

Chapter 1

Omega's family history had been checkered with strains of madness and delusions of grandeur. Coddled and spoiled, he bore his mother's traits: the penchant for fine clothes and easy living, the tendency to overindulge in material possessions. This business about toting a name that denoted finality irked him. *Curls*. A moniker he could live with. And he did, far from the probing eyes of the Black Tick. Did relations strain with dear, old Pappy? Without question. Paps only had to release the silver thread of life and float off into the netherworld, like any self-respecting man whose strength had been fizzling for no less than five years. But not Alpha. He was determined to live forever.

Even as he crept through the narrow hall of stone and silver, Omega held his breath. He needed no guidance below the mountain. He had grown up here. Still he was forced to creep along, out of fear that Jorge or one of his shrouded companions would see him and alert Alanis. He wanted a heart-to-heart with his crinkled, wrinkled father; yet sole intentions were to make certain he really hadn't kicked the proverbial bucket. Omega had a sneaking suspicion he'd been hoodwinked. Call it intuition (he sported a lion's share of feminine genes, after all) but there was more to the "Alpha held on" spiel than his aforementioned doctor revealed. And while opposed to violence, he figured it worth running afoul of her plans to see for himself.

"Ouch!" he snagged a nail on a sharp, unpolished stone and stopped to push at it. Darned if he didn't just ruin a month of repeat manicures at the Dang Di. *Oh, well*. He'd have the two-headed Liana fix it later. *Poor wretched creature*.

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Omega inherited a potful of silver from the family fortune. But when half the earth is desolate and the other half under the control of a madcap group calling themselves the “Black Tick,” silver doesn’t necessarily cover all wants. The only answer was to open Nume for trade and business, allowing the healthy population to fortify and thus repopulate the earth. *Repopulation*. Omega fancied that concept. He made stab efforts from time to time, but minimal earnings can’t sustain a burgeoning family, so he sent his minime bundles out into the wider world — with his blessings, of course. Was he looking for commitment? Hardly. How could anyone commit in a land of fallout and disease? Easy come, easy go.

Electric blue rods flickered above him as he reached the door at the end of the hall. *Ah, that door!* Alpha had been exposed to A24; through experimentation, a weakened immune system — who could say? One day his father stumbled never to rise and Omega grew tired of the charade of importance. Oh, it was fun to play games. He could manipulate smugglers and crusaders against the Numens for enough purse fillings to stake him and a pack of cards at the Whiplash for weeks. But this business of being God...

He hesitated, his hand on the lever. He had warned Alpha to back off. He knew of the lies being spread by Alanis and her team and refused to be in on the con. Not that Omega didn’t want power. But charm and charisma can put a clever man on the fast track to leadership far quicker than coercion and torture — and win a fair number of detractors to boot. *He was living up to his name*. But no one would catch him saying so.

The doors opened with that familiar creaking, cringing heavy draw. He shivered as the boom of hinge in latch evaporated into nothing. He hated silence...even more than the miserable three-man band at the Whiplash. But

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nothing — rock-bottom nothing — could be worse than the world he entered. The dark shroud of a bed, covered in shimmering silk as fine as his favorite cape, the tubes and ventilators and eerie, beeping machines that trailed him with red dots and inhuman chirps: he loathed this place.

Juices flowed through a canister on the floor and bright flashes illuminated the bedding and draperies — all brocade and black as pitch. In the corner sat a giant capsule — a horrid looking thing — electrified and pulsing. The Global Government commissioned this “project” long before the first bomb fell. But not until the Black Tick, under Numen direction, rose to prominence and claimed the city, did Alpha use the capsule as a means to discourage dissidents.

“I must always see it!” he drew the boy Omega close. *“It is my most prized possession!”*

An injection of lethal metallic substances was allowed to spread throughout the victim’s body. They were then locked inside the capsule, where electromagnetic waves drew the metal out, tearing apart organs piece by painful piece, until nothing was left but a pile of mush and crimson gore. Hiram, the family physician, had met such a fate. He was caught circulating pamphlets about the ten point takeover by the Numen hierarchy. His death was a forced public viewing Omega never forgot.

The canopy over the bed suddenly lifted as if a gasp of air caught it. But there were no windows and the door was sealed. Omega spun to find his father’s body propped on pillows and strangely green — a most hideous, putrid shade of decaying pea. He stared openly, his chest rising and falling with every pump of the canister.