointed face, something that on anyone but him I would call a pout, something that in any other situation would make me laugh. So his plan was to slaughter Lennart, here and now. Good to know. And good to know that he seems to be willing to recalibrate. “If I don’t kill him, I’ll have to punish him in other ways. You understand?”

My “yes” is full of breathless relief. I feel victorious—until Gabriel tugs me to my feet and forces me to stand in front of him, between his parted legs. I’m giving my back to Lennart, and that’s when I realize my mistake.

If Gabriel intended to kill Lennart, he would have gotten it done long before I woke up. Which means that what he *really* planned is something else, and…

“You are stunning in this dress,” he murmurs. “Then again, you look beautiful in anything. But it pleases me that he’s going to have to watch me take your mating dress off you.” His smile is predatory. What he’s implying, what he *means to do*, starts sinking in, and my heart pounds in my chest. In my ears.

In my lower belly.

“Have you ever taken your clothes off for him?” he asks me.

I hesitate. When I open my mouth, my lips are trembling, and no sound comes out.

“Sofia. Have you ever taken your clothes off for him?” he repeats.

“No,” I say, low. So low, it’s nearly drowned out by the obscenities Lennart is screaming.

“Don’t you fucking dare! Let her go!”

“I’m sorry, love,” Gabriel tells me with a soft kiss to my cheek. “I need just a minute.” Gently, he moves me aside. Then he walks to the chair and violently jostles the blade in Lennart’s shoulder until he wails with what must be a breathtaking kind of pain. Once Gabriel has forced Lennart to repeat his lesson—“Only s-speak when—fuck, *fuck*—spoken t-to—*ah*!”—he reclaims his seat on the bed and pulls me close again.

“Where were we?”

“Gabriel,” I whisper, closing one hand around his wrist and forcing his gaze to meet mine. I find nothing more than determined, relaxed anticipation in his eyes. When I’m sure that what he’s doing to me is not just fueled by hatred or violence, I let my arm fall to my side and watch him take off my dress. He’s good at it, nearly as good as I am at unlatching an armor. And even now, in this fucked-up situation, my stomach squeezes with insecurity when I think about who could have taught him.

I don’t fully comprehend this bond thrumming and straining between us, but it might allow Gabriel to read my mind. And vice versa. “I’ve had a lot of Omegas, Sofia,” he says against my ear. “Some of them, very lovely.”

The words stab through me just as the bodice pools at my hips, leaving my upper half bare. “Why are you telling me this?” I ask between clenched teeth.

“Because I wish it weren’t true. Because none of them ever had me questioning my sanity the way you do. Because now that I’ve found you, I regret every second I spent not searching for you.” My skirt is a puddle on the floor, soon joined by my underwear. “Look at you,” he murmurs once I’m naked, hushed enough to be only for me and not for Lennart’s benefit. He turns me around between his legs, studies my breasts and my ass, traces my hips and even the curve of my knees, and hums approvingly. “Out of this world. All the men I killed today? I’d kill them again, and then twice more. Just for this. Just to *look*.” And then, louder, but never averting his eyes from my body: “Lennart, is she not the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

Silence. My breath is so loud, I can’t even make out the sound of the environmental controls.

“Lennart,” Gabriel repeats. The back of his finger brushes against the side of my breast, and a shudder rolls up my spine. “Do I have to teach you another lesson about the timeliness of your responses?”

“No! No, please, I— *Yes*. Yes, she is!”

A pleased smile. “And no one else has seen her this way, except for me.”

“You know he’s seeing me now, right?” I ask, but it’s hard to sound sullen when Gabriel can tell how slick the insides of my thighs are. The heat whites out my head, addles me. I find myself hiding my face in his neck despite my best judgment, and he laughs.

I want the floor to open and swallow me. This may be the most mortifying moment of my life, and Gabriel is the one who’s putting me through it. I *shouldn’t* seek comfort in him, but…

“There’s a difference between Lennart seeing you naked and Lennart watching me fuck his mate. Don’t you think so?”

I close my eyes. Scalding, humiliating, aroused tears slip down the sides of my cheeks.

I wonder what Gabriel would do if I asked him to stop.

Then I wonder why I’m not asking.

And then all I want is to know one thing: “Why?”

Gabriel pulls back. His head tilts, questioning.

“Lennart,” I whisper. “The suppressants, all these years. We were friends for so long, and I thought he cared and… Why did he do something so vile?”

It’s ludicrous that I’m asking Gabriel when Lennart is right behind me —when Lady Larsen already told me. But I cannot wrap my mind around the cruelty of it, and Gabriel… Gabriel has yet to tell me a lie. “Because he was smart enough to recognize what he had on his hands. Because he wanted you, and he decided to have you. Because this is what nobles do. They take with no regard for others’ wishes.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “What about you, Gabriel?”

“What about me?”

“You did the same. You wanted me, and so you’re taking me.”

I expect a denial, or for him to twist the events that led to this, but neither comes. “Yes,” he admits with simplicity. “But that’s not the end of it.”

“Why?”

He shakes his head. “Because I am going to give you anything you want, Sofia. I am going to put you before anything and anyone else. I am going to live and die by your hand, and you will dictate the tides of my life. You already own me.” I can smell the sincerity in everything he’s saying. “All I ask in return is for you to be kind to my bound heart. Will you?”

More tears flow down my cheeks. But I’m nodding eagerly, even as I sniffle, and his elated, widening smile short-circuits my brain. I cannot think, but it doesn’t matter because he kisses my breasts and licks and bites my tender nipples until large shivers shake my body. Then he’s taking my wrist and putting my hand on his erection. “Take my cock out,” he orders.

I don’t have much experience with unbuttoning men’s undergarments, and I fumble a little, feeling him pulsate in my hand. He’s hard and hot. Too big, but I already knew that.

“Now let me turn you around. Yes, like that.”

He flips me until I’m giving him my back, and I’m almost surprised to find that Lennart is still there. Still staring at us with a mix of hatred and misery and pain. It’s just hard to keep track of him when Gabriel is pressing me into him, forcing me to sit in his lap until his cock is nestled between my ass cheeks.

I should be trembling in terror, but all I can feel is anticipation.

“It’s okay, love,” he whispers into my ear. His thumb swipes back and forth against the gland between my shoulder blades, and I nearly convulse. “It’ll be okay. From now on, I’ll take care of you. You just have to keep your legs spread open.”

I tell myself that it’s disgraceful how easily and quickly I comply. My head falls back into his chest. I let my thighs slide wider as he touches up

and down my slit, letting out shameless moans, ignoring Lennart's pitiful muted sobs. I don't even have to make an effort to shut him out because my brain and my body can focus on only one thing.

Gabriel.

"You think you're ready to be fucked?" he asks.

"Yes," I beg.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes…sir?"

"Good guess. Not that one, though."

"Yes… Yes, Alpha."

"Oh, no. I mean, that's nice, don't get me wrong. Very hot, and it makes me want to fuck you even more. But I don't want you to call me *Alpha*. There are plenty of Alphas in this stronghold, and I'd like you to be more specific about who is going to fuck you in thirty seconds or so."

My throat constricts. "Yes, Gabriel."

It kills him a little, hearing his name. A groan vibrates through his chest, and then I feel him shiver underneath me. "Lennart," he barks. "Stop crying, you fool; there's nothing to be sad about. We're *all* having a great time here. This is going to be the fuck of a lifetime." And just like that, he shoves his cock deep inside.

There is no other word for it. It's just a couple of hard, powerful thrusts, and then he's almost in to the hilt. My body contracts around his length, as if to clutch him tighter, draw him in farther. "Look him in the eye, Sofia. Look Lennart in the eye while I get as deep inside you as is humanly—Fuck, *yes*. *Fuck*, this is good."

It is. My nails leave scratches deep in his forearms. No one's first time should be like this, in these circumstances, but the pleasure building inside me is so violent, I don't know how to make peace with it.

"So fucking wet and tight. Ready for my knot already."

He is so big, the root of him stretches me open obscenely, almost to the point of pain. Lennart thrashes weakly in the chair in front of us, as if to lunge at us and stop what we're doing. "*Stop*," he sobs, but I have no attention to spare for him.

"Lennart, be fucking serious." There's a tremor in Gabriel's voice, an edge. His control may be about to snap. "Why would I stop fucking your mate when she feels so good? Her cunt is warm and hot and so fucking *tight*."

Wails follow, but I cannot be bothered with them. They sound desperate but distant.

"She has this pretty indentation running down her spine. You can't see it from there, so let me tell you about it. It's made to touch. And made to fill with liquids. And you know what I'm referring to, don't you?"

Lennart's cries are quieting.

"But I'd have to knot outside her beautiful cunt for that, and I'm not sure that's what I want. You get that, don't you?" Gabriel's palm travels up my spine, fists my hair, and pulls at it so hard that my scalp tingles and my clit throbs. "Legs stay open, sweetheart. You're doing so well, but we're giving him a show, aren't we?"

I nod. Try to chase the movements of his hips with mine, the slick sweat of my body sliding against his.

"Tell your mate how much you're enjoying being fucked by me, Sofia."

I cannot breathe. "I— Yes. Yes, I—"

"Say the words."

"I enjoy being f-fucked."

"By?"

"I enjoy being f-fucked by Gabriel, Lennart."

Gabriel's laughter is mean and affectionate. Triumphant.

"She's close, Lennart. Your mate is so close. Aren't you happy for her?" He licks the base of my throat. Presses his palm against my lower belly,

shrinking the space he's carved for himself inside me, making me feel even fuller. "And I have even better news. I'm definitely going to let you live. Want to know why?"

It's a rhetorical question, but Lennart is broken enough to stutter, "Y-yes?"

"Because Sofia is not your mate. She never was and never will be. She was always meant to be mine. And nothing makes me happier than knowing that for the rest of your miserable life, you'll remember me ten inches deep inside her. This Omega whom you profess to love but have hurt unspeakably. And when she's round with our children and swollen with my bite, I will parade her in front of you, and you will regret every single vile thing you—"

My release is a violent, full-bodied thing. My thighs tremble, and I seize around Gabriel's cock, overwhelmed by the pleasure that makes my spine dissolve and my muscles jerk. I must lose consciousness because I don't hear the rest of what he says. In my next moment of awareness, I'm limp in his arms, empty, happy. He cradles me lovingly, more so than I thought him capable of. His knot pushes against the walls of my cunt, spreading me open, stuffing me full.

His come and mine trickle down our thighs, mixed together. Pools onto the floor. Gabriel's release is not finished yet, but I can feel his grin unfurl against my throat. It's more pleasure than I ever imagined.

"Mine," he says. Then he pulls us down onto the bed and half flattens me underneath him, turning us away from Lennart and his near-silent, inconsequential weeping.

Aftershocks of my orgasm still twitch through me. "You're serious about this," I say.

It's not a question, but he presses a kiss against my cheek. "Yes," he says. Simple. To the point. I have no doubt that he means every word.

And suddenly, laughter bursts out of me.

“What?” he asks.

“Just…the children you mentioned.” I shake my head, but I can’t stop laughing.

Gabriel pulls me more closely into him. “Hmm?”

“When they ask about how their parents met, how are you going to explain any of this to them?”

He presses a small, amused kiss behind my ear. “We’ll think of something.” He sighs into my skin, and I let myself smile, too.

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Chapter 23

THE END

Sofia

Things that change a lot sometimes don't change at all.

Lara is still my best friend, even if she lives in the military wing now and is being trained by Martia to become an engineer. House Larsen is still powerful, but its head is now an Alpha from another branch of the family, and she's much more willing to collaborate with the army. Lennart and Lady Larsen are still alive, even if they no longer enjoy the privilege they always had.

I'm still a healer, and Gabriel is still the general, except these days I'm the one who treats all his injuries. The Lows are still becoming rarer and shorter, but when they come, he takes me outside and spends hours staring at me under the pure, unfiltered sunlight. My father is still gone, but I know he would be happy and proud of me. I'm still walking down a stone corridor, barefoot, toward my mating ceremony. The dress I'm wearing this time around, though, is much more beautiful than the last.

"I can only imagine how stunning you'll look by your *third* mating ceremony," Bastian says from my side.

"Leave my future sister alone," Ivar admonishes, rolling his eyes at him.

"All I mean is, the theater of this seems redundant," Bastian says. "Protocol for protocol's sake."

"A seneschal hating on protocol," I muse. "How interesting."

“Given that your bite mark is the size of this very stronghold, I’m not sure why we’re going through the formality of this, but if it’s important to the general, who am I to—”

“We’re here.” Ivar’s hand squeezes my shoulder. “Any last words?”

I think about it. Shake my head. Watch the doors part.

On the other side, Gabriel smiles at me.

I murmur to myself, “Now, *this* is the rest of my life.”



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About the Author

Ali Hazelwood is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Love, Theoretically* and *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as a writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the US to pursue a PhD in neuroscience. When Ali is not at work, she can be found crocheting, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her three feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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