



book three:

a whisper in
the dark

DON'T
LET
ME
GO

chani lynn feener

Don't Let Me Go
A Whisper in the Dark, #3
Chani Lynn Feener

ALSO BY CHANI LYNN FEENER

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Don't Let Me Go

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Chani Lynn Feener

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Don't Let Me Go

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Front Cover design by QuirkyCirce.

Printed in the United States of America.

First edition—2023

To Amy. So grateful to have you on the team!

Chapter 1:

“I don’t think you quite understand the gravity of your situation.” Altz, the Emperor of Sanctum, barely going on twenty-two years of life, pointed the tip of the dagger he’d been idly playing with directly at Odin. And followed that up with the most preposterous thing ever said in the history of ever. “We’re love rivals.”

A sound escaped from Wren’s lips before he could stop himself, and he shrugged apologetically when Odin sent him a sideways glare.

The two of them were seated on a leather couch across from a desk set on a short dais. The high-rise they’d been told to meet the Emperor in was made of glass and sleek black metal, with enough security to make both Dominus hesitate at the entrance. The only reason they’d shoved those nerves aside had been because this meeting was too important.

The room appeared more like a corporate CEO’s office than a royal throne room, but Altz sitting in his leatherback chair on the other side of the desk didn’t seem to realize that. He kept his head tipped, peering down at them with enough indecision in his gaze to make it obvious where he stood even before they’d started speaking.

The plan had been to come and gage just how far into Isa’s pocket the Emperor truly was. So far, it wasn’t looking good. The other part of the plan seemed like a waste of time, frankly, but there was no other choice but to stick with it. If they didn’t it would be too obvious they’d come to test the waters, even to someone as dense as Altz.

“I’d hardly call us that, majesty,” Odin said, tacking on the title even though it made his stomach churn. He was the Head of the Snow family. He bowed to no one. But if he had to give up one step in order to gain two? So be it.

“Oh?” Altz lifted a thin brow. “What would you call us then?”

“There seems to be some misunderstanding here,” Wren cut in, holding up both palms when the Emperor sent him a dark look.

Neither of them had been allowed to bring any of their men inside the building with them even though the Emperor was surrounded on all sides by his own guard. They’d been given the room, but it was as much of a false display as Odin pretending to acknowledge Altz as his ruler was. At the first sign of trouble, Imperial guards would flood in and attack in order to protect the Emperor, whereas Odin and Wren would be on their own if roles were reversed and Altz chose to strike against them.

Hunter wouldn’t like this.

For some reason, the thought had the corner of Odin’s mouth tipping upward, the idea of his Huntsman worried for him soothing some of the disgruntled anger in his chest.

“For one,” Wren continued, “Odin isn’t interested in Frost. For two—and forgive my bluntness—neither are you, majesty.”

Interesting angle, one that even had Odin tilting his head in curiosity. They’d discussed going out of their way *not* to piss off the Emperor and he wasn’t quite sure where the Head of the Hail Brumal was going with this.

“Terra cashed in a very old favor in order to convince me to meet with you,” Altz said, referencing his cousin whom Wren had gone to, and who was currently standing out in the hall. “I hope it wasn’t so you could ply me with bullshit, Dominus Shen.”

Despite the wording, Odin couldn’t help but catch a hint of something else in the Emperor’s tone.

Wren seemed to catch it too, for he settled more comfortably against the couch, lounging in the way he did when he was visiting the club and trying to attract a bed partner. The thin material of his practically sheer dress shirt tugged open at the move, giving a clear view of half of his chest and the coiled muscle of his upper body. Resting an

elbow on the armrest to his left, he lifted his hand and ran two fingers lightly across his bottom lip, all while eyeing Altz down.

“I can certainly think of a few suggestions I could make, none of which you’d find *bullshit*,” Wren drawled.

“We should probably stick to the business at hand first.” Altz was staring back at Wren like he wanted to eat him up, a clear indicator that this approach the Dominus had chosen was working, at least to some extent.

“That’s the best part,” Wren said. “In this case, the business and play are one in the same.”

It was taking everything in Odin to keep from interrupting, but he was annoyed that his friend had so obviously come here with a plan that he hadn’t bothered to share prior to their arrival.

Things hadn’t gone as expected since the moment they’d stepped foot in the building. There was still no sign of Isa, and while that could be a good thing it might also be the opposite. If Altz hadn’t informed Frost of this meeting, that meant they stood a chance of convincing him to turn. But if he had and Isa still wasn’t here...

That most likely meant he was held up elsewhere, and there wasn’t anything Odin could think of that would warrant Isa missing out on this willingly.

Anything good, anyway.

“We’ve been running this planet fairly comfortably,” Wren began to strum his fingers over his black-jean clad thigh, “You stay in your lane, and we stay in ours. But now you’re fucking Isa, and I admit I’m a bit hurt, majesty.”

Altz didn’t seem the least bit appalled by the other man’s crass phrasing. “Because?”

“If it was a Dominus you wanted,” he licked his lips slowly, “clearly there was a better option than Isa Frost.”

He chuckled. “You think you’re more attractive than Isa?”

“I think I’m a bigger package,” Wren corrected, leaning forward when the Emperor’s eyes immediately dropped to the spot between his legs. “Now that I have your attention, how about we lay out all the cards, shall we? We’re all king’s here. We know what matters most.”

“And what’s that?”

“Profit.”

Altz set the knife down on his desk. “I’m listening.”

Odin had wondered why they’d been allowed through the doors, but it was all starting to make sense. The Emperor he knew was a cowardly man who only cared about himself. His people were an afterthought at best, almost as though he enjoyed living on a planet where his title was mostly for show. Since he’d started sleeping with Isa, Odin had assumed he’d either been bribed or threatened into it, but if Altz was afraid of his lover, he wasn’t showing any sign of that now.

He was too distracted eye-fucking Wren.

And Wren...Odin almost shook his head at him. That bastard must have known the Emperor had the hots for him before coming here.

“Isa can offer you many things, but he can’t offer you the world’s weight in gold the way I can,” Wren said. “That’s a particular skill only I possess.”

“Are you saying you’re willing to share, Dominus Shen?” Altz asked.

“That’s the other point I want to make. Unlike some, I’m good at sharing.” He feigned being hot, tugging at the collar of his shirt, opening the material up even more for the Emperor’s hungry gaze.

“You should have come to me sooner,” Altz sounded uncertain.

“If I’d known a partnership was on the table, I would have.”

The Emperor hesitated, the first inkling of fear finally shinning behind his green eyes.

“We can take care of Isa,” Odin jumped in, not wanting to miss the opportunity to press on that crack in the other man’s resolve. “We’re planning on doing that anyway. At least in this scenario you get something out of it. What’s there to lose, really?”

“My head?” Altz snorted and dropped back against his chair. “You think I don’t know exactly what a man like Frost is capable of? Why else would I allow him to—” He stopped abruptly, clearing his throat, and dropped his gaze to the shiny surface of his desk.

So it wasn’t because he was enamored by Isa. That was good at least. It meant they really did stand a chance here. If they could convince the Emperor to work with them instead, they could cut off some of Isa’s support. Frost would be forced to seek aid elsewhere in his time of need, and any of the threats he’d been able to make about using the law in his favor would be out the window.

Vetle, Odin’s underboss, had informed them of Frost’s plan to try and have sex work made illegal, which would severely cripple the Red Light District, destroying Odin’s territory’s worth. The only way he’d be able to accomplish that goal would be with the Emperor in his pocket, but if he was in someone else’s instead...

“We have a plan to handle Frost,” Wren said.

“Tell me.” Altz frowned when Wren shook his head.

“All due respect, this isn’t our first time making a deal. Whether what you’re saying is true and you really don’t have any personal feelings for him or not, we can’t risk sharing details with you. Telling you this much is already a risk.”

“Coming here was a risk,” Odin corrected. “Isa has already used you to threaten our positions.”

The Emperor snorted. “If you think I have a problem with being used, you’re sorely mistaken, Dominus Snow. I’m happy sitting back and leaving all the governing to someone else. This isn’t a position I ever wanted, in fact it was originally meant for someone else.”

This time Odin was the one to frown, but Altz wasn't finished.

"I'll be satisfied with being a figurehead, handing the keys to the kingdom off, so long as I'm guaranteed protection and my creature comforts."

"Why do I get the sense you consider the word comfortable to mean something vastly different from the rest of us?" Odin drawled.

He laughed. "I've been living a certain kind of lifestyle, admittedly. One I'm not willing to give up. Besides, I'll still be emperor in name. It's best for everyone if I keep up appearances. For the sake of the public, of course."

"Of course."

"What will you need?" Wren asked. Clearly he was of the same mind as Odin, snatching at the opportunity before something could go wrong and change the Emperor's mind.

There was always the chance this was a trick, but Odin didn't really think a man like Altz was capable of pulling it off, and so far he'd seemed genuine. If Isa had told him to stall them, he wasn't doing a particularly good job of it, seemingly eager himself. And if Isa had instructed him to simply play along... There was no denying the lust in his eyes every time he set them on Wren. Even though Isa had claimed not to actually care about him, there was no way he'd willingly allow the Emperor to look at another man, not when he was bedding him already. His ego simply wouldn't allow it.

If they operated on the assumption this was real, and the Emperor did in fact want out from under Isa's thumb, they couldn't miss out by playing it safe. Isa's control over the largest branch of the Brumal was already a lot to contend with, and it was only because Odin had Wren as an ally that the two of them had managed to hold out this long.

Now that Isa had announced he was done waiting...

"Two million coin every six months," Altz began laying down his terms. "I continue to reside in the palace, and

I get six percent of all monthly profit made on both the Yellow Brick Road and Liaand Norra.”

Odin highly doubted the deal he'd struck with Isa was anywhere near that hefty, but he held his tongue. Right now, what mattered was getting the Emperor to cooperate with them and abandon Frost. Once that was done and Frost was defeated? They could *renegotiate*.

“And one other thing,” Altz shifted his gaze to Wren. “A bedpartner.”

“There are plenty of candidates in Club Cherry,” Odin suggested, even knowing already that wasn't going to work.

Altz shook his head slowly. “I don't just want anyone. I'm an emperor. If you're unwilling to provide—”

“We're in agreement then,” Wren stated, the corner of his mouth tipping up suggestively.

“Four percent,” Odin corrected, not wanting them to be taken for all they were worth without first giving the appearance of a fight at least. If Altz suspected anything he'd pull out and they were too close for that.

“Five,” the Emperor said.

“Five it is,” Wren agreed before Odin could argue, ignoring the glare he received from him for it. Instead, he kept his attention locked on the Emperor, almost as though he were really into the idea of sleeping with the other man.

As far as Odin knew, Wren had little to no interest in that, which meant this was either another angle he'd need to fill him in on later, or he'd kept his secret desires for the Emperor under wraps all this time.

The latter was doubtful. A playboy like Wren didn't get distracted by any one person for long enough to develop any sorts of attachments.

“Now,” Wren leaned forward again, dropping his elbows on his knees, his smile turning cocky, “for our terms.”

“You'll refuse any and all contact with Frost, or his people, effective immediately,” Odin said.

“And if he barges in here gunning for my head for it?” Altz lifted a brow.

“Our men will be close at all times,” he told him. “He won’t be able to get near you.”

“That would be comforting, if I wasn’t already aware of just how powerful a person Isa is. That’s why you two are willing to strike this deal with me in the first place, isn’t it? You need to knock him down a peg and I’m the perfect pawn to help you do it.”

Odin was starting to think he’d been mistaken about the Emperor all this time. That perhaps Altz wasn’t as cowardly and foolish as he’d led them all to believe since he’d been crowned at sixteen years ago.

As if reading his thoughts, Altz dropped some of the façade, a calculating look entering his eyes for a moment. “A survivalist knows to do whatever needs to be done in order to stay alive. If that means belittling myself before others?” He shrugged. “At least I’ll be breathing while doing it.”

“You didn’t want the throne,” Wren repeated what they’d been told a few minutes ago.

“No,” Altz agreed.

“Then why not give it away?”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing right now?” He glanced between the two of them. “Which of you will it be? Who’s going to be the lucky person pulling my strings?”

“The Brumal throne has always belonged to the Snow family,” Wren said absently.

“Even a few dozen of your best soldiers won’t stand a chance against Isa Frost.” Altz rested his chin on his palm. “I want you.”

“Wasn’t that already worked into the agreement?” Wren asked, pretending not to understand when they all did.

“Only another Shout stands a chance against him,” Altz explained anyway. “Since you’ll be bedding me anyway,

it makes the most sense that you're the one who stays with me."

"I don't stand a chance against Frost."

"No, but you'll be able to fend him off long enough for Dominus Snow to arrive and save the day. Between the two of you, I'm sure you'll be able to keep me alive should Frost come for me. And if you perish trying to do so before Snow can make it? Well, I'll swear an oath now not to break our agreement should that be the unfortunate case."

Altz may want Wren's body, but it was obvious from that statement he had no true feelings for him. He wanted protection and a warm bed and enough riches to keep him satiated and that was all.

Wren didn't seem the least bit offended however. "I have a Brumal and a business to run, majesty. If we're going to do things your way, I'll need a space in the palace to occupy where I can work while I'm..." his gaze trailed pointedly down to where Altz's body was hidden beneath the desk, "staying with you."

"Done." He waved his hand. "There are hundreds of unused rooms in the palace. You can take as many as you like. So long as you take me in each and every one first."

Odin couldn't help it, he laughed, but when the Emperor turned to him, clapped to show it wasn't an insult. "That's a good one."

"Of course the King of the Red Light District would appreciate my humor." Altz seemed pleased. "Any other conditions, gentlemen?"

"I have some deals in the works," Odin said. "Property deals. I need it ensured they go through without a hitch."

"Stealing are we?" Altz nodded. "That won't be a problem. We're all aware how Sanctum is run. Laws are merely a suggestion. If you want something, I'll help you take it since you're helping me to do the same."

"Did you inform Isa of this meeting?"

“I did not.”

“That was a gamble.”

Altz stood, reaching for the ties of the royal robe he was wearing, a silky black and green with swirling details done in gold thread. Though he'd been born on Sanctum, his mother had originally hailed from another planet in a different galaxy. It'd been her greatest misfortune to end up here, where she'd caught the eye of the then emperor. As soon as Altz father had died, he'd begun working in more and more of his mother's cultural customs into his life, and the style of dress was one of them.

He slipped the material down his left arm, baring half his chest and his shoulder to them. His skin was blistered and red, some areas worse than others, and he winced when even the light silk stroked against one of the injuries.

“He tortures you.” Odin recognized the mild frostbite for what it was.

“He likes to use his power on me, yes,” Altz confirmed. “This is nothing. At least these marks will eventually heal. I know what you think of me, Dominus Snow. I am not an intelligent man. I only want to live comfortably, stress free. When Isa first came to me, he made promises I foolishly believed he would keep. My idiocy cost me. I won't make the same mistake again.”

Odin bristled. “Meaning?”

“You mentioned my giving up the throne, Dominus Shen,” Altz readjusted his clothing and eased back into his chair as he spoke. “I imagine it'd be much more agreeable to control a child than it would be a full grown man.”

The next person in line for the throne was his eleven year old sister. The original heir to the throne had died young and suddenly, leaving Altz forced to take his place once their father passed. Out of the three children, none had been of age when that had finally happened, but at least Altz had been sixteen. At eleven his sister *would* be easily manipulated.

“Taking care of children isn’t really an interest of ours,” Odin said, and he meant that in more than one way. They may be mafia, but he drew the line at harming children. He couldn’t say the same for Isa, of course, but knew that at least Wren shared this same ideal.

Wren more so actually.

“That’s great then,” Altz smiled but there was something off about it now, “since there’s no longer a child that needs caring for.”

Odin felt Wren tense at his side, but he got a hold of himself quickly and a glance at the Emperor showed he hadn’t seemed to notice. “Meaning?”

“It’s as I’ve said. I won’t be making the same mistake twice, and Isa never missed an opportunity to remind me just how expendable I actually am. Now that’s no longer the case. I’m the only surviving member of my bloodline, and therefore the only one who can legally have the throne. Which means,” his grin broadened, “it’s going to be a pleasure doing business with you, gentlemen.”

Chapter 2:

“Wait.” Hunter tried to keep up with his sister as she practically sped away from Club Cherry, leading them down a twisting alleyway and then across a bustling street. He hesitated with his foot on the crosswalk, a sense of dread spreading throughout his entire body at being this far from home already but—

Home.

When had he started considering the club his home? Had it been before he’d mated Odin or after?

“Hurry,” Meg called to him, already on the other side. The light to the crosswalk had begun to countdown and he had less than ten seconds to join her. There was a dark expression on her face, a face shrouded by the thick hood of her sweatshirt, obscuring everything from her nose up from his view.

But he recognized that sneer. He’d recognize it anywhere.

Tucking that tiny voice that warned him this was a bad idea away, he jogged after her, cursing when she’d already turned and continued walking without him before he’d made it.

She was leading him further from the club, further from the protection of the Snow Brumal. It made sense that she’d want to though, that she wouldn’t trust Odin after everything they’d been through as kids.

“I thought you were dead,” he said to her once he made it back to her side, grabbing onto her elbow to steady her before she could turn down yet another secluded alley. “Stop. Talk to me.”

“There’s no time for that,” she told him, yanking her arm free. “We have to keep moving.”

“Or?”

“He won’t be pleased.”

Hunter frowned. “Who? Odin? He isn’t going to be happy I left no matter what.”

She tipped her head to the side slightly, still shielded by her hood. “So, you are with him.”

“It’s...” He blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s complicated. I’ll explain everything to you later, but right now we should find somewhere safe where we can catch up. You mentioned you have a safe-house? Where have you been all of this time? Have you been okay? Healthy? Warm?”

A million and one questions raced through his mind but he quelled them, not wanting to bombard her, especially since she appeared to be skittish already.

“Let me see—” His hand was slapped away when he reached for the hood and he hissed at the contact.

“Don’t touch me,” she snarled, and he froze at the pure animalistic sound of it. A sound only someone who’d experienced pain before would make.

“Meg...” He swallowed, suddenly even more afraid to find out what had happened to her over these past years. A decade. A whole decade and now they were finally back together and...Hunter glanced around them at the crowd. It was the end of the day and people were in constant motion, paying them no mind as they went about their business, but that still didn’t make him feel safe out in the open like they were. “We can’t stand here all night.”

“Come.” She turned on her heel and started again for the direction she’d been leading him.

He wanted to argue, but since she was so adamant opted to shut his mouth and let her do her thing. Ten years was a long time, more than enough for people to have changed. The Meg he’d known, that bright, firecracker girl she was in his memory, was most likely no longer here.

Sadness engulfed him, followed swiftly by a gnawing guilt. Whatever she’d experienced since their last meeting, it was his fault. Any hardships she’d suffered were on him. It’d

been easy enough to wallow all these years when he'd believed he was the only one alive and suffering for his choices that day, but now...

Meg was alive. His sister was alive and that meant not only had he'd screwed her back then, he'd also abandoned her.

He tried to assess her from behind as they went, noting there was nothing off about her gait. Her clothing kept most of her form hidden, but with her movements as clean as they were, and the fact they were going at such a fast pace yet she wasn't out of breath, made him think she was at least in decent health.

"What have you been doing all this time?" Hunter asked as they came to the end of the alley and he got close enough that he didn't feel like he needed to raise his voice to be heard. "Have you been staying in the city? Why—"

Something hard hit him from behind, directly over the head, and Hunter stumbled forward. He ended up falling into Meg's arms, the weight of him taking her down to a crouch since she couldn't hold him up, the perfect angle for him to finally see her full face.

Maybe it was the head injury messing with his vision, but Hunter stared for a long while at the place where her right eye should have been, waiting for the cloudy fog in his brain to clear. Only, it never did, and it became painfully obvious after a moment that what he was seeing wasn't a concussion induced trick at all.

"Meg."

In the place where her eye should have been there was nothing but a gaping hole. There wasn't even an eyelid left to help conceal it, just an empty spot in her skull. The eyebrow above it was mostly gone as well, an angry red scar slicing through most of it, leaving only the tip and the end. That same scar patched over her eye socket and traveled a little over her cheek toward her right ear, but her hair covered the rest and he couldn't tell how far it actually went.

He opened his mouth to ask her what happened but nothing but a garbled sound came out. Something shifted off to the side and he turned, grimacing when that caused a shooting pain at the back of his skull. Still, he froze and forgot all about the discomfort when his gaze landed on First, Frost's underboss.

Hunter's grip on Meg's arms tightened. He needed to tell her to run, to get away before—

She dropped him as if disgusted and rose to her feet, even going so far as to dust off her hands, momentarily scowling down at them like they were covered in garbage.

"You took too long," First said, moving closer, and though his eyes were on Hunter, it was obvious by the way his sister shrugged that the words weren't meant for him.

"He wasn't as eager to leave as you made it sound like he would be," Meg seemed exasperated by that fact.

"Our informant told us he was being held against his will." First pulled a set of handcuffs from his back pocket, clicking the side so the metal sprang open as he dropped down at Hunter's side.

Hunter tried to move away, but the world spun and he groaned as a wave of dizziness consumed him. A second later, the cold bite of metal trapping both of his wrists helped a slice of panic to cut through the agony. He looked up at Meg.

"You're working with Frost?" Isa had kidnapped and threatened to murder her. "Why?"

"Don't sound so wounded," she said, for a moment sounding more like the spunky brat of a sister he used to know, before she waved at First. "Take him before someone sees."

There was no chance to struggle as strong arms lifted him and practically tossed him into the back of a hovervan that must have pulled up to the end of the alley at some point after Hunter had been hit.

It was getting harder for him to stay focused, and he fought against the pull of unconsciousness, knowing that if he passed out now there'd be no chance of escape for him later.

The blow to his head had been too hard, however, and before long darkness crept up on him.

His final thought was about how pissed Odin was going to be at him for this.

* * *

When they'd been kids living in the trailer park on the outskirts of the city, they'd turned picking through trash into a game. Who could find the most colorful wrapper? Who could find a soda can? Who could find a half-filled beer? It was their own messed-up version of hide-and-seek, a secret only the two of them knew about.

At the time, Hunter had merely been trying to keep his little sister distracted from their mostly empty bellies and the threadbare clothing they were in. Their mother had been gone for a while by that point, and their father had been called away to prove his loyalty to the Brumal—again—leaving Hunter alone to take care of Meg. He'd been seven.

Still, these past years whenever he'd thought back on those times he'd smiled a little, the memories vivid and meaningful in a way. At least he'd been with his sister. He could get through anything so long as he was with his family.

Maybe it was because of the head injury, or maybe he'd mentally numbed himself to the situation as a coping mechanism or some such other bullshit, but when Hunter finally came too, there was no overwhelming sensation of grief or feeling of intense betrayal. Logically, he knew he should be feeling those things. His sister had handed him over to a man who wanted him dead, after all, and yet...

He blinked, his eyes gummy and hard to open, and then winced when he was met with bright light coming from the left. A glance over showed there was a large open window in the stone wall, only a billowy white curtain tossed over it as a covering. A chill crept in, skating across his skin, cluing him to the fact he felt overheated and unwell.

Something wet was rolling down the side of his face and he didn't have to see it to know it was blood, though it

couldn't be from the hit to his head since that had happened on the back.

Lovely.

Forcing his gaze upward, he caught sight of the thick, rough ropes tied tight around his wrists, the material cutting into his flesh already even though he hadn't fought against them. The rope was secured over a large meat hook, and he would have chuckled at how cliché that was if he'd had any sort of humor left in him. As it were, all he managed to feel was numb.

Even when he realized he wasn't wearing any clothing.

"Awake already?" a smooth voice came from across from him. Isa Frost was sitting in a metal chair, one leg folded over the other. He was twirling an open switchblade in his hand absently but didn't make any moves to attack. "I'm impressed, Huntsman."

"Don't," his voice cracked and he was forced to pause and try again, "Don't call me that."

"You don't seem to have a problem when my brother does it."

"You're not your brother," the way he said it made it clear what he actually meant.

Isa wasn't Odin, wasn't as good as him, and never would be.

"I advise you to err with caution," Isa said. "You're not with Odin now, you're here, with me, and I," he flicked the sharp blade, the edge glinting in the light, "don't have nearly as much patience as he does."

Hunter didn't bother saying anything to that. There wasn't really a point to it. Since he'd gotten himself into this mess he was more than willing to resign himself to his fate. He'd been an idiot for leaving Club Cherry, for allowing Meg to lead him so far away where there was less of a chance a Brumal member had seen and gone to alert Snow.

Odin would find out, of course, but by then it would most likely be too late.

Hell, wasn't it already too late? Isa wasn't holding onto that knife to be cute. He didn't make idyll threats, and the last time he'd promised to hurt Hunter he'd followed through almost immediately.

"Before you kill me," Hunter found himself saying, the resignation in his tone hard to miss, "tell me what you did to my sister."

"Why?" Isa cocked his head. "You think I had to have done something to get her to turn on you? Because of blood?"

"You said she was dead."

"I did," he chuckled. "I lied."

"I'm so surprised."

"Sarcasm? At a time like this? Really, Thorn?"

"How else should I react?"

"Your sister, whom you believed was dead for over ten years, just—"

"Yeah," he cut him off and shook his wrists, wincing when that caused the ropes to slice in deeper, "got that much. I was there, remember? You on the other hand..."

"You don't remember?"

Hunter frowned.

"I was in the car, I helped steady you when First so carelessly threw you in."

He didn't remember that at all, but there was no reason for Isa to lie to him about a minor detail like that so he'd take his word for it. It didn't make a difference anyway. Whether Isa had gone to get him personally or—Wait.

"You were waiting for Meg to bring me to you?" Didn't that mean Isa hadn't gone to the meeting with the Emperor? Was that because Altz hadn't told him, or had he simply not cared to?

“I couldn’t exactly walk into Club Cherry and lure you myself, now could I,” Isa said. “But I also wasn’t about to leave a mission like this up to chance. Knowing I was right there ensured everyone did their part correctly and got me what I wanted without any hiccups.”

That really made it sound like he didn’t know. If Altz hadn’t told him, that meant Odin and Wren stood a chance to sway the Emperor to their side, but only so long as Isa wasn’t informed.

“How long have I been out?”

Isa checked his multi-slate. “About an hour.”

Odin had left before Meg had shown. The meeting was either winding to an end by now or had already ended, but without knowing for sure, Hunter could only think to stall. If Isa found out about the meeting before Odin could finish, he could leave and potentially ruin the whole thing.

He’d keep him distracted for as long as he could, that was the best he could do.

The last thing he could do.

Finally, a sliver of sadness seemed to poke at his otherwise emotionless state of being. He’d gotten to be mated with Odin for such a brief amount of time and now he was going to die before even getting to admit to the other man how he felt. It wasn’t fair.

But it wasn’t surprising.

Why was his life always so unfair?

“Why am I naked?” He really didn’t want to draw attention to that fact, but his lack of clothing probably meant Isa didn’t intend to kill him quickly. Since now they both had a reason for wanting to draw this out, he might as well start them off on the right foot.

“I have a better question,” Isa said. “Why are you so at ease? You do understand what’s about to happen here, don’t you, Thorn?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Do you think perhaps Odin is going to rescue you?” Isa laughed at that, like it was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. “He may have developed an odd fondness toward you, I admit, but he doesn’t even know where you are right now. He probably hasn’t even realized you’re missing. And once he does, all of the security footage at the club will show you walking out on your own. Of your own free will.”

That’s why Isa had sent Meg in to do the deed in the first place. He’d wanted Hunter to paint himself into a corner.

Hunter snorted. “You’re trying to act like you don’t feel threatened by me, but if that were truly the case you wouldn’t have bothered concocting a setup like this. What? Afraid if he didn’t think I left willingly he’d come running? Worried it’s not just an ‘odd fondness’ but something more?”

He realized his mistake a moment too late when Isa was suddenly in front of him and the knife was buried in his right thigh right up to the hilt. He screamed, only catching himself after the fact, clamping his mouth shut and clenching his jaw to fight off any other sounds. Why should he give Isa satisfaction?

“So prepared to die, are we?” Isa drawled, the darkness swirling in his eyes causing Hunter’s breath to hitch despite his resolve. He twisted the blade just a little, not enough to cause any major damage but enough to ensure it hurt like hell, and then yanked it free, laughing when Hunter’s body jerked.

The room was cold and not very large, made of gray stone and unfinished. There was a plastic tarp spread out on the floor beneath them, covering practically the entire expanse of the room, and a cutout door in the stone wall acted as the only entrance and exit.

At least, Hunter had thought there was only one until he heard scuffling behind him.

“Ah,” Isa took a single step back and grinned, “my friends are here. You see, Huntsman,” he began to clean the blood off the blade, using Hunter’s bare chest to do it, “I have no intention of letting you go quick. This is going to be slow, enjoyable—for me, anyway.”

He felt himself being surrounded from behind and at the sides but didn't bother trying to turn and see how many men had entered the room. Giving Isa his undivided attention instead.

“Even if you get rid of me,” he told him, “that won't change things between you two. He's never going to love you, Frost. Didn't in the past. Won't in the future. I'm—”

“Going to regret having ever stepped foot in Faraway Mansion,” Isa snarled. With a flick of his wrist, he gave a silent order to his men and then settled back down in the single chair, lounging as if about to see a show.

The first blow to the side left Hunter reeling, but before he could recover, a fist made an impact with his face, another with his ribs. The hits kept coming, one after the other, until Hunter lost count and even the pain had started to dwindle, his mind blocking it off and separating him from the situation.

He pictured Odin instead, thought about how angry he was going to be when he discovered Hunter had been killed like this, in some shitty abandoned cement building, and by thugs no less.

Would he be disappointed in Hunter for not fighting back? For not trying harder?

A laugh slipped past his lips before he could help it, the sound echoing against the stone walls, growing in volume as it took him over until he was heaving through it and gasping for air as tears rolled down his bruised cheeks.

“Boss,” one of the men took a step back and glanced uncertainly at Isa, “I think he's lost it.”

Isa tipped his head. “It's too soon for that.”

Yes, on that they could agree at least, because Hunter needed to stall.

“Everyone is so afraid of the big bad Frost Dominus,” Hunter hacked a lob of blood and spit onto the ground at Isa's feet, “But you don't even do your own dirty work. This is all you've got? I've taken worse beatings. Hell, my sister hurt me more an hour ago than all of your men combined. Pathetic.”

Isa was intelligent and calculating, but he had one major weakness, and that was his pride. It was the reason he'd always been so jealous whenever someone else so much as looked at Odin when they'd been younger, and no doubt why he had Hunter here now. So even though it was obvious what Hunter was doing, that he was trying to goad him into a reaction, the Dominus rose to his feet anyway.

“Don't regret this, *Huntsman*.”

“Don't call me—”

The blade went right back into his thigh.

Chapter 3:

On the way back from the meeting, the tension in the hovercar was palpable, both Odin and Wren stewing in their separate dark thoughts for more than half the ride before one of them finally broke the silence.

“I hope his sister wasn’t a part of your plan,” Odin said, watching Wren closely in the semi-darkness of the car. They were seated in the back, a space between them. Lights from the street filtered through the tinted windows as they drove, momentarily lighting up the other man’s features before casting them back into shadow once more.

Odin didn’t need to see his friend’s face to know what he was feeling, however. For Wren, the harming of children in any capacity was something he took personally, and now...

“You should have filled me in beforehand,” he added with a sigh. “I could have talked you out of it or helped you come up with another way.”

“Why?” Wren asked, voice low. “You of all people should know better than to look down on someone selling their body. That’s all this is, a transaction.”

“Between us and the Emperor of Sanctum,” he reminded, only to have Wren finally turn and set a serious gaze on him.

“You won’t be the one fucking him, Snow.”

“If he’d asked for that, I would have declined.” He had Hunter and there was no way he’d be throwing away the tiny molecule of trust he’d finally managed to form with his Whisper. Even if it was for a chance of destroying Isa.

At some point, keeping his Huntsman had become more important to him than his revenge, a shocking realization that had him momentarily distracted. He sat back against the plush leather seat, brow furrowed as he contemplated what that truly meant for him.

“Terra filled me in on the fact Altz has always had an interest in me,” Wren interrupted his internal crisis, “so I knew what we were getting into. I had time to think it over. If he’d wanted you instead, we obviously would have needed to come up with another plan. There was no way you would willingly bed him.”

“But you will?”

Wren shrugged. “Let’s just say I have my own reasons for it and leave it at that.”

“That’s not good enough, Shen. I need answers. We’re in this together.”

“Are we?” He snorted. “We both want to stop Isa, but that’s where our partnership ends.”

“And our friendship?” They’d been friends for so long, the idea of having to fight against Wren made Odin feel sick, but he kept his expression blank as he waited for a response.

“Solid as ever. That’s not going to change.”

“Then fill me in. Sleeping with the Emperor after knowing what he’s done—”

“It’s all a means to an end,” Wren cut him off with a sigh, rubbing at his temple. Suddenly, he appeared to be extremely tired.

“To what end?” Odin wasn’t an idiot, he understood he was trying to tell him there was more at stake here than simply defeating Isa, but what and why? “Since we’re friends, you know I’ll stand by you.”

“You’re the Head of the Snow family,” Wren reminded with a small smile that barely made it to his eyes. “Your goal is to rule over the Brumal.”

“You’ve never been interested in the position.”

“I’m not.”

“Then...?”

“I have my sights set on something else,” he said cryptically. “Don’t worry, Snow. I’m not after your crown. I’m

gunning for a different one, and if I have to sleep with the Emperor to get close? So be it. Honestly, him wanting me only works in my favor.”

“What aren’t you telling me? Besides everything, that is?”

Wren stared at him for a moment, clearly considering whether or not he wanted to answer. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision just as the car pulled into the parking garage of Club Cherry.

“I’m going to kill the Emperor,” Wren told him once they’d come to a stop in front of the entrance, just before their driver came around to open the door for him. “Any objections?”

Odin thought it over. It would send the political side of things for a loop, and cause chaos for sure, but it wouldn’t overly affect him in the long run. Altz having murdered his sister was reason enough for Wren to want him dead, but Odin got the sense there was more to it than that.

He also acknowledged that this was as far as Wren was willing to divulge, at least for now, so he didn’t push him.

“Do what you want,” he shrugged almost nonchalantly. “Since when have I intervened in your affairs?”

Wren gave a nod and stepped out of the car, Odin following suit.

“You’re coming in?” he asked as the two of them made their way to the double doors leading to the first level of the club. Two Snow Brumal members bowed their heads low as they passed, but he paid them no mind, still caught up in the events of the day.

“There’s someone I have to see,” Wren said but didn’t elaborate.

“Since when have there been so many secrets between us?” Odin joked.

He snorted. “There’ve always been secrets between us.”

“Fair.”

“I’ll handle things on my end,” Wren said once they’d come to the front desk, just before the club sectioned off. There were people around, the club always packed, so he avoided specifics as he spoke. “The distraction should allow you the chance to deal with things on yours. But we’ll only get one shot at this, and I can’t promise to draw things out for too long.”

The way his expression morphed into one of disgust clued Odin into the fact that, despite the flirting back at the meeting, Wren wasn’t looking forward to tumbling into bed with Altz.

Whatever Wren had planned, he was serious about it.

“How long have you been working on this?” Odin asked, curious how he hadn’t noticed his friend plotting whenever they’d gotten together. Although, it made sense considering they’d mostly been speaking about his problems with Hunter as of late...

“It’s all come together recently actually,” Wren surprised him by replying. “But that’s all I’m willing to say at the moment.”

“Don’t trust me?”

Wren gave him a wry smile and then tapped the front desk to get the attention of the receptionist there. “Where’s Sun?”

Odin frowned. “What are you looking for my manager for?”

“I’ve got to see the man about a fish.” He winked at him.

That made less sense than any other aspect of the conversation they’d just had, but all right. To be honest, Odin was only somewhat interested. Thoughts of Hunter had already started to make him antsy, the need to get back to his Huntsman clawing at his insides until he was shifting impatiently on his feet.

“Mr. Sun should be checking on Dance Room Four, Mr. Shen,” the receptionist, Sammie, said politely. “If you can’t find him there, perhaps he can be located in Bar Six.”

Wren rapped his knuckles against the counter in thanks and then turned to go, waving at Odin instead of giving a verbal farewell.

Clearly Odin wasn’t the only one in a hurry all of a sudden.

He grunted and turned, about to head toward the back hall where his private elevator was located when he caught sight of Corbi rushing to him.

The oldest of a set of twins he’d taken in off the streets years ago, Corbi was usually put together and cool. Now, however, she seemed panicked, a sheen of sweat visible on her brow, strands of her black hair tumbling loose from the tight bun she usually kept together.

“What the hell happened?” he barked before she’d even made it to him, nerves already starting to get the best of him because there were only a few reasons she would be this nervous and none of them were good.

“Sir,” she glanced around them, noting the three receptionists and the few members of the club who lingered in the greeting space with them, “We should take this elsewhere.”

“Tell me now.” He didn’t give a shit who overheard when she was worrying him to the degree that she was. His gaze inadvertently slipped over her shoulder, peering past her down the length of the wide hall she’d just come down. No one had followed her, but he wasn’t sure that could be considered a positive thing. “Where is he?”

She paled and that answered enough.

Odin shoved past her, completely forgetting himself in the moment, and stormed down the hall toward the elevator. Just before he could reach the button on the door it dinged and opened, exposing Loni, Corbi’s twin, standing inside.

Her expression mirrored her sister’s.

He couldn't even formulate words, opting to stare her down until she cracked and gave him the answers he wanted.

"I looked away for two seconds and he was gone, sir," Loni dropped her gaze to the floor and kept it there, flinching when the doors began to automatically close and Odin slammed his palm loudly against them to prevent them from doing so. "We were able to trace him to the back exit."

"What?" That couldn't be right. "Are you saying he *left on his own*?"

Odin had feared his Whisper had been injured in his absence, the idea that Hunter could be gone hadn't even entered his mind. And the fact that he'd walked out willingly...No.

"He wouldn't," he insisted.

"The security footage follows him from the bar where Loni left him," Corbi arrived at his side and started to explain, "down the hall and out the back. There was a person with him, a woman, but as far as we can tell, she didn't force him to do anything."

"She threatened him," Odin guessed.

Corbi looked away. "It doesn't appear as though Mr. Thorn was in any type of distress."

"Other than surprise," Loni corrected. "He looked surprised when the woman arrived."

"Show me." The control room was located on the second level where only Brumal members were allowed access. The ride up in the elevator was brief, but the entire time Odin's mind was on overdrive trying to work through a problem with only half the equation.

Hunter wouldn't have left him. He just wouldn't have. Not when things between them had been going so well lately.

"Sir," Corbi cleared her throat as they got off the elevator and headed toward the large room which housed all security for the club, "is there a chance—"

“No.” He didn’t need her to finish that sentence to know where she was going with it, and he refused to allow those words to even be uttered out loud. “She did something to him.”

“There’s no proof of that in the footage.”

“I don’t give a shit what you were able to see,” he snapped. “You missed something. Period. End of story.”

“Sir—”

He stopped just before the door and turned on her with a growl. “Keep pushing. I’m warning you. Even you.”

She took a step back and bowed.

Odin entered the room, slamming the door open, and walking straight to the nearest computer.

There was a single row of them, five in all, with an employee seated in front of each, viewing various holo-screens. Since the club was massive, they didn’t view live footage from the hundred cameras set up at once but bounced around them. Each room had Brumal guards whose job it was to prevent any type of scuffle or incident, so there was never really a reason for tightened security to be watching the cameras like a hawk.

Though clearly, that had been a mistake, since somehow Hunter had managed to slip past the notice of both Loni and any of the guards currently stationed in the room he’d been in last.

Without waiting for the employee, a smaller man who cowered before him, to make way, Odin shoved his chair, the seat rolling a good few feet before coming to a stop when it bumped up against Loni.

She’d followed him in, but Corbi had smartly waited in the hall.

“Where?” he asked.

“Bar One. Not long after you left.”

Odin typed in the information and pulled up the footage from a few hours ago. It didn't take him long to locate the right camera, aimed just above the bar so that it faced out over the crowd.

Hunter was seated, scowling as he sipped lightly at his drink. Loni was with him for a time, and then Sun arrived and she said something he couldn't hear and left. Not long after that, Sun was called away as well, leaving Hunter unattended.

Odin sped up the footage, frowning as he watched. There was no sign that Hunter intended to leave so why—

A hooded figure approached him, settling into the empty seat at his right. He almost didn't notice until the person spoke. There was no audio on the security cameras since this club dealt with some high-standing members of society who didn't want their secrets, even ones whispered in the dark in the ears of potential lovers, out in the world. But it was obvious whatever the person said—female, he could tell—startled Hunter out of his internal musings.

A range of emotions passed over his face, from surprise to fear to doubt to elation, but then settled finally on confusion. The woman did something below the table, something the camera couldn't see, and then stood.

“We believe this was when she removed his bracelet,” Loni said.

Sure enough, a moment later the woman went to step away, only for Hunter to pull her back. She didn't appear to be pleased, saying something harshly to him before she left, walking toward the exit of the bar.

Hunter hesitated, and even though it had already happened and logically he knew it was too late to stop him, Odin held his breath and silently pleaded with the other man not to follow anyway.

“This is important,” Loni told him.

Hunter turned back and looked directly at the camera as if trying to silently convey a message. He lifted the bracelet

into view, sure that it could be captured on the footage, and then slipped it into his pocket.

“Corbi believes he was trying to taunt you,” Loni tentatively began. “But I have a different opinion, sir.”

“Tell me.” Out of the twins, Loni had been the one at Hunter’s side the most. The two of them had even developed a sort of friendship, one that Odin was a little bit jealous of at times. If he was going to trust someone where Hunter was concerned, it would be her over her sister.

“I think he kept the bracelet on purpose,” she explained. “He may have hoped you could trace it even though it’s been disconnected.”

“Have you tried?”

“I have someone on it,” she said, “but it could take a while. There’s no off switch so it’s technically not powered down, but because it’s no longer attached to his wrist the device is no longer connected directly to our software. I have our best tracker on it.”

Odin kept watching the video, the tension inside of him coiling until he thought his chest was going to explode. He switched cameras to watch as Hunter trailed after the woman, still unsure of his movements. At the exit door, he stopped a second time, tipping his head back to stare at the camera there as he had with the one at the bar.

It was dark in the hallway, almost hard to make him out at all, but Odin caught the movement of his mouth as he said something. He rewound and zoomed in, trying harder to see. It took three tries but he finally got it in the end.

“Meg.” Odin sucked in a breath. “He’s saying Meg.”

“His sister, sir?” Loni shook her head. “She’s dead.”

Hunter had followed an unknown female out of Club Cherry, the one place on the entire planet he knew he’d be safe. He wouldn’t have done that if she’d been just anyone.

“He didn’t leave me,” Odin breathed out, dropping down into an empty chair. The fear was still there, but some of

the pressure, some of the doubt, eased. “He isn’t running. He’s chasing.”

“Sir?”

“If that really is Meg, that means the only family member he has left has returned from the grave,” Odin told her. “Of course he went with her.”

She hadn’t given him much of a choice if the video was any indicator. She’d said a few words and then had left, leaving Hunter to make a choice. Did it suck he hadn’t chosen to wait for Odin to return? Yes. But it was understandable that he hadn’t wanted to risk losing what may have been his only opportunity to reunite with his sister.

Odin knew the kind of love Hunter had for Meg. Seeing it, coveting it, was what had set them all on this path to begin with.

“Sir,” Loni paused before opting to continue, “please don’t take this the wrong way, as I truly believe that Hunter Thorn left with good intentions, but...it would be irresponsible not to consider the other option. If he did run—”

“He didn’t.”

“Still, it should be considered.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Odin got back to his feet. “Was there anything else?”

“We checked the footage outside the club but weren’t able to make out much more than they originally headed east. After that, we lost sight of them. None of our men on the ground saw him either.”

Meaning either Meg had purposefully led Hunter through blind spots or they’d simply gotten lucky.

Odin didn’t much believe in luck.

“Gather everyone currently in the building.” Judging by the timestamp on the footage, it’d been over two hours since Hunter had gone. “He should have been back by now.”

Either the Huntsman had yet to return because he feared Odin's reaction or had lost track of time, or something was preventing him from doing so. An insecure part of himself wondered if maybe Meg had convinced him to really leave with her once they'd escaped the club. To leave the city and possibly even the country.

Odin couldn't let that internal voice win, however, refusing to believe the Hunter Thorn he'd spent the past month with would do that to him. The one who'd agreed to mate him and who'd clung to him in the middle of the night. *That* Hunter cared about him. He would never abandon him without a word.

"I already have them waiting in the common area." Loni bowed her head as he passed and then quickly followed after him.

They were going to find his Whisper, and so help anyone who laid their hands on him.

Even if that person was Meg Thorn.

Chapter 4:

The tracker Loni had put on the job managed to pin a rough location on the other side of the city in enemy territory. And not just.

Frost family territory.

That alone had been enough to send Odin over the edge, the panic and the fear gripping him more tightly than ever before. He'd gathered over a hundred men and ordered them all to that area, completely uncaring about the rules or how this would one hundred percent be considered an act of war.

Hadn't Isa already declared war anyway? Odin was only responding in kind, and since it was war, he didn't hold back. He set fire to the streets, lighting all the known haunts where Frost Brumal stayed in a blaze as soon as they'd been searched and Hunter hadn't been discovered in them. Originally, the Frost Brumal branch outnumbered his on its own, but since he'd attacked without warning and was using the full strength of his power against them, they were being overcome. Between himself and his men, it was impossible to count how many of the enemy they took out as they passed through that part of the city, but he wasn't overly concerned about keeping track anyway.

He'd wanted Hunter found, and in his haste hadn't bothered considering what might happen if they went there and he *wasn't*.

Until he wasn't.

Odin stood in the center of what had been a crowded restaurant in the downtown area only twenty minutes ago before he and his men had stormed in and torn the place apart. Subtly, his usual flare, had gone out the window and he was out for blood.

Screams sounded around him, mixed with grunts and cries of pain as his men fought off a pack of Frost Brumal members. He'd questioned over a dozen himself already as

they'd made their way up and down both levels of the building, but so far no one had been able to tell him where Hunter was being kept.

Either Isa hadn't told his men or he didn't have him...

It couldn't be possible though. He had to have taken him. They'd already searched all of the hotels surrounding the club, all the back alleys, and the hostels. There was nowhere else Meg could have taken Hunter, especially not if they'd stayed on foot. Besides, there was the blood spatter Vetle had discovered on one of the streets nearby.

Finding blood in random places wasn't all that unusual, to be honest, but Odin had gone anyway. They'd scrapped the dried flakes off the asphalt and had tested them. It'd been a match.

Hunter had been hurt and there was no telling how bad the injury was. They also had no way of knowing who had inflicted it, but the Meg that Odin remembered wouldn't have harmed her brother for anything. The only logical step from there was they'd been attacked and taken, and only one person on the planet would be cocky enough to steal the known lover of a Dominus.

"Sir." As if sensing his wavering conviction, Corbi appeared at his side, crimson splattered across her cheeks and staining the dark material of her shirt. "Nothing here either."

There was no way for them to get an exact location when the bracelet was inactive, so this was the best they could do, and it wasn't good enough.

"If we continue on this way," Loni said from Odin's other side, "we risk retaliation."

"Fuck them," he sneered. "Let them come."

"Not against us, sir." She held his gaze when he turned to her.

She meant Hunter. She was worried that something would happen to Hunter if Isa did have him and they backed the Frost Dominus into a corner like this.

Odin swore.

“His temper will get the best of him,” Loni drove her point harder, and she may as well have stabbed him straight through the chest with it.

“He left with his sister,” Corbi reminded them both, still not convinced, which admittedly confused Odin.

She’d seemed like she’d been getting along well enough with Hunter these past few weeks, even if it was nothing like the connection he shared with Loni. The fact that she was this suspicious of him now made Odin both furious and uneasy. He’d never blatantly ignored one of her instincts before but...

They didn’t know what he knew. Couldn’t, not yet. Telling anyone else what Hunter truly meant to him was too great of a risk, and he couldn’t take it even if it meant getting Corbi to see how wrong she was about the Huntsman.

He may have cornered him into it, but in the end, Hunter had mated him. A mated pair wasn’t so easily torn apart.

“We don’t know where she’s been all these years,” Loni stated. “We don’t know who she’s been with.”

“You think she’s working for Frost?” Corbi asked. “You think she’s doing that and Hunter had no idea? They’re siblings.”

“He thought she was dead.”

“He could have been lying.”

“He wasn’t.”

Odin had never seen them disagree on anything to this degree before, but their squabbling wasn’t important here or useful in the long run.

“Hunter Thorn didn’t want to be at Club Cherry, that came from his own mouth,” Corbi said.

“That was before.” Loni shook her head. “He’s different. You’ve noticed.”

She paused and blew out a breath. “One of us has to consider the other side of things. He could have left intending to run off. If that’s the case, we’re playing right into Frost’s hands. These are all lower-level soldiers. There’s no way Hunter is being kept here. What if we were lured here to start a war?”

Isa had declared it, but that’d been the extent of it. This though? This was an actual act, and from an outside perspective, Odin was the one who was starting things off.

But so be it.

“I’m going to take back everything he’s stolen from me,” Odin said. “If he wants me to look like the bad guy? It matters not.”

“It could affect business,” Corbi pointed out. “If the citizens of Ovid think you’ve put them all in danger by bringing a war to their doorstep they may boycott the Red Light District out of protest or fear.”

“Let them.” Odin didn’t care. Right now Lia and Norra didn’t matter, not when there was something far more important on the line.

“Sir,” Corbi glared at him, “is Hunter Thorn really worth all of this?”

“All of this,” he replied, “and more. Aren’t you the one who tried to tell me his feelings for me were real in the beginning?”

“Feelings don’t always overturn survival instincts,” Corbi stated. “He could love you and still turn his back on you. You’ve been different ever since he arrived, and now we’ve gone to war for him—”

“We were always going to end up here,” he corrected, not liking how she was trying to pin all of this on Hunter when they both knew the truth. “You wouldn’t stand back if Frost stole the most important person in your life. Neither will I.”

“You’re the most important person to me, sir,” she told him. “And right now, you’re putting everything at risk.”

“Are you questioning me now? Overstep. I’m in no mood for you to make another. You’ve been warned, Corbi.”

She opened her mouth to argue further, then seemed to think better of it. “Of course. I’m merely concerned. Forgive me.”

Odin took a lengthy look around at the carnage. He’d let them loose on the Brumal they’d found, ordering them to hold nothing back, but Corbi was right about one thing. These were all lower-level Frost soldiers. If Hunter had been kidnapped, there was no way Isa would trust grunts to watch over him. Still, there was no doubt the bracelet’s last location had been in this area...

“We need a way to narrow down the search,” Loni was the one to say it, stepping to the side to avoid being slammed into by a stumbling body as one of theirs tossed him over a table. “This isn’t going to work as is.”

Odin needed to set aside his fear and think.

“What if this is exactly what Isa wanted, but not in the way Corbi meant?” Loni suggested then, and both he and her sister frowned, silently urging her to continue. “What if he wanted us to question Hunter’s loyalties and argue about it amongst ourselves? What if he hoped to shake your resolve and make you abandon him?” this last part she directed to Odin.

“Isa kidnapped Meg and tried to kill her.” How she’d escaped that fate was beyond Odin, but that was a question for another day. “Why would she work with him?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense to me. The only person on the planet Hunter would have followed other than you is her. She leads him out without a fight, ensuring he’s captured on camera going, and they disappear shortly after? It’s the perfect plan. And it’s working, because here we are wasting time trying to decide whether or not Hunter is a traitor when in the end, does that even matter?”

“How can it not?” Corbi asked.

“We have to find him first to know either way,” Loni said. “Think about it. He knows too much. Even if he did betray us, he can’t be allowed to stay with Isa. And if he didn’t and he’s been kidnapped? We have to save him.”

“Because?”

“He’s one of us.”

Odin never thought there’d come a day when he’d wish Dominus had something akin to a Royal Consort, the official title given to the lover of an Emperor. There wasn’t anything like that for them though, the only claims he could make were admitting that Hunter was a Whisper and they were mated, or calling him his boyfriend. Neither sounded right, and everyone here already knew that Hunter was his no matter what fancy title had been tacked onto his name.

But Royal Consort came with benefits, legal ones, and with them, Odin would have been able to call on the Emperor for aid.

He swore that once this was done and he got Hunter back, that was the first matter of business they were going to tackle. Even though Sanctum was ruled by the Brumal, with the Imperial family mere figureheads, as Altz had put it, that didn’t mean they could always avoid red tape entirely.

Right now if he tried to ask the Emperor for help, he’d no doubt be told this was a Brumal issue. But if Hunter had a legally recognizable title, Altz wouldn’t have any reason not to help, and while there was little chance the government had better technology than Odin and his people did, even that sliver of possibility would be worth looking into.

Odin ran a hand through his hair in frustration. A mated Whisper would be recognized to some degree at least, but he couldn’t tell—

He froze.

It’d been so long since there’d been a mated pair, he wasn’t very familiar with all the ins and outs that came with it. But there’d been something about a bond he’d once heard his

father talking about, a connection that linked a Shout and their Whisper, one that could only be felt by the two of them.

He hadn't thought of it earlier because as far as he knew, it wasn't real. When he thought about Hunter he felt a lot of things, sure, but a phantom string tying them together wasn't one of them.

What if their bond simply wasn't strong enough for them to feel it? Or, what if *he* wasn't strong enough?

The connection between a Shout and Whisper needed to be built upon and strengthened over time. He'd been doing that with Hunter, but there had been bumps. A part of Hunter still didn't want to give in to him, to them. Odin had been aware but figured there was plenty of time to convince him otherwise. It'd been hard for him to come to the realization that he wanted Hunter Thorn, after all, so he couldn't expect it to be an easy journey for Hunter either. They'd both spent too many years hating and blaming one another for all of that resentment and mistrust to be causally cast aside in favor of lust and renewed affection.

They'd agreed on a fresh start, and he refused to believe that Hunter wasn't every bit as invested in that as he was. Which meant he was missing because he was being held somewhere, and Odin wouldn't allow anyone to tell him otherwise.

He should have asked Hunter more questions about how mated pairs worked before. Hunter had done the research, much more than Odin had bothered doing, and would most likely be able to explain whether or not this connection was real and how Odin could access it. As a Whisper, he'd needed to learn that information for survival, for Odin, being a Shout meant he was fine without. He'd never believed he'd ever encounter a Whisper in his lifetime anyway.

Hunter had come completely out of nowhere and Odin was now wholly unprepared.

He pictured the look Hunter had given him through the security cameras back at Club Cherry. There'd been so much

sincerity in his eyes as he'd tried to convey his motives before following Meg.

Hunter had asked for a clean slate.

"I won't doubt him," Odin said. He'd let those negative thoughts eat at him before and look how things had turned out. He'd lost a decade to hatred for the Huntsman when they could have been together instead. They could have been building this thing between them, making it strong enough to withstand a separation such as this one.

Whether it was part of Isa's plan or not, Odin wouldn't let suspicion rule him. Hunter had snuggled up to his side each night and held him close. Hunter had agreed to their mating and had ordered Odin to be safe.

His mind wasn't playing tricks on him and he wasn't making any of this up. Hunter Thorn was his, and maybe he didn't one hundred percent want to be yet, but he'd lapped at Odin's blood and tied them together every bit as much as Odin had. Walking away from your mate was practically unheard of.

"What could Isa offer him?" He turned to Corbi, determined to get her to see reason if only for the fact he needed her. She was one of the smartest members he had, and the most loyal. If Hunter was in danger, he couldn't risk her hesitating to protect or help save him. "Even if Isa didn't murder his sister, that was hardly the only offense he made against Hunter. Protection? He has that, with me. There's nothing he could possibly want from Isa Frost that I haven't already given him."

Corbi seemed to consider it and slowly it must have dawned on her that he was right, for her shoulders slumped.

Between him and Frost, Odin had always had a better relationship with Hunter, even when they were kids. The incident that had turned them into enemies had been Hunter shooting him, but that was a reason for Odin to betray the Huntsman, not the other way around.

He checked his multi-slate but there was still no word. If Isa had him, he wasn't gloating about it, which couldn't be a

good thing. Knowing his personality, that only signaled the worst.

The sheer terror that hit him almost knocked him off his feet. He knew what his step-brother was capable of and the thought of him turning any of that evil on Hunter...His hands tightened into fists, fire bursting from his knuckles, blazing hot enough the twins shot back to avoid the heat.

Odin barely noticed, however, too caught up on the other sensation now slithering through him. There was a pull at the center of his chest, directly over his heart, a slight tugging that almost went unnoticed. The second he focused on it, it abruptly stopped and he frowned. What if...

He conjured an image of Hunter again, picturing the way he'd looked the last time he'd seen him, still tucked into bed, his sleepy eyes momentarily meeting Odin's before he'd waved him off and rolled over.

The tugging returned, though it was still faint. Odin opened his palms and shoved more power out into them. The sensation heightened, but only enough to lead him outside onto the side of the street and no further. Once he got there it seemed to hit a dead end.

"What if I'm not strong enough," he murmured to himself, recalling his earlier thought. Dropping his hands he snapped his fingers at the twins, silently ordering them back to the car at the other end of the road.

Odin needed more power.

And there was only one place he knew of he could get it.

He'd kept himself from doing so all this time, out of loyalty or some misguided notion of respect, but for Hunter? He'd do anything for his Huntsman.

Even the unthinkable.

Chapter 5:

Hunter had thought the beatings he'd taken from Leo Grimes men had been bad, but that experience was nothing compared to this one. To distract himself, he tried to concentrate on how it weirdly felt as though that horrible situation had taken place another lifetime ago, and not the mere months it'd been since he'd been held captive in that warehouse and tortured on a daily basis.

And he still didn't know why Grimes had sent them, why the man thought Hunter of all people was responsible for whatever theft had taken place. Here he was, about to die from blunt force trauma all over again, and he'd go without ever knowing what the hell Leo Grimes' problem was.

Isa had called his men off a while ago, but in his current state, Hunter didn't have a very accurate sense of time. It could have been five minutes or an hour since the last time he'd been hit, but the injuries smarted and felt fresh enough there was no way of knowing. All he did know was he didn't want it to start up again.

But it would.

He'd lost track of how many times Isa had sat back and watched as he was kicked and punched as well. One of the soldiers had even pulled out a knife, though he'd been warned not to make any permanent marks. The gaping wound in Hunter's thigh from the blade Isa had driven into his flesh seemed to sting even more after that. The bastard should have taken his own advice.

He shifted, almost unable to feel the torn skin around his wrists anymore, the rope so imbedded it was a wonder his hands hadn't been sliced straight through and fallen off. A couple of his toes were broken, as well as his left leg, and there was no way his ribs had made it out of that last assault unscathed. His vision was blurry, with him only able to partially make out fuzzy forms through his left eye, and it was hard to breathe—either because one of those ribs having

punctured his lungs, or the fact his nose had taken a direct hit a couple of times.

There was a ringing in his ears that didn't want to seem to go away, no matter how much he attempted to shake his head, so he gave up altogether, focusing instead on his rattled breathing.

“Did you miss me, *Huntsman*?” Isa sneered, his voice coming from somewhere off to the right.

Truthfully? Hunter hadn't even realized the man had left, but he couldn't seem to get his mouth to work and so the witty refrain ended up dying on his tongue unheard. A second later a wave of cold skated over him and he forgot all about it anyway.

He shivered, the temperature in the room dropping almost instantly, a clear indicator that Isa was using his power. The memory of what he could do with it, how badly he could make it hurt, had Hunter's resolve cracking, and he began to shake for other reasons as the vague outline of the other man rounded him and came into his partial view.

Hunter tipped his head to the side in a poor attempt to see him better, but his eyes were too swollen shut, so he had little to no luck. It wouldn't matter anyway. Whatever Isa planned on doing there was nothing he could do to prevent him from doing it. Even if he wasn't tied and hanging from the ceiling, his body was so damaged, he doubted he'd be able to stand on his own, let alone take a swing at the Dominus.

“I'm surprised you're still breathing,” Isa said then, reaching out to trail the tip of a finger down the length of Hunter's throat to the center of his chest. Everywhere he touched, he left a layer of frost in his wake, seemingly pleased with every sharp gasp of pain Hunter made. “Although, I suppose I shouldn't be. I told my men that if you died, they die with you. I see they took heed. But,” he stepped closer and planted his full palm against Hunter's stomach, “make no mistake. You are going to die today.”

The cold blasted through him, three times more painful than any of the punches he'd received, forcing him to scream

as it froze him from the inside out. Hunter fought against his binds now, desperate to get away from the excruciating pain. It was a good thing he couldn't see, because there was little doubt that his skin was starting to blister and blacken, and that wasn't something he needed to witness. This was already horrendous enough as it was.

"I'm going to deliver your mutilated corpse to his doorstep," Isa told him, words somehow being heard even through Hunter's cries. "He'll see what happens when he doesn't choose me. He'll see that I'm the only choice left. You almost got in the way the last time and I thought I'd taken care of it then, but clearly, I'd been mistaken. I should have shot you instead of bothering with that failed plan."

What? Was he admitting the reason he'd chosen Hunter for the job was because he'd known about his crush on Odin? Of course that was it, but hearing him say it out loud... Hunter wanted to ask but couldn't, and another wave of ice traveled up his arms, tingling and burning.

This was all Isa Frost's fault. All of it. The animosity between Hunter and Odin, why he'd been on the run all this time. And now Meg... He'd done something to Meg, he had to have, there was no other way to explain why she'd turned on Hunter like this. The last he'd even seen her was right before he'd passed out in the hovercar. Here he was about to die and she was nowhere to be found.

She hadn't even bothered sticking around to watch the show.

Did she care so little about him?

"Odin's going to forget all about you," Isa switched tactics, clearly annoyed by Hunter's lack of response. "You know that, don't you? You're nothing but a pretty little plaything to him, a means to piss me off. He doesn't actually care for you at all."

That was a lie. While it was true Hunter had no idea just how much Odin did care for him, he knew that he did, on some level at least. He wasn't sure when he'd started to trust that, but he did. He meant more to Odin than Isa was making it

sound, whether that was because he was the only known Whisper on the planet or not. And even if it was, that didn't really matter.

Not when Hunter was going to be an ice statue in a few minutes.

What he wouldn't give for a hit of that heat Odin could give off. The warm, comforting balm he applied whenever he felt Hunter get nervous, or when he was pumping deep inside of him and close to orgasm. If he were here, he'd chase Isa's frost away with ease, smooth over the burns, and set Hunter alight in a different, delicious way.

He could recall it so vividly, he could almost feel it now, spreading through him, starting from the center of his chest, branching outwards like tiny ropes of fire dipped in gasoline, touching every icy spot inside and melting it until—

“What the hell is going on?” Isa's shocked tone snapped Hunter out of it, and at first, he thought the man had stopped using his power.

The dread that hit him the second he registered that wasn't the case chased away any comforting feeling he'd been able to drudge up with memories of Odin. The ice encased him anew, and he ground his teeth together to keep the screams from starting up again.

Isa pulled his hand away and stood there, but with Hunter's swollen eyes, he couldn't make out what he was doing other than hovering.

After a lengthy moment of nothing but silence, he tried his voice a second time, clearing and wetting his throat before finally being able to rasp out in a barely audible tone, “What?”

“How did you do that?” Isa asked, and Hunter got the sense he was inspecting him, searching for signs of something not there. “You...That's not possible. You're not a Shout. A Shout would have fought back and exposed himself a long time ago.”

He hated himself for it, but he jerked away when Isa reached for him, a show of weakness he'd been trying so hard

not to give. But even as badly injured and out of it as he currently was, Hunter could process the danger here. A danger that was several billion times worse than it'd been a minute ago when Isa's only goal had been to kill him and dump his body.

He'd been thinking about Odin and his heat and...The power Isa had been forcing into him had dissipated and warmed away. Since Odin wasn't here to have done it, that only meant one thing.

There'd been a note of power transfer in the books Hunter had read during his travels, but it wasn't common and therefore not overly documented. Apparently, some mated pairs were able to do it, the Whisper gaining access to part of the abilities the Shout had. Hunter had forgotten all about it. If that's really what had just happened, his body must have instinctually done it in order to survive.

Isa grabbed him by the chin and forced his head up, searching his gaze before his eyes traveled to Hunter's pursed lips. He ran his thumb over the bottom one, collecting blood and saliva from the crack there, and then pulled back, staring down at his finger.

"Don't," Hunter said it but was too late. He watched in horror as Isa stuck his thumb into his mouth and sucked.

Frost groaned, the sound low and primal, sending warning bells clanging inside of Hunter so loudly that he went back to struggling, this time harder, practically tearing strips of skin off his wrists as he tugged uselessly at the rope. Instinct told him to run, overriding any sense of logic or reason he would have otherwise had. That part of him, the part that was a mated Whisper, screamed about the danger.

If only he'd remembered what he'd read and had known there was as chance he could call on Odin's power, he would have been smarter and not used it.

Hunter had given himself away.

Again.

“It makes sense now,” Isa said, his voice completely different from how it’d been up until this point. “Unless... Does he know?” He took Hunter’s chin a second time, tipping his head back and forth so he could inspect his neck, the rise of his shoulders. Without warning, he dropped down to his knees and forced Hunter’s legs apart, not bothering to mind his broken leg while doing so. “I can’t find any bite marks.”

That was because there weren’t any to find. Odin didn’t bite him and tear into him like he was meat. Hunter had read stories about vicious Shouts that preferred to do it that way, but typically those cases were ones where the Whisper was forced into a mating.

The fact that Isa was looking for a bite though...

Hunter made a sound of alarm and tried to pull away, managing to move an inch or so before Isa was standing once more.

He wrapped an arm around Hunter’s waist and hauled him back, again not caring how much pain that caused Hunter when his injuries were shaken. “Have you kept it a secret from him, Thorn?” He grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked. “Tell me. Does Odin know about this?”

“Let,” he had to pause before he could get another word out, “go.”

Having never encountered a Whisper before, it seemed as though Isa didn’t really know how to handle one. He clearly believed he needed to chomp down on Hunter for a mating bond, which wasn’t the case, and because of that belief, thought he was unmated.

Which also meant he hadn’t been able to tell that the taste of Hunter’s blood he’d just gotten had only boosted his power a little bit. It wouldn’t have done much for him at all, considering he wasn’t Hunter’s Shout.

If Hunter told him he’d mated Odin, Isa wouldn’t have reason to keep him. He’d kill him after all.

But...Wouldn’t that be better? Better than anything else he was cooking up now in that twisted brain of his?

“Change of plans,” Isa said, sounding slightly manic in a way that only made Hunter more afraid. “How could I kill something so rare? Yes, this is better. I’ll take you from him, make him watch as you become my bitch, and then the only choice he’ll have left is to accept me or lose you forever.”

“You’re insane,” Hunter told him, but it didn’t seem like Isa was listening anymore.

“He’ll come crawling on his hands and knees once he hears of this, but by then it’ll be too late.” Isa tugged Hunter’s head to the side, exposing his neck. There was a knife in his other hand a moment later and he slashed carelessly at the side of his own throat, blood welling instantly. Then he was forcing Hunter’s mouth onto him, pinning him in place as he struggled to get away.

“Drink,” he ordered, lowering his mouth to the tender spot between Hunter’s neck and his left shoulder, one of the few places he wasn’t already bruised. “And become my Whisper.”

The taste of copper coated his tongue but Hunter couldn’t get away from it. How disgusting it was stopped being a concern the second Isa’s teeth latched onto his flesh and viciously bit down, tearing through skin mercilessly.

Hunter’s agony-filled howl was muffled by Isa’s neck, the man’s blood continuing to drip into his mouth, making him want to gag. He could feel his stomach coiling, bile rising at the back of his throat as his body rejected the Shout blood that wasn’t from his mate.

Isa probably would have drunk him dry, too lost to the blissed-out state of tasting a Whisper for the first time, if Hunter hadn’t started to vomit. He shot back, untangling from Hunter with a curse, only touching him again once Hunter had finished, ignoring the vomit that now splattered on the floor between them.

“That isn’t right,” he said. “Why didn’t it work?”

At least the idiot knew enough about mating to understand that.

When Hunter had bonded himself to Odin, the electricity between them had a strong enough voltage to power the entire city, maybe even the country. Right now, after being forced to drink Isa's blood? He just felt sick.

"You can't," he coughed and hacked up phlegm, spitting it out as close to Isa's feet as he could get, "force a mating." He would have tacked on an insult for good measure at the end there, but that'd already taken a lot out of him. Whenever he swallowed it felt like he was choking on sandpaper.

"Mating," Isa rolled the word on his tongue, and before he'd even completed that thought, Hunter realized his second mistake. "That's right. That must be it."

"No." He couldn't mean...

Isa walked behind him. "We'll try again. Get it right this time."

"Stop." Hunter cried out when his hips were pulled back, his ass angled up. Tears started leaking from his eyes, stinging the cuts on his face even as he scrambled to come up with something to say to get himself out of this.

Isa held him in place with one hand, the other moving to spread Hunter's cheeks, finger finding his hole and invading him without any further warning.

At the contact Hunter's spine went rigid. "Stop!"

"He won't want you at all after this, but oh well. Even if it means giving up on making him jealous I stole his toy, I'll still be gaining a Whisper for my efforts."

"He'll kill you," Hunter said. "I'll kill you."

"Once mated, you won't be able to. And Odin? He'll think of you as spoiled goods. You'll be nothing to him." He shoved that single finger deep into Hunter's body and made a sound of annoyance. "We can't do this dry. It'll hurt."

For him he meant. Even now, believing that Hunter was an unmated Whisper, Isa still only cared about himself.

Hunter heard the sound of a zipper, and a second later Isa swiped his hand over the still-bleeding knife wound at Hunter's thigh, coating his palm in crimson. Though he couldn't see what happened next since Isa was behind him, it didn't take a genius to put two and two together.

Isa was lubing himself up with Hunter's blood.

He'd thought death was scary. It was nothing in the face of this.

"I'm mated!" he said, as loud as he could make his voice.

Isa paused but recovered quickly. "Liar."

"I'm not—" Hunter felt something hot and hard prod against his hole, bumping, exploratory against that tight ring of muscle. He automatically clenched up, even knowing that would only make it worse for himself, and fervently shook his head, in a full-blown panic now. "Don't!"

Notched into place, Isa steadied himself with a hand on Hunter's hips. "Stop struggling and I'll make this quick."

Hunter braced himself for the worst.

But it never came.

A shadow burst through the doorway in front of him, momentarily catching his attention a split second before Isa seemed to notice. Though Hunter couldn't make out who it was, a warmth exploded within him, sudden and bright, easing all the aches and pains and instantly soothing the internal voice that had up until now been wailing.

A fireball blasted forward, but he didn't so much as flinch as it sailed past him and hit its mark, causing the man at his back to hiss and swear.

Suddenly, Hunter was let go, his body drooping, the relief snuffing out the fight or flight responses that had been the only thing keeping him conscious amidst all the suffering he'd already endured.

He managed to stay awake long enough to watch Odin step into the room, his face bathed in the glow of yet another

ball of flames.

His gorgeous and severely frightening face.

Hunter smiled. "Snow."

Trusting it was finally over, he gave into the pull of darkness.

Chapter 6:

Odin couldn't look at Hunter, if he did he'd completely lose it and right now he was already so close to being a mindless beast he couldn't afford that. Hunter couldn't afford it.

Isa had avoided the first shot, but barely, and was currently busy trying to tuck his dick back into his pants.

His erect dick.

Odin saw red. Letting out a bellow of rage, he let loose another fireball, scorching the cement and leaving a large black mark in its wake when Isa avoided that one as well. He continued to lob them as he advanced, needing to get to Hunter, but more than that, needing to get the other man away from him.

The other *Shout* away.

Even though he was here, in the same room as Hunter, that tugging in his chest continued to pull at him, but he was too focused on keeping Isa back to pay it heed and give it what it wanted. He'd get to Hunter as soon as the threat was dealt with.

Regaining his bearing, Isa snapped out of it and started fighting back, first attempting to drop the temperature in the room. When that didn't work, he started to freeze the floor, a layer of ice skating over and under the plastic tarp.

Only to melt as soon as it got within a five-foot radius of Odin.

He frowned, and that momentary hesitation cost him, Odin's next throw catching him off guard and searing straight through his side. He screamed as the material of his shirt melted into his skin, the burn happening faster than his power could prevent it. His feet got caught on a fold in the tarp and he tripped, slamming into one of the walls with a heavy thud.

"How are you so strong?" he growled, before it hit him and his gaze returned to where Hunter was still hanging. "You

didn't.”

“Don't you dare look at him!” Odin shot flames forward, filling the entire room in his fury, only avoiding the spot where Hunter was located. He cut off the only two exits with walls of fire, preventing any of Isa's men from entering and providing backup.

They'd all be dead and captured soon anyway, Odin's people taking over the building at that very moment.

Because he'd arrived so suddenly, he'd caught Frost off guard. That advantage and the fact it had allowed him to back the other man into a corner, had made what may have been a dangerous fight into something far more simple than either of them could have ever anticipated.

Which was good, since Odin had come here for blood.

Isa threw up his hands and formed a thick shield of ice, but the layers kept melting, water pooling on the ground only to evaporate from the heat within seconds. He poured more and more of his power into it, but Odin refused to let up.

He'd been expecting the worst when he'd discovered this building, but he still hadn't expected actually seeing it.

“How dare you touch what's mine!” he yelled, reaching deep within himself to unlock even more power.

Isa laughed, the sound sharp and mocking. “It's too late. He's already been tainted. I'm all over him, brother. I took your precious toy and I broke it and made it—”

Odin shot that new wave forward, pushing against that barrier of ice with all his might, a flicker of triumph blooming in his chest when he melted through it with ease.

Isa only had enough time to make a sound of alarm before his protection was gone and the fire was on him, gnawing at his skin, causing it to burn and blister and peel. He'd thrown his arms up as a last-ditch attempt and Odin watched them burn, the screams so loud they drowned out all other sounds in the room.

Until Hunter coughed.

Odin had made sure the flames didn't touch him, but there was nothing he could do about the smoke currently filling the small space.

Isa was still backed into a corner with Odin blocking the exits, so Odin gave one last shove and then spun around, running to Hunter. He dropped the walls of fire as he did, hoping to stop the smoke production to prevent it from choking his Huntsman further.

And almost puked when he finally allowed himself to look, the yawning mix of horror and grief opening within him like a void, sucking the feeling of satisfaction he'd gotten from finally beating Isa in a heartbeat.

Odin burned through the ropes quickly, catching Hunter before he could drop, careful where he touched—not that there was any spot left undamaged.

The Huntsman was covered in cuts and bruises, angry-looking welts, and smears of dried blood. An open wound on his thigh was still bleeding out, not at a dangerous level, though Odin feared if they didn't hurry and get it treated it would become infected.

He let out a strangled cry, one completely foreign to him, and was so distracted by the broken man in his arms he almost sent a fireball sailing at Vetle's head when the underboss came running into the room.

The look Vetle made when he saw Hunter's state only made Odin feel more afraid.

“Deal with Frost,” Odin ordered, arranging Hunter in his arms as best he could so he could carry him out of there.

Vetle frowned. “Where is he?”

“What?” Odin twisted on his heels and swore when he saw the corner where he'd last seen Isa empty.

Following his line of sight, Vetle rushed over to the massive cutout in the wall that acted as a window, leaning out over it to glance down both sides of the street. He cursed and sprung back, already halfway to the exit before he called over his shoulder, “Crazy asshole jumped!”

“Don’t let him escape,” Odin ordered. If not for the Huntsman, he’d go after Isa himself, but...Getting to a doctor immediately was more important. Besides, he’d burnt Isa pretty badly. With injuries like that, he couldn’t be moving very fast. It was already a miracle he’d survived the three-story jump from this floor—the only reason Odin hadn’t even considered the window a threat in his haste to get to Hunter.

The smaller man was unconscious in his arms but he found himself whispering to him anyway, saying ridiculous cliché things like he shouldn’t worry and he was safe now. He made his way through the abandoned stone building he’d tracked Hunter to and outside to the front where he’d left the car running.

The building was surrounded by Snow Brumal with the twins somewhere amongst them. Without bothering to wait and deliver more orders, Odin laid Hunter out on the back seat and then rounded the car to the front. He shoved the driver out of the way, ignoring the man’s sputtering protests, and slid in himself.

The nearest hospital was at least a thirty-minute drive from where they were, no doubt done on purpose by Isa.

Odin made it in fifteen.

* * *

His head was groggy and his body felt like it was about to collapse, but Odin forced himself to remain strong, standing at Hunter’s bedside at the hospital. He’d expended too much energy by blowing through his power, but in the moment he’d completely lost control and had simply reacted to the scene before him.

His only regret was that Isa had gotten away.

They were still searching for him, but a rat always had a hidden hole to crawl into, and he wasn’t overly confident that they’d find him any time soon. Isa would be forced to lay low, however. Odin had burned a good portion of his body, after all. Not even a Shout would be able to handle that kind of damage.

His recovery time wouldn't be quick or easy.

“Do everything you can for him,” Odin said to the doctor standing at the foot of the bed. He'd gotten a private room and had placed more security on the hospital than ever before. Even Jita, his Counselor, hadn't gotten the same level of treatment.

At the reminder that this was the second of his people that Isa had put in the I.C.U., Odin clenched his hands around the metal rail at the side of the bed. Jita was bad enough, but this... The fact that he'd laid hands on Hunter was worse than a death sentence. Suddenly, he was no longer as upset that he hadn't managed to kill Isa.

He deserved far worse.

“We're keeping him under right now,” the doctor, Cher, told him, adjusting her glasses as she scanned over his medical chart. “He's in pretty bad shape, but with the advancements in technology available today, we should have him up and walking out of here on his own two feet before the month's end.”

“Make it sooner than that.” Odin wouldn't be at ease until he had Hunter back in his bedroom, under lock and key and surrounded by the entire Snow Brumal. Even with all the security measures in place here, a hundred-and-one things could easily go wrong. “When's the soonest we can relocate him?”

She considered it, clearly not liking the idea. “I'll have to monitor him closely and see. There's no way of knowing at the moment. Right now, making sure there aren't any underlying issues we're not yet aware of is the most important thing. Many of the ligaments in his wrists were torn. Those devices on his arms are repairing the damage as we speak, but it's extensive. I've already set his leg, but several of his major organs have been compromised.”

Hunter was in worse shape than when Odin had first found him again all those months ago. There were contusions all over his body and the knife wound to his thigh had needed over a dozen stitches—Isa's fucking signature move. It'd leave

a scar no doubt, and that had Odin fuming in a different kind of way.

The thought of Isa leaving his mark on his Huntsman...

A thick bandage covered Hunter's shoulder where he'd been bitten. The injury was gruesome, even to Odin's standards, a deplorable show of aggression from a Shout to a Whisper that should never have been allowed or considered all right.

Neither mark could remain when Hunter woke up. No matter what he had to do, how much coin he had to spend, Odin would find a way to rid him of them before then.

"And you're certain that..." He couldn't even bring himself to say the words, choking on them.

"As far as I can tell," Doctor Cher picked up on his meaning easily enough, "there are no signs of rape. But there's no way for us to know if he was sexually assaulted."

Considering what Odin had walked in on—Isa, standing behind Hunter, his hands on his hips—it was safe to assume he had been.

"You showed up just in time," Loni said from where she stood on the other side of the room, tucked into the corner nearest the door. There was a horrified look on her face and it was obvious that she felt pity toward Hunter.

"This is the second time I've left him with you and you let him run into danger," Odin growled, only remembering as much now that he was sure Hunter was, for the most part, out of serious danger.

The doctor glanced between the two of them and bowed her head to Odin before leaving the room, not wanting to get involved in Brumal business.

Wren, who'd arrived not too long ago once he'd finally been able to shake free of the Emperor, set a hand on Loni's shoulder and gave Odin a look. "We can table that discussion for later, don't you think? Right now, it's imperative we figure out where Isa is hiding and catch him before it's too late."

“And Meg?” Odin sighed, silently agreeing with him. He’d left Corbi in charge of hunting down Isa and Hunter’s sister and had ordered Vetle to secure the hospital.

“If you let Vetle join the hunt, we’d have more luck,” Wren suggested.

“You said you had people on it as well.”

“I do, but we know how slippery Isa can be. So far there’s been no sign of Meg Thorn, which only leads me to believe she went into hiding a head of time, or she’s with Isa now.”

“Then we’ll catch them together.” And he’d make them pay. It didn’t matter that she was Hunter’s blood. Odin would show no mercy.

“Sir, if I could—” Loni began only to immediately stop short when he sent her a murderous look.

“If you’re about to ask me to let you take over the security of the hospital, you’re insane.” On some level, he understood that it wasn’t her fault Hunter had gotten into this situation. If Meg had been staking out the joint, she would have found an opportunity to approach him sooner or later, but that didn’t help quell the anger currently eating at his insides. He didn’t have the patience for logic at the moment, his mind too cluttered with thoughts of Hunter and all the horrifying things that had been done to him.

All the things that could have been done if Odin hadn’t arrived at the exact second he had.

“Why did he bite him like that, I wonder?” Wren frowned and slid his hands into his front pockets, easing a shoulder against the wall. “It’s not really his style, is it?”

No, Isa didn’t like to dirty himself, and tearing through flesh with his teeth? Not exactly clean.

“He was trying to steal what’s already mine,” Odin found himself saying, having already put the pieces together himself. It was the only thing that made sense. He could see Isa trying to fuck Hunter out of sheer evilness, but biting him?

Not to mention the look in Frost's eyes, greedy and a bit awestruck.

“By...biting him?” Wren wasn't following.

Since Isa already knew, the secret was out. He momentarily considered waiting and getting Hunter's opinion on the matter but opted to reveal it himself in the end. He'd do whatever he had to to keep his Huntsman safe, even if Hunter didn't like or agree with his methods.

He'd be embarrassed when he woke and discovered Odin had shared this secret, had told them what he was, but a little embarrassment was worth it if it meant he'd be more protected.

“He was trying to mate him,” Odin said, waiting a second for that to sink in for the other two.

“...What?” Wren blinked, completely caught off guard.

Since there were no physically defining features, there was no way to tell when someone was a Whisper unless their blood was tasted by a Shout. It hadn't been hard for Hunter to keep it hidden from the world. In the past, when both of their species were in more abundance, there wasn't as much need for it, but considering there were only three known Shout in the world now, and Hunter hadn't been overly fond of any of them at the beginning of this, his urge for secrecy had made sense.

Odin knew how Hunter felt about being a Whisper, how it made him feel less than somehow, like it automatically meant he'd need to rely on a Shout in order to get by. That was part of the reason he'd been so insistent the other man pick up combat training again. The other was so he could defend himself. What he hadn't counted on was Meg rising from the dead and throwing a wrench in everything for them.

After what he'd just endured, how would Hunter react when he finally woke? Would he be angry with Odin, blame him? The only reason Isa had kidnapped him in the first place was to get back at him, after all.

That was the reason he'd done so initially. But if he tried again it would be because of what Hunter was. Which meant spreading the word here and now to ensure everyone knew just how important the Huntsman was to Odin and the Brumal as a whole was of the utmost importance.

"He's a Whisper," Odin tilted his head, catching Wren's gaze with a warning, "*My* Whisper. Isa, the fool that he is, must not have realized Hunter was already mated to me so he tried to form the bond."

"Against his will?" Wren sneered. "Idiot."

"Exactly." Odin was a little surprised by that fact himself, but considering how impatient Isa had always been, and how strong he considered himself to already be, it wasn't too big of a reach that he'd jumped the gun.

"How long?" Loni asked after a long moment of silence had stretched between them.

"I'd say a little over a month now," Wren guessed before Odin could answer. "The two of you were practically attached at the hip for a week straight last month. You were strengthening the bond, weren't you?"

Mating only took one encounter, but in order to ensure the bond between a Shout and a Whisper was at its strongest, blood exchange between the two was suggested to last for upwards of a week. They could have done that easily enough without sleeping together during the process, but at the time, Odin had been unable to leave Hunter, the sheer possessiveness he'd felt unparalleled by any other feeling or emotion he'd ever experienced.

"He let you do that?" Wren sounded unsure and Odin growled.

"I didn't force him." That was one thing he never would have done.

Suddenly, Loni dropped to her knees. "Kill me, sir. I deserve it. I let a Whisper be harmed."

"You let *my* Whisper be harmed," he corrected, hating that he had, but unable to ignore the urge that drove him to do

so. “Get up, Loni. I’m not going to take your life. But I am angry, and I don’t want to see you right now. Go,” he flicked his wrist and turned away. “Spread the word. I want everyone to know what Hunter is and who he already belongs to before the day ends. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” She crawled back a few feet before she finally rose and then practically raced out of the room.

Wren let out a low whistle watching her leave. “Poor thing.”

“Don’t,” Odin said.

“You know it’s not really her fault.”

He blew out a breath. “Hunter is fond of her.”

“You’re fond of her,” Wren reminded. “We both know you won’t do anything to hurt her.”

“She—”

“Hunter is a big boy,” his voice grew serious all at once. “He wouldn’t appreciate you viewing him any differently.”

“And I don’t appreciate you telling me about my own Whisper,” Odin stated.

Wren held up his hands. “Fair enough.” He shook his head at Hunter’s unconscious form. “He’ll be fine. He’s stronger than this, and when he wakes up, I bet you he’s going to be gunning for blood.”

If he woke up.

Odin didn’t allow himself to voice that particular fear, however, too afraid doing so would make it a reality.

Too afraid to lose the one thing he’d finally been on the verge of obtaining after all these years.

Family.

Chapter 7:

“I’ll watch him.”

“Like hell,” Odin wrapped his arm tightly around Hunter’s shoulders protectively and sneered at the other Dominus.

Used to the display of aggression by now, Wren merely rolled his eyes. “You can’t keep putting this off. The longer you wait, the more likely the chance Isa makes an appearance before you can act.”

“Then I’ll melt his skin off again.” It was going to take a lot more than that to get Odin to leave this room.

Two weeks had passed and Hunter still hadn’t woken. The doctors weren’t overly concerned since the first few days they’d had him induced and later had explained his injuries had been serious, however, there was always the chance he wasn’t waking on purpose. That he didn’t want to wake.

That he wouldn’t.

Doctor Cher hadn’t said it in so many words, but it’d been clear that’s what she meant and she’d just been too afraid to say it out loud to the already antagonized Snow. She’d rattled off a ton of jargon, but the gist of it was Hunter had undergone severe trauma and due to that, he may be trying to protect himself by not waking up.

His physical injuries were healing nicely at least, and much faster than they’d hoped. Cher had tried a couple of new treatments that had sped up the healing process and most of his bones had already knit back together. The bruises were all but gone and now the only visible injuries were the stitches in his thigh and the gauze over where his bite scar had been.

Odin had ordered that fixed as well, wanting all traces of what Isa had done to him gone no matter what it took. He didn’t want Hunter to have any physical reminders of that experience. Now that they were finished with that procedure and it was healing—without a scar—they were finally able to

relocate him back to the club. One more night at the hospital just to be certain, and tomorrow would finally be the day.

Yet Wren wanted Odin to leave him now?

“Faraway Mansion won’t be left vulnerable forever,” Wren tried again. It was just the two of them in the room, the puffing of the humidifier on the table next to Hunter the only sound between them. “His people are guarding it, but they don’t stand a chance against you. Word spread that Frost was badly injured and may or may not already be dead. Because of that, most of the Frost Brumal have collected there for answers. If we hit them now, while they’re all together, we can end this. It’d be better if we both went, of course, but I know you won’t risk leaving Thorn with just anyone.”

“I won’t risk leaving him with another Shout either,” Odin snapped, and this time Wren flinched.

He was quiet for a moment and then, “Do you really think that I’d try something just because he’s a Whisper? Do you think so low of me, Snow?”

Odin exhaled slowly, trying to release the ball of tension that had become a permanent fixture in his body these past few weeks, and forced himself to calm. “No, of course not. Logically, I know you would never, but—”

“Instincts, perhaps?” Wren suggested, already over his hurt feelings. “We’ve never gotten to witness the dynamics between a Shout and Whisper before. There’s supposedly a bond between you now. Do you think it’s imbedded behavior?”

“You make it sound like we’re animals.”

“I mean, technically, we are.” He held up a hand and began ticking off fingers. “We eat, sleep, fuck—”

“You were in the process of trying to convince me you weren’t a slave to being a Shout,” Odin drawled.

“At least you’re back to being sarcastic,” Wren said. “Does that mean you’re finally ready to listen to reason?”

His eyes narrowed. “No.”

He was lounging on the hospital bed with Hunter tucked against his side, easing heat into the unconscious Whisper in hopes to, if not rouse him, at least help him to feel safe. Odin wanted Hunter to know he was here, that he was being taken care of. That there was nothing to fear and that he could wake whenever he was ready.

But on the same token, his friend was right. He'd spent every day and night since rescuing Hunter holed up with him in the hospital, and because of that, it'd been up to the rest of the Snow and Hail Brumal to clean up the mess. With Isa Frost on the run, his people were in chaos.

"First still hasn't been found either," Wren told him.

Both First and Meg had gone missing at the same time, leading them to believe they were with Isa. That was one of the major reasons the Frost Brumal were in such a weakened state now, because they'd all but been abandoned by their boss and underboss. They were scrambling, which meant it was the perfect time for Odin to strike, and yet...

"You guys can handle it." He didn't want to leave. He'd left Hunter once before and look what had happened?

"First may not be there to hold the fort," Wren argued, "but that doesn't mean the rest of Isa's capos are to be taken lightly. He hand-selected each and every one of them, trained them personally. And now they've gathered at the mansion to help hold down the fort for him. They're simply biding their time until he returns. We need you, Odin."

The capos, or captains of the soldiers, typically took their orders from either Isa or First. There was a good chance that First had fled after leaving a set of strict instructions. If they were holding out, it was likely that First had told them with no uncertainty that he and Isa would return soon.

"Frost can arrive any day," Wren continued as if sensing Odin's wavering thoughts. "We can't wait any longer. I'd go myself, but with the numbers as they are..."

Not to mention his power wasn't as useful in a fight as Odin's was. Turning things to gold could get him many things,

but since Wren needed physical contact in order to do it, there was no way for him to easily take on an army of soldiers with blasters. He'd be shot before he ever got close enough to make a dent.

"You've waited a decade to take back your family home. Are you going to let the opportunity to finally achieve that pass you by?"

If it was for Hunter? Yes.

Wren switched tactics. "Frost knows about him now. He won't be safe, either because Frost's jealousy will make him want to murder Hunter, or out of determination to take him from you anyway. Even weakened, Hunter's blood can still provide him with a power boost, and after the abilities you displayed at that warehouse..."

"He doesn't know for sure and he won't want to believe that we're mated," Odin insisted. "His arrogance will lead him to assume I was able to get the drop on him and nothing more."

"You're willing to bet Hunter's life on that theory?"

He swore.

"I'll watch him," Wren promised. "I won't leave this room and I won't leave him alone with anyone, even the doctors if they ask. Hunter trusts me. My being here shouldn't hinder any of the progress you've possibly made staying with him like this. But if we let this chance pass us by, we'll all be in more danger than we needed to be. Take the mansion back, Snow. That's the only guarantee that Isa stays debilitated. He'll heal and when he does he'll do everything in his power to get revenge. Removing a safe place he can try to do that? It's the smart move."

It was, and his friend wasn't wrong about the rest of it either. This was what Odin had been working toward all this time, what he'd been dreaming of. Snatching back everything that was stolen from him, right out from underneath his step-brother's nose. And yet...His gaze traveled to Hunter, who remained still at his side.

His coloring was returning, the hue of his skin more that golden color Odin was so fond of, but he still hadn't woken and that meant they weren't quite out of the woods yet. If it came down to a choice between the Huntsman and the Faraway Mansion? There wasn't really a choice at all.

Only, Wren was correct in his assumptions about Isa as well, and how he would no doubt retaliate the first chance he got, and against Hunter.

"He won't kill him," Odin realized with a sick twisting in his gut. "He'll want the only known Whisper on the planet for himself. He'll try to take him and—" He couldn't even finish that sentence, the rage, and anguish recalling how close Isa had already come to that very thing burning him up.

"I'll protect him with my life," Wren said. "You have my word."

"He's mine."

"Yes, I'm aware. Everyone is, thanks to Loni and your instructions."

"And the Emperor? What did he say about it?" Odin felt for his friend that he needed to keep close ties with Altz, but that was the deal they'd made, and so far, there wasn't a good enough reason for them to break it.

No matter how much Wren hated being around the other man.

Sure enough, as soon as he was mentioned, the Hail Dominus glowered. "Being a Whisper is considered the same as being a boyfriend in the eyes of Sanctum law. Our agreement was he refuse to offer Frost aid, but he also won't get involved with this. Should I convince him otherwise?"

"Don't bother." Odin had already known it would go that way. On Sanctum, a dangerous planet known for being run by a mafia, there were stringent laws in place to protect married couples. They could legally file for their partner if anything were to happen and were even allowed to request a protection detail free of charge—so long as they could prove

they weren't in the wrong, aka, mixed up with the Brumal for something stupid they'd done.

The government wouldn't get involved if the Brumal were "in the right" as they put it. Just another fucked up reason why the rest of the galaxy considered them a lawless planet. Typically, Brumal law was more than enough for Odin, but where Hunter was concerned, he wasn't willing to settle for anything less than what the man deserved, and that was protection from everyone and everything.

"I'm going to marry him," he admitted then, stroking his fingers lightly through Hunter's hair.

"You can call on Sanctum police now," Wren reminded. "You have them in your pocket."

Sure, but there was no way of knowing just how many Isa had in his.

"What if he doesn't say yes?" Wren hummed when Odin didn't reply. "He doesn't seem like the type who ever considered marriage before. He could turn you down."

"He'll marry me anyway." If Odin had to make him, he would. This wasn't like the mating. Hunter wouldn't have a choice in the matter, and if that upset him? Odin would find a way to ease his anger later, once everything was dealt with and he was certain he was safe.

"If we take care of Isa before he wakes, it might not be necessary," Wren pointed out, only to have Odin glare at him.

"If there's a binding contract that exists on this planet," he stated, "I'm going to have it. With him."

"You're already mated."

"And I'll bind him to me further. Objections?"

"Wouldn't dream of it."

With a sigh, Odin gently slipped his arm free from beneath Hunter and settled him comfortably onto the pillow, stalling even longer while he adjusted the blankets around him. Right now, Odin was the most powerful Shout on Sanctum, which meant he needed to put that power into action.

The rest of his people were still out there fighting and had been all this while. How could he let them remain out there, dying, when there was a very real chance he could handle it and spare them?

Hunter was the most important thing here, true, but at this rate, even if he woke right this second, things wouldn't be any safer for him than they'd been before Odin had turned Isa into a shish kabob. Less so even since he knew Hunter was a Whisper.

"We need to take care of this fast," Odin said, finally tearing himself away from his Huntsman to turn back to Wren. "I'll gather everyone and take Faraway Mansion, you stay here. Don't let anyone else in the room who isn't Doctor Cher, and *do not* leave."

"Of course."

He hesitated. "I'm trusting you, Wren, and to be honest I don't want to."

"We've been friends for most of our lives," he reminded. "If I were going to betray you, I would have done it by now. Besides, you aren't the only one who has someone, Snow. Hunter Thorn is great, but he isn't my type."

He tilted his head. "You counting Altz here? The two of you suddenly grown closer?"

He made as though he was about to gag. "Please, my tastes are more extravagant than that."

"More extravagant than an emperor?" Odin quirked a brow.

"Oh, I'll have an emperor, just not that one."

At the cryptic words he paused, but no matter how long he searched the other man's face, it was clear Wren was holding those cards close to his chest and wasn't up for sharing. Still.

"This again. I'll continue to trust you'll explain when the time comes?" Odin ended up asking. "And that it doesn't have anything to do with me or mine."

“You’re going to be King of the Brumal,” Wren said with a grin. “I said I’d help you achieve that, help you get back the crown Isa stole right from under your nose, and I meant it. Don’t worry, Snow, your position isn’t something I’ve ever had any interest in. That won’t change in the future. Neither will the fact that we’re friends.”

He wanted to keep pushing, to get Wren to tell him who this love interest was then if it wasn’t Altz, and also remind him not to get caught with them lest the Emperor get upset by it and turn on them. But it wasn’t really his place, and despite what he’d said earlier, he did trust him.

“I’ll be back before first light,” he swore, and then after one last lengthy look at Hunter, Odin forced himself to exit the room, leaving the protection and comfort being with his Whisper provided, and entering the middle of the war raging outside.

Chapter 8:

Weirdly, it took him much longer than it should have to process he was no longer dangling from the ceiling with ropes sawing into his flesh, and instead lying on his back in a brightly lit room. The sound of machines whirring and the almost imperceptible humming filled the room with a comfortable ambience that was enough to have his eyes slipping shut once more.

But the horrors of that cement room and all that he'd endured were too vivid in his mind for sleep now that he'd woken, and with a groan, Hunter pushed himself up into a seated position. He didn't feel safe lying down, felt too vulnerable, especially when the humming had come to an abrupt stop.

His body ached when he moved, but it wasn't nearly as painful as he'd feared. He would have taken stock, but his eyes locked onto Wren, who was seated on a leather couch on the opposite side of the room, and he froze in momentary panic.

"Whoa," sensing something was wrong, Wren held up his hands, "it's just me, Thorn."

Hunter recognized him, of course, but that didn't make the tightening in his chest or the ringing in his ears go away. He fought through it, but it was difficult, more than it should have been, hands clawing at the bedsheet.

"It's because I'm a Shout, isn't it?" Wren guessed, his voice dropping low, trying not to scare him any more than he already had. He kept to that side of the room, even leaned back on the couch to give the appearance there was even a couple more inches of space between them. "Don't fret, Whisper, you're mated. I've been told."

"That didn't stop Frost." He wasn't even surprised that Odin had informed Wren, not after what he'd walked in on.

"I don't go after what isn't meant for me," Wren said. "You're safe. We've been in this room together for over

twenty-four hours now, just the two of us. If I'd wanted to do something to you, I would have done it already."

It was tempting to point out there was no way for him to know if he already had, but Hunter refrained. Wren Shen was many things, but he wasn't a creep. And he wasn't Isa Frost.

"Just," he motioned with his chin, "stay over there and give me a moment. I don't know why I'm acting like this either."

"It's instinctual," Wren told him. "We've already figured out as much."

"We?"

"Your Shout and I."

"Don't call him that," he snorted, but some of the tension eased. "It sounds ridiculous."

"You like it." Wren smiled, only teasing him a little as if he were afraid of pushing things too far and was reigning in his usual witty self for Hunter's benefit. "Besides, it should be soothing to hear."

There was a part of Hunter that had breathed a sigh of relief at the other man's acknowledgment that he was already spoken for, but he refused to admit to that out loud. Instead, he focused on loosening up, forcing his muscles to relax and his breathing to even. They were the only two in the room, and it was easy to make out they were at the hospital. He must have been brought there straight from the cement room.

"How long?" he asked, watching as Wren's expression darkened.

"From what we were able to gather, you were with Frost for at least eight hours before Odin was able to find you."

Eight hours. It'd felt like eighty. Hell, at times it'd felt like eight days even.

"He tortured me." That's all those beatings could be called, where he'd order his men to stop just so Hunter could

get in a breath and pray it was over.

Then Isa would tell them to start right back up again, harder than the last round.

His eyes traveled over his arms, visible since the hospital gown he was wearing had short sleeves. There was almost no sign of the ordeal he'd been through. When he reached to touch his head and his nose, those things felt fine as well. They weren't even tender to the touch.

"He had the best doctors working on you for over a week," Wren explained even though Hunter didn't ask. "He even spent five hundred till coin to have new treatments flown in from a neighboring planet."

Considering how infrequently others traveled to Sanctum, since their threat level was considered too high, that was a big deal.

"You're still not one hundred percent," he warned, "but you should be able to move on your own. You'll be weak though, since you've been out for over half a month."

He frowned. "It's been that long?"

"Yes."

"And," he swallowed the sudden lump in his throat, "where is he?"

"Odin?" Wren guessed. "He's been handling the Frost Brumal, at least, what's left of it. Even though we'd hoped to avoid an all-out war, Isa's taking you was too far. It got worse after he found you—"

Hunter waited for him to continue, but Wren merely cleared his throat and glanced away. It was rare to see the other man embarrassed, and that only had Hunter's chest clinching tightly all over again, though this time for a different reason.

"Does everyone know?" his voice sounded meek, too quiet in the already silent room, and he squeezed his eyes shut afterward. He didn't want to be this person, the type who cowered from the truth, even if it was cold and hard and

terrible, but the thought of them all knowing what Isa had been about to do to him in that room...He hated it. It made him feel helpless and pathetic all over again.

“Only me, Vetle, and the twins,” Wren reassured him. “No one else was privy to that kind of information, Thorn, don’t worry. All anyone knows is you were in a really bad state by the time Odin found you. That was enough to get all of them fighting extra hard against the Frost family, more so when it was announced that you’re a Whisper mated to their boss.”

They were mated, but that didn’t mean Odin was forced to stick around. What if he was disgusted now after what he’d seen? After the insinuation?

“You aren’t going to ask me any questions?” Hunter said.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to answer any,” he told him honestly. “I’m not the one you have to tell things to anyway. Now that everyone knows who and what you are, you don’t have to answer to anyone except Odin directly. No one wants to mess with a mated Whisper and risk pissing off his Shout. Look what happened to the last guy who tried it?”

At Hunter’s serious look, he shrugged.

“Sorry, bad joke.” Wren sighed. “What are you worried about, Thorn? If anything, you look even more anxious now than you did a moment ago.”

Since it was going to come out anyway, Hunter figured it was stupid to try and hide what he was thinking. It wouldn’t benefit him in the long run, and hadn’t he already decided his pride wasn’t the most important thing here anymore?

“Why isn’t he here?” he blurted finally. “Tell me the truth. Is it because...” He paused and inhaled a shaky breath before trying again. “Is it because he’s disgusted by me now?”

Wren frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t pretend. You said you knew. About what Isa was doing to me when—”

Wren shot up from his seat, only stilling when that had Hunter jerking back to press himself against the headboard of the bed. “I’m sorry,” he held up his hands a second time, “Sorry. It’s just...The doctor told us you hadn’t been raped. Is that...*Were* you?”

“No.” He shook his head, but before Wren could look relieved, added, “But he did touch me. It was brief, fortunately, but it happened. What if...What if Odin doesn’t want me now? Isa said I would be spoiled goods.”

“Fuck Frost,” Wren snapped with so much venom it was a wonder Hunter’s heart didn’t leap straight out of his chest.

He seriously couldn’t wait for his body to return to normal so he could go back to being comfortable around the Dominus. He’d rather enjoyed their talks before now, and didn’t want to lose out on that thanks to Isa.

He didn’t want to lose anything because of that asshole.

“He thought you’d maybe passed out before seeing, but that pretty much answers that,” Wren said then. “You missed a great show—I did too, sadly. Frost chose the worst place to keep you holed up, it was basically just a cement box with two exits, and once Odin had those blocked off, there was nowhere for Frost to run to when he attacked. He burned him pretty badly, would have killed him if he hadn’t needed to check on you at the last second. The smoke fumes were blocking your airwaves. He turned his back and that bastard leaped out of a three-story window.”

“Isa didn’t fight back?” That didn’t sound right.

“He tried, but—” The door to the room slid open then, cutting off anything Wren was about to say. He grinned when he saw who was entering and stepped away from the couch. “Great timing.”

Odin didn’t reply, his gaze already on Hunter. He stopped a few feet away, staring as if seeing him for the first time.

Hunter drank him in as well, noting the slight differences that hadn't been there the last time he'd seen him, just before he'd left for the meeting with the Emperor. There was dark scruff on Odin's chin and his blue hair had about half an inch's worth of brown root showing. There were blood stains on the knees and lower legs of his gray jeans, but his hands and arms were clean.

He looked tired. Like he hadn't slept in days, and he probably hadn't if what Wren had said was any indicator.

"I'll be off now," Wren said between them, though neither gave him any sort of acknowledgment. "I've got a ball of sunshine to check in with and then it's back to that disgusting excuse for an emperor. Clingy motherfucker has been blowing up my multi-slate since I got here." He gave a mock shiver and then he was gone, the door shutting behind him with a whoosh.

Hunter broke the staring contest first, mostly because it was starting to make him uneasy, his earlier doubts still heavy on his mind. "Where have you been?"

"How are you feeling, Huntsman?" Odin asked instead of answering, he kept his tone even and steady, despite the wild look in his eye giving him away. He was every bit as emotional right now as Hunter was.

The question was, why?

"I have to say this," Hunter decided, "no matter how pathetic it sounds, and I swear I'll only ask it once, and then I'll never bring it up again, but I've got to know. Do you...not want me anymore?"

Odin's brow furrowed, almost as though the question had been asked in a foreign language and he was struggling to puzzle out what the words meant translated. It must have hit him eventually, however, because in the next instant, he was rushing forward, dropping down to Hunter's side and taking his hands in his lap.

"Don't," he said, a bit frantically now, almost as if *he* was the one here who was afraid. "Don't let him get in your

head. Whatever he said to you, forget it.”

“What about what he did to me?”

“I’ll make him pay.”

“He touched me, Odin.”

“I’ll cut off his hands.”

Hunter glanced down to where Snow was holding onto him tightly, and when he tried to pull away, that grip only strengthened, keeping him there. “What if you hadn’t made it in time?”

“But I did make it.”

“What if you hadn’t?” he insisted stubbornly. He needed to know. “What we’ve got right now, it’s fragile. Enough so that any little thing can come along and topple it over. This, Isa Frost having his hands on my body, that isn’t little. It’s a big deal. And he said you wouldn’t want—”

“Since when did you listen to a damn thing Isa says?” Odin’s voice dropped low, almost in warning, and in return, Hunter’s spine straightened.

Not in the same way it’d done with Wren, though. There was no fear. It was as if Odin was calling to something deep within him and that something was responding in turn. The possessiveness in his voice was soothing to Hunter, coaxing him into a sense of security.

“You’re mine, Huntsman. No one can change that, certainly not someone as obsolete as Isa Frost. You’re my Whisper, and now that you’re awake, you’ll soon be my husband too.”

Hunter frowned. “What?”

Odin reached for him, cupping the side of his face in one palm and easing him closer so they were leaning toward one another. “I’ve already trapped you with the mating bond,” he said, “but it’s not enough. I want more. I want everything. I’ll trap you legally as well, make it impossible for you to ever walk away from me. Catch you, well and truly, mate. So, whatever happened to you? Forget it. I’ll help you any way I

can, just know it's not something you have to carry. We'll make Frost pay for what he's done. Frost. No one else. It was no one else's fault but his."

Hunter searched his expression for any signs this was a trick or that he was merely trying to placate him, but there weren't any. "You mean that?"

"You once mentioned us needing to be on the same page for this to work," Odin reminded. "Let's do that now, get on the same page. Who do you belong to, Hunter Thorn?"

He licked his lips, only hesitating briefly. But they were alone and there was no reason for him to be embarrassed. "You."

"Who do you want to touch you?" Odin leaned in even closer, bringing his mouth dangerously close to brushing against Hunter's, though at the last second, he held himself back.

"You." Hunter had been unconscious for weeks and had been half dead before that, and yet his body responded to the other man's nearness like a moth to a flame, coming alive instantly.

"And who are you going to marry?"

"You—" He stopped himself. "Hey."

Odin lifted a brow, the corner of his mouth turning up in a barely contained, self-satisfied smile. "Too late," he leaned back. "You've already agreed now, Huntsman."

"That doesn't count."

"Oh? Are you saying you won't?" Odin didn't touch him, but he didn't have to in order to maneuver him just the way he wanted. He pressed forward, forcing Hunter back until his head was resting against the headboard. "Don't forget that I'm still angry with you, Little Whisper. Even if it was to follow your long lost sister, you walked out of Club Cherry on your own two feet." He clicked his tongue. "You disobeyed. There should be a punishment."

“I think I’ve been punished enough.” He hadn’t meant to spoil the mood, but the words were out before he could stop them.

Odin’s eyes lost their fight and he dropped his forehead against Hunter’s lightly, letting out a pained sound that rocked Hunter to the core. “Huntsman. Please. I need this. I need you.”

He meant he needed him to agree. The strain in his tone said everything he couldn’t with words, and Hunter picked up on every single one of them.

Even though they were both here and they were alive, Odin was scared.

The same way Hunter had been scared when he’d woken and feared the worst.

Tentatively, he reached up and ran his fingers through Odin’s hair, both hands pulling his head back enough that their eyes could meet once more. Sure enough, the raw worry was shining back in Odin’s gaze.

“I don’t want to lose you either,” Hunter confessed. “If doing this is so important to you, then all right, I’ll do it. I’ll marry you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he blew out a breath, the seriousness of the moment making him uncomfortable to the point he felt he had to break it or he’d die of mortification, “You know it’s dumb though, right? Marriage? I mean, look how well that turned out for Isabel and Ander—”

Odin silenced him with a kiss and Hunter forgot all about what he’d been trying to say or needing to distract himself. For the next few minutes, everything else faded into the background, useless and unimportant.

All there was in the whole damn universe was this, their mouths, Odin’s tongue tangling with his dominatingly, his hands holding Hunter in place, and the heat that spiraled between them, growing like a tiny inferno until they were both sweating and panting and ablaze.

Chapter 9:

He never thought there'd come a time when he'd be relieved to make it back to this room, but the second Hunter entered their bedroom in Club Cherry, it was like a huge weight was lifted off his shoulders.

The entire drive from the hospital he'd been anxious, checking the rearview mirrors, searching for any signs they were being followed. While he understood Isa would be a fool to attack them now, he couldn't quell that frantic voice inside himself long enough to relax. Wren had told him he'd only been with Frost for eight hours, but in his mind, it was so much longer than that, and though the beatings hadn't been all that creative, they'd carved into his psyche in a way that his past encounters with being beaten hadn't.

He'd never lost sleep over the situation with Grimes men, for example, and yet now...He shivered just thinking about that cement room and Isa's constant, unwavering stare. How it'd turned from taunting and loathing to awed and a bit manic the second he'd discovered what Hunter was.

The door clicked behind Odin and beeped as the locking mechanism was set into place, and Hunter automatically reached for his empty wrist where the bracelet should have been.

They'd managed to track it to a part of the city, but the bracelet itself had never actually been located. Odin had reassured him on the drive over not to worry about this, since he was able to cancel it remotely, meaning no one would be able to use it to access the club, but that still didn't make Hunter feel comfortable.

"You don't need it," Odin said, possibly misreading his apprehension. He stepped up and wrapped his arms around Hunter's waist, pulling him back so he firmly rested against his front. "It's not like the bracelet did any good anyway. You still slipped out unnoticed."

"That was Meg," Hunter explained, even though there was no real reason for him to.

“Still, you chose to go with her.”

“Can we not do this right now?” He closed his eyes and rested his head back against Odin’s shoulder, inhaling that familiar scent deep into his lungs and letting it settle there. It calmed his nerves even more and when he exhaled it was with a contented sigh. “Later, you can scold me all you want.”

“Oh, Little Whisper,” Odin leaned down and pressed his hot mouth to the curve of his ear delicately, “I’m going to do so much more than scold you. But yes, that can wait. Come, let’s get you to bed. You’re still recovering.”

Hunter grabbed onto his wrist when he went to move away. “I’ve slept enough.”

He paused, easily catching on. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. You may feel all right now, but your injuries were severe, and according to the doctor you still need time—”

“I’m not suggesting you bend me over the nearest flat surface and fuck my brains out,” Hunter snapped, irritation blooming as the feeling of rejection reared its ugly head. He didn’t like feeling like he needed to beg for it when up until this point Odin had been the one constantly making the first move. “Forget it. If you don’t want me after all then just leave. I don’t need a chaperone to take a damn nap.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” This time Odin was the one to catch him when he went to move for the bed, easing him back into his arms, front to front. There was so much patience in his expression and he spoke gently as if dealing with a wounded animal.

Hunter hated it.

“Stop patronizing me,” he ordered, trying to shove away only to have Odin’s arms tighten and restrain him. A spark of heat in his lower region gave him pause and he glared up at the taller man, annoyed with his reaction amidst everything else going on. He wanted to be angry and sulky, didn’t want to come off desperate, but his dick had other ideas and before long he was hardening, the proof of his arousal impossible to ignore between them.

“You ready for me so easily now,” Odin said, the corner of his mouth turning up in a partial smirk.

“Shut up.”

“It’s true. All I have to do is show a hint of dominance and look at how quickly your body reacts.” He chuckled. “There’s no need to pout, Little Whisper. You want my cock? That’s good, I want to give it to you. But—”

“No buts,” he interrupted.

Odin hesitated, clearly torn. If the bulge in his pants that was bumping up against Hunter was any indication, he was also more than ready.

He just needed a push in the right direction.

“You said you’d do whatever you could to help me forget,” Hunter reminded, not feeling the least bit guilty about playing this card. It’d been weeks since the last time he’d felt Odin’s body on top of his, inside of him, and he wasn’t lying. He wanted to chase away the horrors of that day. Wanted it stripped from his mind and put through a shredder. “He stuck his finger in my ass.”

Odin flinched and then growled, anger sweeping over his features. His hold turned vice-like, to the point it almost hurt, but Hunter didn’t say anything.

“What else?” Odin’s voice was clipped, and it was clearly a struggle for him to ask. “Where else?”

“That was it,” he reassured. “Well, the only place he touched me sexually. You arrived before he could do anything else.”

Anything worse.

“Thank you, by the way.” He held Odin’s gaze, hoping he could convey how truly grateful he was. “For coming for me.”

“I’ll murder everyone who ever dared lay a hand on you,” Odin promised darkly. “You don’t have to thank me, Huntsman. Coming for you is the least I can do. You’re my Whisper. You’re everything.”

Not wanting to touch that serious statement, not sure he was emotionally ready for it, Hunter opted to lighten the situation instead. “If coming for me is the least you can do...” He reached between them and cupped the other man through his pants. “We’ve been standing here for too long already. It’s past time for you to do your duty as my Shout, Snow.”

“Duty, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Which is?”

“Fuck me,” he said crassly, then with a bit more vulnerability forced himself to add, “Help me forget.”

For a moment he feared Odin was going to reject him again and insist he wasn’t healthy enough for sex, but then he slowly started backing Hunter toward the bed, his hands slipping around to tug up the ends of Hunter’s shirt in the process.

“Tell me I didn’t get it wrong,” Snow said just as the edge of the mattress bumped against the backs of Hunter’s knees. “Tell me you were coming back to me.”

“You watched the security footage.” He’d known he would.

“You wanted me to know you weren’t running away.”

“Yes,” he confirmed, gathering that was what was holding them up now. “I didn’t want to miss the chance to see Meg again after all of this time, so I had to go. But I didn’t want you thinking I was leaving for good.”

“What if she’d asked you to? If you made it outside and she had a hovercar ready to take you out of the country,” Odin searched his gaze closely, “would you have gone?”

Would he have? If his only surviving family member had somehow miraculously appeared and happened to have a golden ticket out of this life? If he’d been asked this same question two months ago, a month ago even, would his answer have been different than the one he was going to give today?

Maybe.

Before he'd left with Meg, he'd decided to stop running from himself, and that hadn't changed even though he'd been in a coma for three weeks. What was the point in hiding anyway? What had that gotten him other than dissatisfaction and more grief?

"No," he said, and there wasn't even a slight possibility that he was lying. "I wouldn't have gone with her if she'd asked. I wouldn't have gone with anyone."

"Even if it meant you'd be free?"

"Free? Of what exactly? If I left I'd live the rest of my life on the run, looking over my shoulder, waiting for the day you caught up with me."

Odin's shoulders sunk, though it was obvious he was trying hard to keep his reaction from showing. "So the only reason you wouldn't have left is because you knew I'd come after you."

"The only reason I wouldn't have left," he corrected, "is because I know you'd come after me, and I know I would hate waiting until you finally found me again. Snow," he slipped free from his hold, and settled down onto the bed, "this may have started as you forcing me, but you aren't forcing me now."

Hunter pulled off his shirt and then slowly crawled backward, eyes locked on Odin's as he moved languidly, ignoring the way some of his neglected muscles ached. He wasn't willing to let on and give the other man reason to put an end to this before they even got started, and now that he'd been thinking about it for the better part of a half hour, his body was on fire with need.

He stopped once he was in the center of the bed, propped up on his hands, and eased his legs open invitingly.

"Tell me you want me," Odin ordered in a low whisper, pupils dilating as he took Hunter in.

"I want you," he obliged. "Only you."

Odin removed his shirt and then dropped his hands to undo his jeans. Once he was naked, he climbed onto the bed,

kneeling between Hunter's spread thighs and capturing his lips in a swift and searing kiss.

"Lay back, baby," he urged, fingers unsnapping the button on Hunter's pants. He tugged them free and discarded them as well, resting his palms on Hunter's upturned knees for a moment so he could stare down at him. His gaze lingered on the clear bandage between his shoulder and his neck and some of the lust left his eyes.

The doctor had removed the gauze before Hunter had been discharged and assured him they'd done everything they could to heal the bite and ensure there wouldn't be a long-lasting scar. For now, there was still scar tissue, and the plastic covering had some type of formula on it that would help speed up recovery and smooth out his skin. Eventually, there'd be no sign that horrible ordeal had ever happened to him.

The same could be said for the stab to his thigh. The stitches had been removed and now there was only a faint mark. She'd said it'd be gone within a week or two. Thanks to Odin flying in the best medical technology around, Hunter was going to be able to look in the mirror and not be instantly reminded of that day.

He was going to be able to try and forget.

"Don't think about it," he said, waiting until he had Odin's full attention once more. He smiled softly. "I won't be. Just think about me, here, with you."

"With me," he repeated, clearly still caught up in his thoughts.

Hunter tried harder to pull him back, sitting back up to rest a hand over one of Odin's. "This isn't just about sex, not anymore. Maybe it never really was. Maybe we were both fooling ourselves in more ways than we realized."

"I've known that for a while now," Odin said, but that comment seemed to do the trick, and before Hunter could ask about that, he shoved him flat onto his back once more. "Stay there and be good for me."

“What will I get in return?” This was what he needed, the teasing, the push and pull. Their usual banter to help him erase all the bullshit.

Ironic that he'd spent ten years of his life running from Odin, only for the Dominus to turn into the one thing he needed to run to in order to feel whole again.

“You remember that little alcove on the third floor at Faraway Mansion?” Odin asked instead of answering, placing the tips of his fingers at the hollow of Hunter's throat. “With the white furs and the abundance of throw pillows?”

“The one no one ever sat in?” It took him a minute because those fingers had started making their way downward, trailing over his skin with such a light touch he had to concentrate to feel them there.

“The afternoon sunlight always hit it just right,” Odin continued, “causing the furs to glitter.”

“I'm,” he swallowed, “not following.”

“I always wanted to fuck you there.” His fingers reached Hunter's navel, but instead of going lower, they changed direction, heading back up again at the same agonizingly slow pace. “I can't even tell you how many times I fantasized about it. About dragging you by the nape up the stairs and down that hall, tossing you onto that cushioned bench. Sometimes I'd picture propping you up with one of the throw pillows—front, back, it varied. Other times I'd shove your face into one to muffle your screams while you took my cock.”

“Colorful.” Hunter could almost see it now though, could almost imagine being there instead of at Club Cherry, with the bed beneath the long window seat in that alcove.

Odin grabbed at one of the pillows and dragged it over, lifting Hunter's hips so he could slide it beneath his ass.

“I always held you down,” he said, and Hunter quirked a brow.

“You aren't holding me down now.”

“Do I have to?”

Pointedly, he set his arms at the side of his head, silently making it clear he was fine with giving up control.

Odin hummed in appreciation, his palm stroking down Hunter’s right thigh, touching as much of him as possible as he slid across his silky skin to his knee. He shifted once there, so that when he roamed back up it was on the inside, his hand traveling straight to the apex of Hunter’s trembling thighs where his stiff and weeping dick jutted, needy and begging.

“All that time spent fantasizing about you,” he wrapped his hand around Hunter, smearing his precome up and down his shaft with measured pumps of his fist as he spoke, “and it was still nowhere near as good as the real thing. The sexy sounds I imagined you making? Pale in comparison to your actual ones.”

Odin twisted his hand and sparks shot straight down to Hunter’s toes, causing him to moan and his hips to jerk.

“The sight I always pictured,” Odin leaned back on his heels so he could glance down between Hunter’s legs, “not even half as sexy as watching your juices roll down the crease of your ass.”

“Is this your attempt at romance, Snow?” Not that he was hating it. It was actually only making his balls tighten and his dick harden even more. This mix of rough and sensual play was doing all sorts of things to him, and falling back on sarcasm was his default amidst the complicated rush of emotions.

This was sex just like every other time and yet...There was something different about it, something more...intimate. More so even than the day they’d mated. Odin may be reminiscing, but he was also drawing a line in the sand, one that separated who they’d been from who they now were.

When they’d been kids, they’d been young and foolish and driven by base instincts like lust. They’d wanted one another in the way a child wanted the last piece of candy,

coveting the sweet hit of sugar only to forget all about it come dinner.

After everything they'd been through since, both together and apart, this thing between them was deeper.

“We aren't at the Faraway Mansion,” Odin said. “We're here, in our bed. In our home. I'm about to fill you with my cock and my come, and then later, I'm going to do it again. Not because you're forbidden fruit, or out of curiosity about what your face might look like not wearing that serious expression you always used to wear, but because you're mine and I can. I can fuck you whenever and wherever I like, Huntsman, and you'll spread these legs for me and welcome me into that tight little body of yours willingly. Won't you?”

That stubborn part of him reared its head and wanted to snap back for the sake of pride, but he caught it and shoved it back down, shifting his hips instead in a wordless plea before whispering, “Yes.”

Odin's fingers slipped to his puckered hole, collecting sticky drops of precome from Hunter's still-leaking dick. He traced the outline, smirking when that had Hunter whimpering, and then finally slipped a digit inside, pushing past that ring of muscle.

“It's been a while,” he reminded when Hunter tried to shift onto him and force his finger in deeper, clucking his tongue.

The pillow lifting his hips helped ease the glide forward, but there was a slight burn and as much as he hated having to wait, Hunter had to admit it would probably hurt a lot if he attempted to take Odin's massive cock right now.

“I'll open you up nice and good,” Odin promised, bending to press a kiss to the inside of Hunter's thigh before he slipped in another finger. He paused when Hunter flinched, giving him a moment to adjust, and then reached down with his free hand to rub against his own swollen cock.

Hunter gasped when he felt Odin lube him more with his precome, clawing at the sheets as those fingers wiggled

inside of him, pressing against his walls. Any signs of discomfort dissipated within a few breaths, quickly leaving him a writhing mess, desperately riding three of those fingers.

His neglected dick bobbed between them with each thrust of Odin's hand, but it was clear the other man had no intention of touching him there again any time soon, a fact that had Hunter emitting another needy moan.

Without warning, Odin suddenly flipped him over, settling him back onto the pillow so that it kept his ass high, his dick caught between the soft material and Hunter's stomach.

"You have no idea how badly I want to punish you right now," Odin said darkly, and Hunter mewled at the underlining threat as he rested a hand over the globe of his ass. "But I won't. Just know it's coming, Huntsman. I won't let you off easy next time."

"*This* is easy?" He gasped when he felt that thick, flushed head press against his entrance, the sound swiftly shifting into a sharp cry when Odin flicked his hips and began to enter him.

He stretched him around his cock slowly, almost torturously so, feeding Hunter inch by inch. When he was halfway in, he pulled back to the crown, chuckling when that had Hunter whining in protest. "Patience, baby. We have to be gentle. You were just in the hospital."

"Screw that," Hunter argued.

"What's wrong?" He started gliding back in at that same agonizing pace. "You asked me to fuck you. I'm obliging."

"Not like this!" Hunter buried his face in his arms to keep the sob that slipped past his lips from being heard. It was like he was being filled with a hot poker, stretched and pinned, but denied the rough friction that would help bring him to the end game. Instead, the sensations zipped through his lower belly, warming and heating him, but never letting him feel complete or full.

“You didn’t specify.” Odin dragged his cock back out to start the whole process over a third time.

Or maybe it was the fourth.

Hunter had lost track.

“Snow.” At this point, he wasn’t above begging.

“Uh-uh,” he chided. “You’re going to feel this, every single ridge of my cock, the way your muscles stretch around it to accommodate me. How our bodies fit together perfectly.” He placed both hands on his ass and pulled his cheeks apart, and Hunter didn’t have to turn to know he was staring down at them, watching where they came together.

Odin thrust a little harder, giving him two inches instead of one, but then eased back out to the tip again.

“Snow! Please!” He tipped his hips up and rocked suggestively and invitingly, hoping that would be enough to tempt the other man into just taking him.

He should have known better. Once the Snow Dominus set his mind to something, that was it. The rest of the people around him merely had to endure.

Defiantly, Hunter started humping against the pillow, small movements at first so that they’d go unnoticed. He halted as soon as those fingers dug warningly into his flesh, even though it took all of his willpower to do so, his dick having practically soaked the pillow already.

“Trying to make your punishment later worse?” Odin enquired, relaxing his hold on Hunter’s ass when he got a shake of the head in answer. “I’ll make you a deal. Tell me, Huntsman.”

Hunter frowned into the bedsheet. “Tell you what?”

“That one thing you still haven’t said.”

He still wasn’t following, and his silence must have made that apparent.

Odin draped himself over him then, so that he could bring his mouth to Hunter’s neck. He trailed open-mouth

kisses there, sucking a bit harder now and again until he'd reached his ear. "Safety, security, and power. Those were the things you wanted, Hunter. I'll provide them. But what about the thing I wanted in return?"

It took him longer than it should have to put the pieces together, but the second he had, he sucked in a shocked breath, grateful his face was still hidden and the other man couldn't see his expression.

They'd only spoken about this once before, before Wren had managed to set the meeting with the Emperor. It was the first time they'd both laid all their cards out on the table, and Odin's had admittedly surprised Hunter. For him, being with the Snow Dominus meant he'd have status and protection. Wealth. The promise of a comfortable life was what everyone wanted, and Hunter wasn't special for wishing for the same.

But Snow...

"It's okay if you still can't say it yet," Odin told him, pressing another light kiss to his cheek, though there was obvious disappointment in his tone he wasn't able to mask. "I'll still make you come, it's just going to take a while for you to get there."

The same way it was taking a while for Hunter to fall for him. He didn't have to add that part for the message to ring loud and clear.

On the one hand, Hunter could always lie. But it would be a stupid thing to lie for. He might not be getting it hard the way he liked *now*, but this was only round one, and he knew the rough sex was coming whether he gave in here or not. This pace was torture, sure, but he'd just gotten back from literal torture and he'd survived that just fine. In reality, he could handle this, could take being teased and forced to accept delayed gratification.

If this had happened before he'd walked out of Club Cherry, he most likely would have, but as it were...

There'd only been one thing steadily on his mind when he'd realized Meg had set him up. When he woke to find Isa Frost had him naked and strung up like meat at a butcher's.

When he'd taken blow after blow until it'd felt like the next would be the last his body could take and surely he was going to die.

Odin.

He'd thought about how guilty he felt for having left, for that video of him staring at the security camera being the last time Odin would "see" him alive. For knowing it was his fault he was in that situation and his fault he was about to put the other man in that kind of pain. The kind that only came from losing someone important.

Hunter had been on the verge of death and yet he hadn't been worried about himself at all.

He hadn't been able to.

All he could think of was Odin Snow, the dominating, overly possessive Dominus Hunter had been obsessed with since he was nineteen.

"Shh," he must have mistaken Hunter's hesitancy for anxiety, nuzzling closer even as he continued the slow in and out motion of his cock, "don't fret, baby. I'm not mad. I understand. You don't have—"

"I love you," the words were mumbled, almost inaudible within the barrier of his arms and against the sheets, but Odin froze behind him anyway. Hunter tipped his head to the side, inhaling and glancing over his shoulder to meet his gaze. "I love you."

His brow furrowed and he stared. "You love my dick."

Hunter snorted. "Well, yes, and I would really like it if you would give it to me, hard, but that's not why I'm saying it."

Even though he'd been the one to bring it up, Odin still didn't appear to believe him.

“Do you remember that hidden fountain in the West gardens?” Hunter asked, continuing when Odin nodded. “The hedges were always overgrown because the gardener knew he could get away with it since no one ever went that far in.” He licked his lips. “I always wanted you to fuck me there.”

Odin’s mouth parted but he didn’t speak.

“I used to fantasize about walking in, feigning curiosity,” he elaborated. “You’d find me and demand to know what I was doing but I never had a good enough answer. Then you’d bend me over the stone edge of the fountain, pull my pants down to expose me, and shove—”

He rammed his cock in as deep as it could go, turning Hunter’s words into a scream that echoed throughout the room. Keeping himself buried, he rocked against him, grinding down into his ass, the motion pressing his dick more firmly against the pillow.

Odin nipped at Hunter’s ear then, pleased when that had him jerking beneath him. “Tell me again.”

“I love you.” His eyes rolled back as Odin retreated and drove his cock back in, his thrusts aggressive and fast, the way that he needed it, that thick cockhead rubbing against that spot within him with each and every hammering in and out.

“Again,” Odin growled, settling his weight more over Hunter’s back until he was pressed into the mattress so firmly he couldn’t even wiggle his arms free if he wanted.

“I love you.”

“Again.” The bed shook in time with every plunge of his cock into Hunter’s body, and he shifted his knees to spread his legs even wider to accommodate his rapid motions.

“I love you!” Hunter shouted as he came, convulsing, trapped between Odin and the bed. The orgasm burned through him, stronger than ever before, seemingly lighting his skin on fire until he was a panting, heaving mess, and tears were pouring down his cheeks. The sparks kept crackling, even as oversensitivity began, causing him to wail as his hole continued to be pummeled.

His cries turned to sobs before he realized it, the cock still being forced in and out of his overstimulated body until he was practically a mess of goo under the Dominus. Something inside of him broke, and the tears came harder, even as he lifted his hips to welcome that throbbing cock even deeper despite the discomfort it was causing.

He wanted to make Odin feel good, the same way the other man always made him feel good, and more than that, he wanted to apologize for putting them both through the past few weeks. Hunter had blindly trusted Meg, a person he hadn't seen in over a decade, a person he no longer knew, and it had cost them.

“Again,” Odin demanded one final time, the strain in his voice apparent.

“I love you,” Hunter said, biting down on his bottom lip and breaking the skin when he felt hot ropes of come start to bathe his insides.

Odin plugged him up and came, pulling Hunter's face back so he could take his mouth in a brutal, bruising kiss. The second he tasted blood his body temperature raised a notch, his power flooding through the both of them.

It seemed to last forever, both the kiss and his orgasm, Hunter filled with cock on one end and greedy tongue on the other. He was exhausted and every nerve ending seemed to be extra sensitive, but when Odin gave one last light grind of his hips and then moved to pull out, he felt the loss straight to his bones.

Odin shushed him when he made a sound, pulling the soiled pillow out from under him and tossing it across the room. He rolled Hunter onto his side and then fit his body against him, front to front, wrapping his arms around him to tug him close. One of his hands rubbed down his spine soothingly as he whispered affirmations as though Hunter were a child in need of comforting.

“You're safe, baby. I've got you. It's okay. Let it out.” He rocked them lightly and tucked Hunter's head beneath his chin.

“Snow.”

“I’ve got you.”

Hunter clung to him and gave in, the reality of what had happened finally catching up to him.

He wept for all that had been done to him. For the way Isa had touched him and abused him. For the beatings and the fear that he was going to die.

And he cried for the betrayal, for having lost his sister all over again, for still not fully knowing why.

His only family had turned on him and given him to the enemy, and yet, he wasn’t alone.

Odin held him through it all.

Chapter 10:

He'd calmed some an hour later, the warmth from the hot bath Odin had drawn for them combined with the solid body at his back helping to lull him into a state of contentment. The room was brightly lit and he felt almost weightless, the sound of popping bubbles and the steady rhythm of Odin's chest behind him calming his nerves.

It was almost as though the horribleness of the past month hadn't occurred.

Almost.

"Tell me, Little Whisper," Odin nuzzled the top of his head with his chin, and Hunter grinned but didn't open his eyes.

"I think I've told you enough for one day," he drawled, only to have Snow press two fingers to his jawline, forcing his head to tip back so their eyes would meet.

He didn't want to, wanting to keep pretending reality didn't exist, but Hunter dutifully looked at him. What he saw almost took his breath away. But then, looking at Odin Snow tended to have that effect.

The Dominus appeared every bit the part of a king, lounging back against the edge of the tub, the sparkling white wall towering behind him. It made his hair stand out, but even the shown roots couldn't detract from his beauty. His mouth was lifted at the corners, giving away that he found enjoyment in Hunter's perusal, his eyes latched onto him as he waited.

Back in the bedroom, Hunter had been the impatient one, but now that the sex play was over the tables had turned.

"Tell me again," Odin demanded, voice rich and inviting despite the insistence in his tone.

Hunter shook his head and his grip tightened.

"Huntsman."

"I made it clear before," he said, "that I wouldn't put myself in another one-sided crush."

“This is more than a crush.”

“Is it?” He feigned uncertainty.

“Careful,” Odin wrapped his other arm around his chest and held him closer, “You’re playing with fire.”

Pointedly, he slapped at some of the bubbles, splashing at the surface of the bath. “I think I’ll be all right. You still haven’t filled me in. What happened while I was out?”

For a moment, it looked like Odin wasn’t going to allow the change in conversation, but then he sighed and released Hunter’s face, leaning back against the wall. The water shifted around them as he resituated, bending his knees to block Hunter in at either side, arm slipping lower to settle around his waist.

“Isa is still on the run,” he began.

“And Meg?”

“We don’t know. Since we can’t find her, it’s safe to assume they’re together. Did she say anything to you that could be useful?”

He shook his head. “She didn’t really speak to me. I left with her because she claimed to have a safehouse nearby, so I assumed she’d been in hiding like I was before you found me. Considering how easily she gave me up, though, now I’m guessing she’s been with Frost if not all of this time, for most of it.”

“He must have gotten to her somehow.” Odin thought it over. “The Meg Thorn I recall would have done anything for her brother.”

“I need answers.” He’d thought he could just let it go and roll with the punches but he’d been fooling himself. At the time, there’d been so much going on it’d been hard for his brain to bother with Meg, too busy worrying about survival at the hands of Isa. But now that he was safe and more in control, it was eating away at him slowly but surely. “Even if it’s just finding out that she’s been under his thumb these past years.”

It would be horrible and he'd feel bad for her, but there'd be a reason, and Hunter desperately needed there to be one.

"We'll get them," Odin promised and Hunter hummed in agreement.

"I heard you burned him pretty good," he said.

"He was distracted."

"By me."

"Let's not discuss that."

"Why?" He shrugged. "I'm fine."

"But I'm not." Odin dropped his chin on the curve of Hunter's shoulder and hugged him close with both arms. "If there was a way to burn the memory from my mind, I would do so without a moment's hesitation."

"It's okay, Snow. I'm here. With you. Don't get sappy on me now. What happened to all that earlier talk? About wanting to fuck me in the mansion?"

"We can't anymore," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"There's no more mansion to do it in. I burned it to the ground."

Hunter pulled away from him, turning in the tub so they were face to face. "You what?"

Odin didn't seem too bent up about it, but Hunter knew him better than that. He rested against the back of the tub once more and watched him from beneath hooded eyes, clearly melancholy but not wanting to admit it.

"We had to strike while Isa was on the run," he explained. "The remaining Frost Brumal stationed there fought hard, but they were no match once I arrived. It was either leave the place standing and worry about having to safeguard it, or destroy it and put the ghosts of the past to bed. I chose the latter."

“Why?” They’d joked about wrecking it before, but Hunter hadn’t ever thought Odin was serious. The Faraway Mansion was the place he’d grown up, a place that had been in his family for generations.

“We weren’t going to live in it, you and I,” Odin said. “And if I spread our forces too thin there’s a greater risk Isa will risk an attack. If he strikes the mansion and reclaims it, I’m back at square one. I’d rather ensure Club Cherry remains a fortress.”

“Snow...” He wanted to ask if he’d done it for him, but the words got stuck in his throat and no matter how he tried, he failed to dislodge them. Hunter didn’t want to come off like that was something he expected. They may be mated now, and things between them may be a lot better than either of them could have ever predicted, but that didn’t change the fact that this had started sour.

The reason for that was so tightly entangled with both Isa and the mansion. Odin may have forgiven Hunter for the part he’d played in his losing it all back then, but that didn’t mean he would throw something as meaningful as his childhood home aside all for the sake of Hunter.

It would be ridiculous of him to assume he should.

“I’m sorry,” Hunter ended up saying instead, swallowing down the rest of those thoughts.

“It is what it is.” Odin gave him a tired smile. “Honestly, a part of me is glad it’s gone. Now there’s one less thing to worry about. It made the news too.”

“There’s an all-out Brumal war happening in the streets,” Hunter drawled. “Pretty sure a lot about you has been in the news as of late.”

“We’ve tried to keep the bloodshed to a minimum,” he said, “but yes.”

“Weren’t you trying to avoid this outcome?” That was the reason Odin had been sneaking around all these years, buying up property in Isa’s territory. He’d planned on taking

control back in a different way, one that prevented too much carnage from resulting on either side.

Many of Isa's people once stood under the Snow name in the beginning, before Isabel had turned on Ander and her son had turned on her. Some of them had tried to return and were prevented, others had settled too comfortably into their new lifestyle with Frost to bother. They may have forgotten Odin, but he hadn't forgotten them. He wanted what was his back, but he didn't want to have to kill everyone while he did it.

As a leader of the Brumal, people automatically assumed Odin was a monster—even Hunter had been guilty of that. But the truth was, even though he couldn't ever be considered an angel, he wasn't nearly as heartless as he seemed.

“Isa forced my hand the second he decided to kidnap you,” he stated matter-of-factly. “It couldn't have gone any other way after that.”

“And...we're winning?”

“We took the mansion and several other locations that were once considered under Isa's rule. We're ahead, but I wouldn't say we've won, not yet.”

“Not until Frost is dead,” Hunter caught on. Neither of them would be able to sleep comfortably at night until that was the case, even if it was for different reasons. Even now, a part of him was actually frightened at the idea of having to confront Isa again, of being anywhere near him.

That was something he was going to have to get over, because he refused to stand on the sidelines.

“I'm awake now,” he said. “No more keeping me in the dark. You promised when I agreed to mate you that we'd stop Isa together. You've already accepted that the bracelet is pointless. You should realize that trying to keep me under lock and key is as well.”

“Remember how I warned you to be careful before, Little Whisper?”

“I’m not asking you to loosen the reigns entirely.” He understood too well Odin would never do that. It just wasn’t in his nature or the way he was raised.

As the heir to the Snow throne, he’d been brought up to conquer and control. That instinct must have only worsened after Isa’s betrayal. The things he cared about he held with an iron fist, and even though Hunter had been the only one to say it thus far, he knew how Odin felt about him.

How could he not, after what he’d just learned?

That earlier thought he’d had but been unable to voice returned, and this time he shoved his trepidation down and forced himself to just say it.

“You burned down your home because keeping me safe was more important,” he acknowledged, “but there’s a difference between keeping me protected and suffocating me.”

“That wasn’t my home,” Odin argued. “This is.”

“And it’s my home, too,” he said stubbornly. “Meaning I also have every right to want to protect it. You aren’t the only one who hates Isa Frost, and you aren’t the only one who knows what it feels like to worry.”

Hell, the only reason Hunter had been able to accept that he was, in fact, in love with Odin was thanks to the shit Isa had pulled. His concern for Odin and how he would go on without him was the knock in the head he’d needed to stop being so obstinate. If he was able and willing to change for him, Snow should do the same.

“Do you want to know the best part about those fantasies I used to have?” Odin held his gaze.

He was talking about the alcove again. The one that apparently no longer existed. “What?”

“They’d end like this. With you snuggled up in my arms, basking in the afterglow.”

“Things can’t always be perfect and pretty,” Hunter said, knowing that’s what he was getting at, that he was trying

to say they could be like this and only this. “I can’t be your escape from the darkness outside, not all the time.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want a *partner*.” Even as a kid, life had been too much of a struggle for him to ever have considered a future with someone else. He’d needed to worry about the present, how he was going to keep his sister fed, and whether or not he would make it day by day working for the Brumal. Marriage had rarely if ever crossed his mind, and typically in regards to other people and not himself.

He hadn’t even been aware he could mate someone until he’d discovered he was a Whisper, and by then he’d been on the run and the idea of being forced into something like that had been so horrifying he’d had to set it aside and pretend it didn’t exist as a possibility.

But now here he was, mated, and going to get married. And to none other than Odin Snow, the most dangerous man on the planet.

In that sense, Hunter partially understood where he was coming from. Now that word was out, everyone and their grandmother would know who and what his weakness was. Enemies of the Snow family could come for Hunter at any time in an attempt to use him against Snow. He’d been at risk before, but that risk had multiplied tenfold. Still...

“We’re putting a stop to Isa,” he reminded. “And once he’s taken care of, there won’t be anyone left who stands a chance against you.”

“In a fair fight,” Odin said, only to have Hunter sigh in exasperation.

“I’m not a damsel in distress.”

“Considering I’ve saved you twice now—”

“Don’t.” He held up a hand stopping him. “Don’t treat me like I’m fragile or weak.”

“I’m treating you like you’re my Whisper, Huntsman.”

“You aren’t just a Shout any more than I’m just a Whisper. If this is going to continue between us and *work* we both need to accept that. I want a partner,” he repeated, “not a jailer. I don’t want to end up resenting you, Snow.”

Odin didn’t seem to be happy about that prospect either, quieting to think things over. It would be difficult for him to concede, even an inch, but the fact of the matter was, Hunter wouldn’t live the rest of his life like a caged bird. Not even for him.

“I want this to work,” Hunter said after a long stretch of silence, opting to be even more vulnerable and honest than he’d already been for the sake of pushing them in the right direction. The mating was already done, and there was no going back. They only had forward and he’d prefer they do it together. “Same page, remember?”

Odin reached for his left hand and interlocked their fingers, staring down at where they touched. “You can’t leave without informing me first, and you absolutely can’t go anywhere on your own. That’s non-negotiable.”

“Anywhere outside the club,” Hunter agreed, “but inside, I’ll stick with Loni.”

His eyes narrowed.

“It wasn’t her fault.” He should have brought this up sooner and felt a little bad that he hadn’t. “You didn’t like...do anything to her, right?”

“Such as?” It was obvious he understood the question and was being difficult on purpose.

“Snow.”

“She’s fine.” He pressed his lips into a thin line, clearly not pleased. “But the truth remains, she failed at doing her job.”

“None of us could have predicted Meg was alive,” Hunter said. “Or that she’d come for me.”

“Fine. Protection detail with you at all times if and when you leave the club—which until Isa is found, will be

never unless you're accompanied by me—but I'll only have Loni on your private detail within the club walls. Deal?"

"Deal." He had no intention of leaving without the Dominus anyway. Being tortured like that once was already one time too many in his book. He wanted autonomy, sure, but he wasn't an idiot. "I'll keep myself safe. I promise."

"If you hear from your sister—"

"I'll tell you immediately," he reassured.

"You won't follow her or go anywhere to meet her privately."

Hunter made a face. "No duh."

Odin didn't look like he bought that.

"I won't," he insisted. "I was caught off guard before, but now I'm aware of who she is. It's been so long, I forgot the obvious."

"Which is?"

"That people change." He waved his free hand between them. "Just look at us."

Hunter had needed to cry about it, mourn over the loss, but now that he had he felt a lot more centered again. It sucked, but that was life and Meg...She'd been dead to him a long time.

"Keep letting me in on the meetings," he said. "Don't leave me out of the process."

"I already told you I like when you're there anyway," Odin admitted. "That won't be a problem. But if there's an actual attack, you don't get to come."

He wanted to argue with that but paused and thought it through before nodding in the affirmative. When Odin quirked a brow in mild disbelief that it'd been that easy, he explained.

"I'm not a Shout so I have no power," though he could call on Odin's a bit, which was something they still needed to discuss, "and I've only been training again for a couple of months. I'm not nearly strong enough or skilled enough to take

on a high-standing member of the Frost family if we run into one unless there's a blaster in my hand. I've got my pride, but I also don't have a death wish."

"Let's also agree not to talk about you dying from here on out."

"Why?" He grinned. "Make you nervous?"

"Huntsman."

"For the record, you aren't allowed to die either."

"Right," Odin drawled, "something about how I pulled you back into this life and now I owe you."

"That," he tightened his fingers around the other man's, "and because I don't like the idea of losing you any more than you like the idea of losing me."

"Neither of us is allowed to die," Odin hummed and then motioned to the cooling water with his chin. "Which means we should probably get out before we catch a chill."

"Like a cold would be enough to kill you," he snorted. "Besides, you can just wave your hand and heat it back up again."

"I'm not a magician." Odin stood, pulling Hunter up with him, and then reached for the attached shower head to rinse the suds off of them quickly. "Wait here."

Hunter shook out his damp hair and stood in the center of the tub while the Dominus exited and went to grab towels. He glanced over to watch him go, frowning when he noticed something different. "What's that?"

There was fresh ink on Odin's spine, harsh lettering Hunter couldn't read surrounded by swirls shaded from light gray to pitch black. It started between his shoulder blades and ended just above the swell of his ass. It was also healed which meant he hadn't gotten it too recently, but it hadn't been there the day Hunter had been abducted.

"Odin," the floor felt like it was dropping out from under him as a dark thought filled his head, "what is that?"

He paused with his hand reaching for one of the white towels, his back still to Hunter. When he didn't immediately respond, that was more than answer enough.

"You didn't." He swallowed and his vision seemed to get cloudy as panic overtook him for the millionth time. "Tell me you didn't."

The Shout tattoo was unmistakable, and Odin's reaction only solidified that's what it was, and yet...Hunter didn't want it to be true. There were only two ways for a Shout to gain new ink and one was through bloodletting of a blood relation. Odin only had one family member left, and a tattoo of that size and that shade...It would have taken a lot more than just a spoonful of blood. Which meant...

"He was already gone," Odin's voice came out low and soft, almost inaudible. "He had been for a long time. I was holding on to a ghost."

Hunter's legs went out from under him and he dropped unceremoniously back down into the bath, splashing timid water and the remaining layer of mostly gone bubbles over the rim. It hadn't been that long since he'd learned that Ander Snow, Odin's father, was actually alive. Everyone on the planet thought he was dead and that Odin had already inked his ashes onto his body, taking his power for his own.

Only, that hadn't been the case at all. Odin had kept his father comfortable, hidden at a hospital under a false name.

"He wasn't coming back," having heard the commotion, Snow finally turned around to face him. "The doctors told me that from the start, I was just too stubborn to do what was necessary. If anything, I should be thanking you for finally giving me the push I needed."

"You murdered your father because of me."

"I did it for you," he corrected. "And it wasn't murder, not really. He was gone, Huntsman. Braindead. There was only a body with no one in it. And besides, he would be glad it happened this way. He'd be proud that his power was used to help save my Whisper."

That may or may not be true.

They would never really know.

Chapter 11:

Hunter was quiet.

He'd been like that for a while, ever since last night when he'd discovered what Odin had done to his father. If he were less confident, Odin may even be worried that the silence was out of disgust and an attempt to work through that, but he had a hunch it was for a different reason.

All this time together and he was finally starting to understand who Hunter Thorn was at his core. If only he'd paid more attention in the past, most of this could have been avoided, yet they'd allowed themselves to be played by the people around them and had turned a blind eye to their true feelings for one another.

Recalling how the Huntsman had repeatedly told him he loved him, warmth bloomed in the center of Odin's chest, despite where they were currently.

The Storeroom was packed, at least a dozen of Frost's men held prisoner, some undergoing questioning already, others left there to rot. Their offenses varied, but the important ones, the ones Odin actually cared about, were already in various states of being, having been subjected to Yule's machinations.

It'd been a debate about whether or not to bring Hunter here. There was a big difference between knowing something and experiencing it firsthand, and while he'd spent his younger days as part of the Brumal, and had no doubt heard sordid tales from his father, he'd never been privy to these sorts of things himself before. Back then, that had been by design, Odin having ordered that he never be asked to attend or participate in anything that took place at the Storeroom.

He almost chuckled out loud thinking about that, seeing just how naïve he'd been to not have realized back then that he had feelings for the man now standing at his side.

"This one seems the most likely to crack," Yule was telling them, waving toward one of the men who had his face

tucked into the corner of the room like a scared child or a wounded animal. He'd spent the most time with these people, trying to uncover all of their secrets.

Ensuring that they hurt as much as possible while he did.

"Do you recognize them?" Odin asked Hunter, but the Huntsman merely nodded his head in the affirmative once, eyes still scoping out the medium-sized room.

There was blood and piss in pools on the cement ground, sprayed over the wooden walls. They hadn't bothered with a tarp, not worried about the police finding their secret location, or even caring if they did. Odin had enough people in his pocket for that not to be a fear, something he'd been blatantly taking advantage of this past month as he'd waged war with the Frost family.

There were only two men alive in the room they were viewing from the wide, heavily guarded entrance. A third, dead when they'd arrived, had been left to rot on the other side, either as a warning to the others to cooperate or simply because Yule hadn't bothered to care enough about removing it. With him, there was no telling which way it leaned.

"Anything you'd like done, Mr. Thorn?" Yule was keeping himself uncharacteristically polite in front of Hunter, whom he was meeting for the first time. Since he was Odin's number one butcher, he didn't spend much time at Club Cherry and was typically busy working on other...proclivities. "Or anything you'd like to do?"

Hunter shook his head. "I just want to know what happened to my sister. What she's been through that made her this way."

"No problem." He grinned at him, coughing when Odin sent him a warning glare for being overly friendly. "I'll get those answers for you right away."

"Do you want to watch?" Odin asked when Yule headed toward the corner to retrieve the terrified man he'd pointed out a moment ago. "We don't have to."

“I do,” Hunter said, sliding his hands into the pockets of the leather jacket Odin had given him earlier. Typically this would be where he also tacked on mention that he wasn’t weak and could handle something like this, but he remained silent after delivering those two words.

“You don’t have to feel bad.”

He scrunched up his face just as Yule yanked the trembling man into the center of the room. “I don’t.”

“Not for him,” Odin corrected, waving dismissively toward the man who was now trying to plead with Yule not to hurt him. “For me.”

Hunter kept his eyes locked on the scene before them, watching as Yule hauled the man up and mentioned Meg. If he was bothered by the sound of the beating that followed, he didn’t show it. But then, he’d also confirmed he recognized him, that this man was one of the ones who’d tortured him near death at Isa’s behest.

Not exactly the type of person worthy of remorse.

“We can talk about this later,” the Huntsman finally told him, but Odin wasn’t a fan of his deadpan tone.

“Discussing it now won’t interrupt anything Yule is doing.”

“Except,” Hunter finally tore his gaze away from them and rested it on Odin. “I don’t want to get into it now. Here.”

He pretended not to understand, glancing around them. “What’s wrong with here?”

As if summoned by his words, a piercing wail sliced across the warehouse, coming from the other side where a different Frost soldier was being questioned about Isa’s possible whereabouts.

To his credit, Hunter merely lifted a brow as if to say, “That”, and then turned back to the bloodied man before them.

Yule was still demanding answers, and though the man was bawling, snot and tears leaking down his face, he kept repeating over and over again that he didn’t know.

“He’s not lying,” Hunter said then, lifting his voice so it was clear he wasn’t speaking to Odin.

Yule paused with his fist raised. He was holding the man up by the dirty hem of his shirt, but as soon as Hunter’s words were processed, he tossed him down to the ground and rubbed his palms on his thighs as if to clean them.

“Why do you think that?” Odin asked.

“Isa called him and the others in to beat me because they’re just muscle. They got off on it, that one especially. You don’t tell people like that important information,” Hunter explained.

“Ouch,” Yule feigned being wounded.

“You’re much more than muscle,” Odin reassured him, only partially joking.

“I need someone who spent a lot of time with Isa over the past decade,” Hunter continued. “Someone who would have been around doing all the minor, inconvenient things Isa felt were too beneath him to bother with himself. The last I saw Meg was in that photo he sent me of her death.”

“Think she was playing along or unconscious?” Yule crossed his arms, smearing blood stains over his skin and seemingly not noticing.

“She wouldn’t have been on his side back then,” Hunter replied. “So she must have been out when he staged the photo and made it look like she’d been killed. What I can’t figure out is why he’d bother going through all of that. Why keep her around? And what did he subject her to all these years that had her turning against me?”

That was the biggest question Odin had as well. His obsession with the Huntsman had begun because he’d witnessed a private moment between him and his sister. It’d been the first time he’d seen what real love was, what it looked like, and how it made people interact. Though he’d instantly latched onto Hunter, it hadn’t been one-sided. Meg had loved him every bit as much as he’d loved her.

“There’s no telling what he told her or he did,” he said. “Isa is a master manipulator.”

“And he’s had ten years to put bullshit in her head,” Yule added, letting out a low whistle. “Fucked up. If we weren’t planning on killing him before, we’d have to add it to the agenda now. No one messes with your man and gets away with it, boss.”

“That was...” Hunter seemed at a loss for words, so Odin helped him out.

“Cliché.” He shook his head at Yule. “Tone it down.”

“If you would, Mr. Thorn,” a crisp voice piped up from the doorway and they turned to find a man in a three-piece navy and gold suit standing there, “I believe I have the perfect candidate for you.”

“Jita.” Odin had seen the man a few times since he’d been released from the hospital, but this wasn’t his typical hangout, and he was a bit surprised to find him here.

“Sir.” He bowed and then returned to addressing Hunter directly. “We can consider it a welcome to the family gift from me. Right this way please.”

Hunter didn’t even hesitate or turn to Odin to get the go-ahead. Instead, he left after the counselor, not even bothering to look back to see if his Shout was following.

Odin let out a low growl, irrationally pissed about the fact his Huntsman was so openly trusting someone other than him, even though it made sense since he was well aware that Jita was one of the most trusted members in the Snow Brumal.

But. Still.

“You should probably get a handle on that,” Yule leaned in and told him, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Jealousy isn’t all that attractive in a lifelong partner. Sows seeds of distrust.”

“I’m two steps away from cutting out your tongue and force-feeding it to that bastard,” Odin warned, motioning to

the man who was still a sobbing mess on the floor. He rolled his eyes. “Deal with that.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Yule gave him a mock salute and then turned back to the prisoner, slipping a switchblade from his left pocket as he ambled toward him.

Not caring enough to stick around to watch the show, Odin exited the room and made his way across the warehouse toward the opposite side where he’d seen Jita lead Hunter. There were sections in the Storeroom, built to keep multiple prisoners at once, and though most were filled, it was obvious Jita had a specific location in mind.

The Counselor hadn’t been here when they’d arrived, otherwise, he would have come to greet his Dominus, which meant he must have only recently shown up. Admittedly, Odin was more than a bit curious about what he’d brought along with him, especially since he was so certain it would be helpful for Hunter.

He wasn’t expecting what he found when he finally made it to the corner room where Jita and Hunter were, though, and soon as he spotted the man tied up and hanging from the ceiling by his wrists he moved closer to his Huntsman’s side.

First, Isa’s underboss, was gagged but not blindfolded, and he glared wildly out at them. His wrists had been bound by metal and attached to a pulley above him, given just enough length that his toes still touched the ground.

The position wasn’t too different from the one they’d put Hunter in, and Odin found his hands fisting at his sides from just thinking about it.

“Do you know what truly irks me?” Jita said, tipping his head to Odin as he adjusted a set of black plastic gloves over his hands, making sure to tuck the shiny end of his diamond-crusted multi-slate beneath the end of the latex. “The chain of command. I’m the Counselor to the Snow family, a reputable position, no?”

“Agreed,” Odin opted to play, curious about where this was going.

“And yet, not only did Isa hire a low-level grunt to deliver the message to that trash that jumped me, he also didn’t find it worth the effort to hire the messenger himself.”

Yule had discovered that the men who’d attacked Jita had been given the orders by a man named Tuesday, someone everyone knew was deep in Isa’s pocket. Still, Tuesday wasn’t very high up the food chain, nothing important or special.

Jita went to a metal rolling table set against the right wall and took his time selecting something from the array of objects over the surface. When he turned back, he was testing the weight and length of a medium-sized chain.

“He sent his dog to do it for him,” Jita picked the conversation back up as though there hadn’t been a pause, walking around until he was standing behind First. With no other warning than that, he wrapped the chain around First’s neck and pulled, meeting Odin’s gaze as the man in his hold began to struggle. “I hate when people don’t acknowledge my worth.”

It was rare to see the counselor emote since he was usually all business, but he’d been trained along with the rest of the Brumal, and there was literally only one thing that he absolutely refused to tolerate from anyone.

Being looked down on.

Jita had been abandoned at an orphanage at the young age of three and had no recollection of his parents. He’d studied hard on his own to make it into college and had gotten involved with the Brumal during. As a self-made man who’d grown up on the streets, he understood the importance of having his accomplishments and social standing acknowledged, especially on their planet.

He tugged the chains tighter, listening to First gurgle and try and struggle against it before letting it loose and ripping off the gag. “Why isn’t Meg Thorn dead?”

Straight to it, very Jita.

Hunter tensed and Odin rested a hand on his narrow back lightly. Whether he was anxious over if First would speak or because seeing this scene was giving him flashbacks, Odin just wanted him to know that he wasn't alone.

There was still a lot they needed to discuss about the day he'd been kidnapped, and how Odin had found him, but last night they'd been exhausted and after their bath he'd coaxed the Huntsman into bed, not wanting to get into it. Later, once they'd handled this, the two of them would need to sit down and talk, and until then, there were most likely aspects of Hunter's kidnapping that he wasn't yet privy to.

Hunter didn't ask to leave or look away, so Odin wasn't going to bother suggesting he do so like he had earlier with Yule. Besides, Jita was every bit as deadly when he wanted to be, but he was far less creative with his torture methods than the butcher.

First hacked a few times, angry red welts forming around his neck from the chain, but didn't immediately respond.

So Jita repeated the process, cinching the metal a little harder and for a little longer this time.

"She isn't dead because she isn't dead, asshole," First heaved when he was released again. Even though he'd answered the question, he spit on the ground at Hunter's feet.

"Why didn't Isa kill her?" Jita asked as he tightened the chain, letting go once tears had begun leaking from the other man's eyes.

"He tried," First surprised them by admitting. "He shot her in the head."

"I was sent a photo," Hunter said.

"She was still breathing when people went to move the body," First told him. "For some reason, Frost found that interesting and decided to have her hospitalized instead of offing her for good. When she woke she was different."

"Different how?" he asked bluntly.

“She’d lost most of her memories but had no personal connection to the ones she’d kept either. She described it as though she was seeing clips of a movie, like the life she saw in them was foreign and belonged to somebody else.”

“Frost found that interesting, too,” Odin surmised.

“Of course,” First confirmed. “He tried to see how truthful she was being, trained her and taught her how to use a blaster, then told her to kill one of her old co-workers. She did it without batting an eye so he took that as her test, passed her, and had kept her all this time.”

“No one has seen her.” Odin certainly would have noticed if she’d been kept close to Isa for over ten years.

“She wasn’t in Ovid,” First said. “He had her relocated. She’s only recently been called back.”

“And she turned on Hunter so easily,” Jita frowned behind him. “Does she have no recollection of him?”

“Her family is one of the things she completely forgot,” First affirmed. “To her, even the name Hunter Thorn is meaningless.”

“Will she ever recover her memories?” Jita asked, but before First could answer, Hunter cut him off.

“No,” he said. “Because she doesn’t want to.”

First laughed.

“How did you catch such a big fish?” Yule had his shoulder propped against the side of the doorway. He must have gotten curious himself and come to see what was up. “When I loaned you my guys, I didn’t think you’d get this lucky, Jita.”

Odin had been so wrapped up in making sure Hunter was okay, he hadn’t even considered that. As his underboss, First was typically not far from Isa’s side, especially when something was going on. Right now, while they were in the midst of an all-out war?

First also happened to be incredibly skilled. He’d have to be in order for a person like Isa to trust keeping him close.

According to Jita, his digging into the situation had uncovered that First had been the one put in charge of having him jumped. As a highly skilled and trusted member of the Frost family, who could order around dozens of soldiers, it was unlikely that First had just stumbled into Jita's hands.

Something wasn't adding up.

"How did you catch him?" Odin had only just asked the question when a loud boom rend the air, shouts following soon after.

"What the hell was that?!" Yule called, stepping out into the main part of the warehouse.

"Someone blew up one of the cars outside!" a soldier yelled back.

Odin swore. "It was a trap!"

Even without hearing the details from Jita, it was obvious now that First had gotten caught on purpose. They must have planned on following his trail.

"Do you think it's a rescue mission?" Yule asked as he pulled out his blaster from the sheath at his thigh and set it to its highest setting.

"His numbers are low," Odin considered, "so it's possible. If he can rescue them, they'll remain loyal in any case. If he can take out as many of us in the process, bonus."

"So probably not here for you then?" Yule kept his gaze on Odin but passed the blaster off to Hunter without skipping a beat.

Before Odin could say anything, Hunter took the weapon, turned on his heel, aimed, and fired.

First's mouth gaped open but that was all he managed to do before the bullet whizzed through the air and hit its mark directly between his eyes.

Yule let out a low whistle.

Jita adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat, stepping away from the now dangling deceased body. "I was told you

were an excellent marksman, Mr. Thorn, but I do say that was an impressive shot.”

“Sorry for stealing your thunder,” Hunter said, not sounding the least bit apologetic despite his words, “but we can’t risk him making it back to Frost.”

“Agreed.”

“They’ll have the place surrounded by now.” Yule bent down and removed a hidden blaster from the side of his leg. “What’s the plan, boss?”

“Kill on sight,” Odin ordered. “And keep my Whisper safe.”

He snorted. “I think he’s got that last part covered all on his own but all right.”

There was another blast, this one not nearly as dramatic as the first, followed by the sound of boots pounding against concrete.

Blasters fired and shouts rang up, echoing throughout the building as the Snow Brumal members who were present took on the intruders.

There was a back exit, but Yule was right, they were most likely surrounded with the enemy hiding in wait for anyone to try and escape that way. Meaning there was only the front door as an option. He hesitated, wanting to come up with a safer exit strategy since Hunter was with him.

“Stop overthinking it,” Hunter said, elbowing him lightly in the side. “Act the way you usually would if I wasn’t here.”

“Not an option.”

“Fine.” He reached for one of the sheathed daggers hanging off of the weapons belt Yule was wearing and slipped one free before the other guy even noticed. A quick surface-level slash to the side of his arm happened faster than Odin could stop, and then he was holding it up to his mouth. “Drink.”

“Huntsman.” Odin was not pleased that he was making decisions like this amid all this chaos.

“I get you need to be in charge,” Hunter stated, “but we don’t have time for you to throw a tantrum. Just drink. You need to be strong enough for both of us.”

He frowned, but it was clear by Hunter’s pursed lips he wasn’t of the mind to elaborate at the moment. With a growl, Odin grabbed onto his elbow and yanked him closer, latching onto the wound to lick and suck at the blood welling there. He only got a little, enough to coat his tongue, and then he let go.

Power thrummed through him, setting his veins on fire in the most pleasing of ways and he groaned.

“Gross,” Yule said, throwing up his hands when Odin glared. “I meant the icky sex sound you just made, not the blood-drinking.” He turned to Hunter. “That was badass. I like you, Thorn.”

“Like him enough to keep him safe and no more than that,” Odin growled, banking down his jealousy as he took the lead and stepped from the room.

And directly into the fray.

Chapter 12:

Hunter was surprisingly detached as he fired the blaster at Frost soldiers, sticking close to Odin and Yule as they briskly made their way across the floor toward the front doors. He'd been a bit concerned he was going to have flashbacks or something of the like, but seeing the carnage and hearing the grunts and screams didn't trigger him in the slightest.

Maybe it was the fact he'd put a bullet in First's brain, or it could even have been because of earlier, seeing what Yule had done to those who'd attacked him under Isa's command. It'd been hard for him to think about before, but now he felt a rising anger take control, sweeping the fear aside.

They were almost to the exit when someone tossed a smoke bomb through the opening, forcing them to dash out of the way and off to the sides. Hunter and Odin sprang to the left, with Jita and Yule going right.

He hit the ground on his shoulder hard, clenching his teeth against the sharp pain even as Odin dragged him back onto his feet. The two of them took up stance back to back, firing whenever a Frost soldier got too close.

"I can't believe I allowed you to convince me this was a good idea," Odin snarled as he killed three men in a row.

"Why?" Hunter feigned a lightness he wasn't feeling. "This is fun. We should turn it into a regular thing. Date night."

"The next date we'll be having will be you thrown over my knees if you keep up with the cavalier attitude," he warned, shoving him out of the way of an oncoming bullet just before it would have connected with Hunter's arm. "Pay attention!"

"Sir, yes, sir," he stated, grinning as he aimed and fired at the person who'd almost hit him.

Odin blinked over his shoulder at him for a split second. "...You're actually enjoying this."

It'd started as a joke, but yeah, he actually was.

"I forgot how much I like to shoot," he said, emptying the rest of the clip in one swift motion. Hunter held out his palm. "Refill."

"Oh," Odin pulled something from his pocket and slapped it into his hand, "I'll definitely be filling something later. You're incredibly sexy when you're murdering people, Huntsman."

Someone made a gagging sound and they turned to see Yule had joined them at some point.

Hunter winked at him.

Yule gagged again.

Odin glared in obvious jealousy.

Hunter slid the clip into the blaster and lost himself to the moment. Not all of them were fighting with guns, some had knives and others were merely throwing fists. Whenever he saw a Snow soldier about to take a hit, he helped them out, then quickly moved on to the next.

Though it'd been a while since he'd done anything serious, it was clear all that practice with Loni at the club had paid off. He didn't feel nearly as helpless as he had that day he'd been kidnapped, felt confident he could hold his own even if he ran out of bullets. Which of course, is what eventually happened.

He tried to signal to Odin he needed more, but somehow the two of them had gotten separated by a few feet—not much, but still surprising. With a curse, he dropped to his knees just in time to avoid the swing of a blade at his throat, kicking out at the man's leg.

There was a crunch and pop and then the soldier was screaming and falling to the ground.

Hunter spun back onto his feet and stomped down on the man's windpipe, cutting his cries short. He took up the knife the man had been using and tested the weight in his hand as he glanced around.

They were winning despite having been outnumbered at the start. Isa must have gathered all of his remaining supporters to attempt this attack, but he'd underestimated Odin's people.

During his momentary distraction, a body slammed into him hard enough he hit and rebounded off the nearby wall. His skull whacked against it, a ringing filling his ears as he struggled to adjust the weapon in his hold and aim when the person shot forward a second time.

He sliced, but the Frost soldier retreated just in time, bringing up a blaster and pointing it directly at Hunter's chest.

"You're coming with me," the soldier said. "Frost will be—"

A shot rang out, cutting whatever he'd been about to say short. Blood dripped from the side of his head and then his body swayed and hit the ground, glassy eyes staring sightlessly out at nothing.

Hunter turned and shrugged when he spotted Odin with his arm still raised, giving him a frustrated look. "Whoops."

"Whoops?!" He stormed over and latched onto Hunter's arm, tugging him behind him so he could shield his body, and glared. "If I hadn't noticed and shot him—"

"He was going to try and take me alive," Hunter said. "There would have been plenty of time for me to escape."

"You're asking for it, Huntsman."

Knowing he didn't mean the kidnapping, Hunter dared to smirk suggestively.

Odin blew out a breath.

Around them, the commotion started to die down, bodies littering the floor. A few remaining Frost soldiers called to one another and retreated, but the Snow Brumal followed after them, disappearing into the night so that only a handful remained within the Storeroom.

"Looks like we're going to need a new hideout, boss." Yule stepped up to them, kicking at the leg of a dead guy.

“I sincerely apologize,” Jita appeared next, head bowed low. “It’s my fault. I checked to be sure we weren’t being followed, but clearly not well enough.”

“Call Wren and Vetle,” Odin ordered. “Tell them to meet us at the club within the hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

He turned to Yule. “Take a head count. I want to know how many we lost and how many of his we managed to kill. Isa’s numbers had already dwindled immensely. This may have worked in our favor. Also, let me know if any of the prisoners managed to escape. If they have, send out a hunting party. Kill on sight.”

“What if there are Frost survivors in the building?” Yule glanced around as if he could spot one now. “Could be useful to interrogate them. They may have a better idea where their boss has been hiding.”

“Do that. And ask them about Meg—”

“No,” Hunter shook his head. “Don’t worry about that anymore. Focus on finding Isa.”

Odin’s brow furrowed. “You’re giving up on your sister?”

“I’m not,” he corrected. “I’m prioritizing. According to First, my sister, the one that I grew up with and cared about, has been dead for a long time now. The girl who’s left may have her name and her face, but that’s where the similarities end.”

“We may be able to get her help,” he said. “I have access to top-notch doctors, and we know Isa didn’t bother trying to get her memories back. There may be a chance.”

“This is who she’s been for over a decade,” he reminded sadly. “Would you want to give up your personality for a ghost?”

Hunter missed his sister, and he didn’t want to abandon her, but bigger things were happening in the world at the

moment, and...As much as he wished otherwise, the facts were the facts, even if they were cold and hard and horrible.

Meg Thorn as he knew her no longer existed. Was there maybe a slight chance he could get her back? Sure. But right now, with Isa Frost on the run, they were too close to finally putting an end to his tyranny, something that affected the planet as a whole. Not to mention...

“What if we shifted focus and he managed to get to you?” Hunter asked. “It isn’t worth the risk. We find him and we stop him, and after if there’s an opportunity to deal with Meg? We can worry about it then.” He motioned to Yule. “If you find someone, make them tell you about Isa. Don’t even bring my sister up.”

“Will do, Thorn.” Yule bowed his head and then chuckled uncomfortably when he saw the dark look pass over Odin’s face. Without another word he bolted away, moving into the center of the warehouse to call out orders to nearby Snow soldiers to help check and ID the bodies.

“What?” Hunter asked a moment later when Odin had continued to stare at him quietly.

“The old you would have done anything to save his sister.”

“Yeah,” he exhaled and looked away, “well maybe the old Hunter Thorn is dead, too.”

Odin reached for his hand, linking their fingers until he got Hunter’s attention back. “Are you that angry with her?”

“I’m not angry at all.” He’d yet to decide whether that was a good or bad thing, but no matter which way it fell, it was how he felt. At first, he’d been shocked and hurt, of course, but then he’d woken chained to a ceiling and he’d forgotten all about his sister during Isa’s torture. And after that, when he’d finally broken down in front of Odin and allowed himself to process it all, he’d sorted through it then and let it go in the only way he’d known how.

By choosing indifference instead.

Had a part of him hoped there was a way for them to find their way back to one another? Yes. But he hadn't been holding his breath.

"I was with Isa for several hours," Hunter said. "Meg was with him for several years. First wasn't alive long enough to give us gritty details, but there's no way, in all that time, Isa left her completely unscathed. The shot to her head was what erased her memories, and it most likely changed her personality in the process because that girl who handed me off to Isa? That wasn't my sister."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I have to be." He didn't want to give up on Meg, but she'd made her choice, at least for now. "I have a family to protect. That has to come before anything else."

"Your sister—"

"Is a stranger," Hunter stated resolutely. "You're my family now."

"From zero to one hundred." They turned to find Yule suddenly standing nearby again, his tattooed hands on his hips. He eyed Hunter. "Weren't you like, trying to escape only two months ago?"

"You better be back here to tell me something important," Odin warned.

"Car is ready to take you to the club," he hitched a thumb over his shoulder, clearly trying to keep from grinning and getting his teeth knocked out.

"Report once you've finished here and if you find something." Odin took Hunter's wrist and led him quickly outside to the black hovercar that waited for them. Even though there were Snow soldiers everywhere keeping watch on the perimeter now, his gaze kept pinging around them as they went, his hold on Hunter not loosening until they were at the door and he could ease him into the vehicle.

They were mostly silent on the drive to Club Cherry, but he settled his hand over Hunter's on the seat.

Hunter didn't pull away.

Chapter 13:

“It was a desperate attempt,” Vetle snorted, glancing around at them all.

They’d reconvened at Club Cherry, the underboss, and Wren already waiting by the time Hunter and Odin had arrived. Corbi and Loni were both off following other orders, so it was just the four of them in the large meeting room, the waning sun bathing them in a golden glow.

“He was turned away by the Emperor,” Wren told them. “That’s probably why he took this risk.”

He would have left his people to rot otherwise, Odin knew. With most of his soldiers out of commission, scattered, and on the run, Isa was most likely desperate for any strings he could grasp.

“What did he ask Altz for?” Hunter was seated on Odin’s right, his expression serious. Despite their playful banter during and after the attack at the Storeroom, he’d settled back into work mode the second they’d entered the room.

“He never got far enough to actually ask for anything,” Wren said. “Since he didn’t want to risk getting spotted by one of ours, he sent a soldier to the Emperor to demand an audience, but that soldier was turned away. I had someone follow them, but they must have sent the information through their multi-slate, making them obsolete, because they ended up being hit by a car shortly after leaving the palace.”

“What about his multi-slate?” If they had that, Odin knew more than a few people who could try and trace all outgoing and incoming communications, but Wren shook his head.

“Another reason why I’m certain it was a hit. They killed the man on impact, but they backed up afterward to make sure they also destroyed the device. There was nothing but bits and pieces left. Nothing useful.”

“Killing his own,” Vetle let out a low, disgusted whistle. “What an asshole.”

“Most of the Frost Brumal stood with him out of fear,” Odin reminded. “When he was the most powerful Shout on the planet, it made sense for them to. Now that word has spread I almost killed him people are starting to change their tune.”

“Not to mention the fact you have a Whisper.” Wren nodded at Hunter. “Even though we’re all a dying breed, that still means something in the streets. Isa Frost doesn’t stand a chance against you so long as you have Hunter by your side.”

“Which I will,” Odin drawled, a thread of warning in his words, “always.”

“It wasn’t the Whisper that allowed you to beat Isa,” Hunter pointed out.

“How are you holding up, boss?” Vetle asked after a moment when they were all silent.

“Fine,” he clipped. Talking about his feelings wasn’t going to happen. Not here, with them.

“Ander Snow would be happy to finally have a place inked into your body.”

“Don’t make this weird.”

“How do you feel?” Wren asked, smiling wryly when that earned him a scowl. “I mean physically. Do you feel more powerful?”

He considered the question. At the time, the whole thing had been a blur. He’d gone to the hospital and given the orders, had his father burned and the tattoo artist there to begin as soon as they were able. It’d taken less than two hours for it all to take place, and his focus then had been entirely on his Huntsman and how he was going to find him even after he’d boosted.

“I wasn’t sure I’d be able to follow the link,” he said, tentatively at first. “There’s this invisible string that connects a mated pair, and before I took his power I was only able to slightly tap against it. Afterward, there was a burst and a

heatwave where I felt like my insides were boiling alive. But as soon as those sensations subsided, there was only this warm thrum.”

“That’s how you located me?” Hunter frowned.

Odin nodded.

“I felt it, too,” he admitted. “I’d read somewhere that if the Shout is powerful enough, their Whisper might be able to connect to their power source if they were in danger. That’s how I gave myself away. Frost was freezing me from the inside out and I reacted instinctually to save my life.”

“Since Snow was already on the way,” Wren said, “that must have been after he’d inked his father’s ashes.”

“Why didn’t you tap into me during the fight at the Storeroom?” Odin asked him. He’d paid close mind to Hunter during, impressed with his moves and his dexterity, but he didn’t think the man had used any heat or fire in his attacks.

“I was prepared to, but I didn’t need to,” he shrugged. “I wasn’t in any real danger.”

Vetle snorted and then scratched at the side of his nose, pretending it’d been nothing.

Later, the two of them would have to sit down and discuss all of the things Hunter had learned while he’d been on the run. Apparently, there was a lot for Odin to learn, and he didn’t like the idea of not being prepared, especially when it could make all the difference during an emergency like the one they’d just experienced when the Huntsman had been kidnapped.

If he’d known there was a chance Hunter could tap into him, he would have chosen to go to the hospital and ash his father sooner.

Hunter had called Odin his family and was willing to put his feelings for Meg aside until they’d secured their places as the head of the Brumal and Isa was no longer a threat. Of course Odin should be more than willing to do the same, even when it came down to losing his father.

Truthfully, he'd never intended to leave Ander Snow alive forever anyway. He'd kept him with the purpose of one day using him against Isa, and technically, he'd done that.

As far as sacrifices went, the Huntsman had one-upped him. Odin gave himself a moment to let that settle and see if it eased some of his fury over the whole ordeal, but it didn't.

He hadn't forgotten the punishment he'd promised his disobedient mate, and he was more than ready to follow through as soon as they were done here.

Which meant getting them all back on track so he could get his Huntsman back into bed.

"Isa is on the run with nowhere to go," he said, tapping his fingers against the table. "We no longer need to worry about keeping Altz happy. You can put an end to this farce and stop fucking him if you'd like."

Wren let out a low growl. "Thank Light. He's such a whiny little moron, did you know that?"

"Of course," he chuckled. "Why do you think I was glad it was you he wanted and not me?"

"That better not be the only reason," Hunter mumbled.

Odin cocked his head, inspecting him, a bit taken aback by the reaction. A warmth spread through him, at first nothing more than a pleasant, pleased feeling, before it reached his groin and morphed into something entirely different.

Interesting that the Huntsman being possessive was such a damn turn-on.

He wondered if that was how Hunter felt whenever he showed his possessiveness toward him.

"Jealousy, Little Whisper?" His hand moved under the table, settling over Hunter's knee. "That's a new look on you."

Wren made a choking sound at the nickname and Vetle appeared as though he wished he could be anywhere else. Their reactions had Hunter's cheeks turning pink, and he glared as though Odin had just cussed him out.

“If you’re certain we have no more need of him, I’ll proceed with my own agenda,” Wren said, thankfully not asking any questions about the name.

“Are we sure it’s a good idea to cut him loose?” Vetle glanced between them. “What if the Emperor gets angry and decides to reach out to Isa after all?”

“It’s too late even if he wants to,” Odin decided. “The royal army is a joke, their numbers are nothing compared to ours, so even if he lent them out, it wouldn’t make much of a difference other than to prolong bloodshed in the streets. And now that we’ve taken out most of his remaining men...”

“He’s got nothing to fall back on,” Hunter said. “Which means he has nothing left to lose.”

“He’ll attack soon,” Wren agreed.

“At this point, he’ll try to take me again,” the Huntsman sounded so certain, cluing Odin to the fact that he must have been pondering this for a while now on his own.

He didn’t like the idea of Hunter being scared but not sharing.

“If he can’t,” Hunter continued, “he’ll kill me to ensure Snow can’t use me to boost. We could always use me as bait —”

“Absolutely not.” A wave of heat rushed off of Odin’s body, turning up the temperature of the room a couple of degrees at just the thought of it. “We’ll find another way. There’s no need to put you in danger.”

“It could be the fastest way,” he argued. “We need to get him while he’s still injured. It’s been weeks already and Shouts heal fast. We’re running out of time and you know it. I can—”

“Don’t you trust me?” Odin cut him off, only to have Hunter heave a sigh of exasperation.

“Of course I do,” he said, “Why else would I suggest something so risky? I’m only willing to do it because I know

there's no way you would ever allow something bad to happen to me again."

"He does sort of have a valid—" Vetle dropped his gaze to the table. "Never mind."

"How much blood do you think you need to drink to keep the upper hand?" Wren asked then. "You were able to best Isa so easily because you caught him off guard, but he has his mother's power, and she wasn't much weaker than your father in that department."

"She couldn't stand against him." That was why she'd had to resort to dirty tricks. Odin licked his lips and considered things. "I'm certain I'm more powerful than he is already. The real question is by how much. You know how fights go. Strength and power are only parts of the equation."

"Before I was kidnapped," Hunter informed the others, "he was drinking daily. We need to start getting back into that routine. The boost he gets will last longer that way."

"As opposed to?" Wren cocked a brow, the glint in his eyes showing he was just messing around. "Draining you dry?"

Hunter hummed. "Taking more at once would of course lead to stronger effects."

"Enough." Odin didn't like the turn this conversation was having. "Taking too much from you would make you weak and vulnerable."

"You already won't let me play bait," Hunter stubbornly insisted. "This could be an alternative. If you drink as much as I can take for a couple of days—"

"I said enough."

"Stop interrupting me."

"Stop suggesting nonsense," he countered.

"I think Snow is right," Wren said after the two of them had wasted almost a full minute glaring at one another. "Not only did Frost figure out that you're a Whisper when he took you, but he's also now aware that you're Odin's one and

only weakness. You need to stay in top form to protect yourself. The next attack can come at any given moment, and you've already realized you're more than likely his target."

"Do what you have to where the Emperor is concerned," Odin brought them back around, sending his friend an appreciative nod for siding with him on this. "Just make sure you're available if need be."

"Of course." Wren stood and made a big show of bowing with an overly dramatic flourish. "Long live the king."

"Where are you going?" Vetle asked as he headed toward the door.

"To do my own thing." He quirked a brow. "Why, was there something else?"

"Are you really that eager to get back to the Emperor and call things off?"

"No," his smile turned dark, "I'm that eager to get back to the Emperor and kill him."

"What?" Hunter blinked.

"We don't need him." Wren shrugged. "Don't worry about it. It won't affect you or your Shout, Thorn. Not really, anyway."

"Wren." Odin did not like the sound of that.

"Oh come on, everything has a ripple effect, that's all I'm talking about. I stand by what I said to you earlier when we came to this agreement. I won't tread on your crown, Snow, so don't try and stop me from snatching mine."

He had no clue what that meant, but before he could ask anything else, Wren waved at them and exited, slamming the door shut behind him.

"He's going to murder the Emperor?" Vetle asked as soon as they were alone. "And...that's okay?"

Odin sighed. "Altz hasn't been more than a figurehead since he took the throne. Taking him out of the picture shouldn't be too much strife for the Brumal. If anything, the

chaos it will plunge the government into might benefit us. There's no other surviving member of the Imperial family, so I imagine there will be many arguments over who gets to take the throne."

Hunter considered those words and then tipped his head. "Why did it sound like Wren thinks he has a chance at it himself?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe he does."

"You're not curious?" Vetle hummed. "If he becomes the next Emperor, wouldn't that put him above you?"

Odin laughed. "Setting aside the fact you need to have some sort of previous claim to the title in order to be named Emperor, which as of now I'm unaware Wren has, how would him becoming the ruler of the planet put him above me? I'm about to be the Head Dominus of the Brumal. Even if he's the Emperor of Sanctum, that puts us on an even playing field, nothing more and nothing less."

The government only had so much power, and putting a Dominus on the throne could only benefit the Brumal as a whole. Besides, he trusted Wren. Maybe that was foolish, but he'd wasted enough time mistrusting the wrong people and was still picking up the pieces from that. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"Corbi keeps reporting that Frost members defect to us every day," he added. "By the time this is over, we'll have doubled our numbers, then even if Wren did have ill intentions, he wouldn't be able to take us on."

Even combining the Hail Brumal and the royal army wouldn't be enough for that.

"Still," Vetle insisted, "he knows too many of our secrets. You aren't concerned even a little?"

"Right now my only concern is finding Isa and killing him once and for all. After that, we'll deal with things as they come." It'd been ten years in the making, and he was so close to victory Odin could practically taste it. So long as Isa was alive, there was always the chance he'd find a crafty way to

retaliate and somehow turn the tables back around. That couldn't happen, which meant they needed to stay focused on the thing that truly mattered in the here and now.

“Check in with Yule,” he ordered. “By now he should know if any of the Frost who attacked survived, and if they're useful.”

“You think we might be able to find clues to Isa's whereabouts?”

“He'll make a move soon,” Hunter jumped in, rehashing what he'd said earlier in the conversation. “Even if Yule doesn't find anything, we won't have to wait long.”

“How can you be so sure?” Vetle asked.

“Because Frost is impatient and prideful. He'll be pissed off that his attack on the Storeroom didn't work in his favor and that anger will make him act rashly. If we sit back and wait, he'll come to us.”

“We just have to be prepared for *how* he'll be coming,” Odin said. “Merely knowing he will be isn't enough.”

Hunter nodded in agreement.

“I'll make sure security around the club remains tight,” Vetle reassured, getting up from his seat. “Yule will be taking any surviving Frost members to the secondary location. I'll meet up with him there and inform you if we're able to uncover anything. Corbi is still combing the city with the Small Army, and Loni has been checking our weapons supply to ensure none of our people run out while they're making the rounds on the streets. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but it finally seems like we're going to succeed in taking back everything that was rightfully yours in the first place.”

“Kind of seems like it's been too easy,” Hunter said.

“Before I probably would have thought the same,” Vetle told him. “But now? No one could have guessed you'd turn out to be a Whisper. Since you were already boosting the boss with your blood on a daily bases he started out more powerful than he'd been in years. Then add in the fact he has a

brand new Shout tattoo...If only Isa had kidnapped you a month ago, he might have been successful, but now?"

"The second we mated it was too late for him," Odin stated. "My father also happened to be one of the most powerful Shouts in all of history. And now his power is in my bloodstream. If it's a one-on-one fair fight, Isa won't be able to beat me."

"After what happened when you found me, it's safe to assume that Isa is also aware of this fact," Hunter pointed out.

"Which is why we're trying to figure out what his next move will be before he can blindside us."

"On it." Vetle took that as his signal to go, bowing at them both before doing just that.

Odin followed him toward the door, waiting until he'd exited before he typed against the keypad at the side of it. The lock code activated quickly, the door clicking shut, sealing him and his Huntsman in with no way in or out unless Odin chose to key in the exit code only he knew.

When he turned back, Hunter was standing at the side of the table, clearly thinking they were about to leave as well.

He tilted his head suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

"Making good on my promise," he said, and though it was clear Hunter wasn't following, he still retreated a full step when Odin took one toward him. He grinned wolfishly, a thrill racing down his spine. "Chasing you is never going to get old, Huntsman."

Hunter threw up a hand to stave him off and he paused, opting to play along for a minute. "Wait. I don't know what you're talking about. What promise?"

"I told you it was coming, remember?" Odin clucked his tongue chidingly. "Don't tell me you forgot. How uncharacteristically careless of you. I promised you a punishment, Little Whisper, and I always make good on my word."

Hunter made to retreat again, but this time Odin didn't allow him the false sense of security.

Before the Huntsman knew what was about to hit him, Odin pounced.

Chapter 14:

He grabbed onto the Huntsman and spun him, slamming his front down over the meeting table. One hand held him pinned by the neck, the other making quick work of his pants, dropping them down to Hunter's knees. As soon as he had him bared, he groaned, Odin's cock already hard and aching.

"Snow...", there was a note of apprehension in his tone that gave Odin momentary pause, but not for long.

"You need this," he said, undoing his fly to release himself. "We both do."

Whatever lingering subconscious fears Hunter still carried from his time with Isa, Odin was determined to sear them away. They both always preferred when he played the villain anyway, and a quick glance proved he was right in his assessment when he saw how rigid Hunter's dick had gotten.

His hole fluttered in preparation and Odin emitted another needy sound, releasing Hunter's neck so that he could reach down and spread his cheeks to get a better look.

"Do it," he said when Hunter pressed his palms to the surface of the table and made as though he was going to right himself, "and I'll make this punishment five times worse for you. I've been going easy on you, Little Whisper, but don't think I didn't notice how nimbly you moved back at the Storeroom."

"Did I?"

He hummed in the affirmative. "Watching you fight was a bigger turn-on than I could imagine. It's a wonder I managed to keep myself in control until we finally got the others to leave the room. The whole time Wren was talking all I could think of was doing this to you."

Odin grabbed a handful of Hunter's ass and squeezed, then released him and delivered an open-palm slap that echoed throughout the large meeting space. His handprint appeared, a

bright apple color, but dissipated within seconds, causing him to repeat the process with a little more force.

Hunter cried out, shifting forward and digging his hips into the edge of the table as he attempted to get away from the continued spansks, but Odin wouldn't let up, having already decided on this form of punishment days ago.

"You're lucky I'm not making good on my other promise," he growled when Hunter hissed at a particularly hard smack. "Pretty sure I told you if you tried to run again I'd lock you in our room and chain you to the bed. After we're done here, I'm going to carry you up there and fuck you into the mattress so hard chaining you won't be necessary, at least not for the next few hours."

Hunter made a whining sound, and despite the threat, his legs shifted as he attempted to widen his thighs. His pants around his knees prevented him from doing much, just as Odin had intended.

"You're going to be nice and tight for me, baby," he informed him, switching his attention to his other ass cheek. The right one was now an angry shade of red that had a pleased rumble coming from him. "I'm going to practically spear through you and you're going to scream loud enough everyone walking by in the hall is going to hear and know exactly what's being done to you in here."

"Odin." Hunter wasn't a fan of exhibitionism.

But that was fine. Neither was he when it came to the Huntsman.

"The door is locked, "he reminded him. "No one can get in no matter what they hear."

"Take me upstairs," he pleaded, only to be spanked again on his already bruised right cheek.

"You don't get to make demands," Odin said, ignoring the glisten of tears that now streaked down the Huntsman's face. "Submit."

"I have!"

“Then you should know what you did was wrong and you need to be disciplined.” It may be pushing things a bit too far, but Odin tried it out anyway, paying close attention to see how Hunter would react to the words. Before when things had been rough between them they hadn’t been playing.

Things were better between them now, but that didn’t change the fact he liked dominating the other man in the bedroom, and if the way Hunter’s dick was leaking from where it was caught against the edge of the table was any indicator, he wasn’t alone in that.

“We’re more compatible than we ever realized.” It was tempting to reward his Huntsman for that, but Odin held himself back. Now wasn’t the time to go easy. He’d been terrified when he’d gotten back to the club and found out Hunter was gone—livid, but also absolutely terrified. That feeling had yet to entirely fade, a sliver still lingering in his gut, stabbing at him and making him constantly uneasy.

He wouldn’t be able to rid himself of it until he was staring down at Frost’s corpse, but burying himself into Hunter’s warm heat, getting drunk on his Huntsman’s moans and the feel of his flushed skin against his own...It’d help.

Still, he smoothed his hands over his ass, easing some of the sting with his power.

Hunter shifted again, dropping his forehead to the table. He was panting and covered in a fine sheen of sweat.

Odin wanted to strip off his shirt so he could see him naked, but there was something about the disheveled look that also called to his cock. He slipped a hand between Hunter’s thighs to fondle his balls, starting with gentle caresses that turned to harder groping. He played with him, tugging and massaging, listening to the way Hunter’s gasps heightened.

“Snow,” he choked on the word, seemingly struggling, “please.”

He pulled him off the table and shoved him down to the ground on his knees, fingers tangling in Hunter’s hair and tugging until he was staring up at him.

“Remember the Room with a View, Huntsman?” Odin had brought him there that night to humiliate him, forcing him to watch as another man blew him. The job had been so bad, he’d gotten someone else brought in after, but she’d known what she was doing and it must have shown because not too far into her work Odin had noticed the lust-filled haze in Hunter’s eyes.

“You threatened to choke me,” Hunter said, noticeably gulping.

“With my cock,” he grinned, glad he wasn’t the only one who’d left that night with an impression.

“The one meant for me,” Hunter added.

“Trying to get on my good side now so I’ll go easy on you, Little Whisper?” He clicked his tongue. “I don’t think so.”

“Pick a nickname and stick with it.” It wasn’t the first time he was making that particular demand, but it went unheeded all the same.

Odin liked what it did to him, how it threw Hunter off his game, even if for only a split second, as if his brain automatically scrambled to find a pattern. A method to Odin’s madness. Truthfully, there wasn’t one. He called him in the heat of the moment, just whatever felt right and whatever slipped past his lips.

His cock hung heavy, jutting up between them, and Odin shifted forward, pulling on Hunter’s scalp at the same time so his face hovered closer to his engorged member. He stroked himself, gathering a sticky drop of precome and slicking it down the long length of his cock, smirking when Hunter’s gaze homed in on the motion and he gulped a second time.

“Take a deep breath,” he ordered, then almost before Hunter could comply, forced his mouth down onto his swollen cockhead. He pressed it against his lips and tugged his hair again, causing Hunter to gasp. The second he did, Odin shoved

himself in, gliding against the Huntsman's tongue as he struggled to ease the way for him.

Still, he glared even as more and more of that cock entered his mouth and he stretched his lips around Odin's girth.

When he bumped the back of his throat and Hunter gagged, Odin retreated, pulling out slowly, moaning when that tongue skated across the underside of his cock. Then he drove himself back in, leveraging his hold on Hunter to keep him steady as he rocked his hips.

It wasn't long before Hunter was sputtering around him, tears and saliva dripping down his face.

"Suck," Odin growled, eyes fluttering shut when Hunter immediately started doing so, hollowing his cheeks.

Now and again his teeth lightly grazed against Odin's highly sensitive skin, and he used his tongue on him skillfully, lapping and stroking, chasing after him every time Odin withdrew. He'd thought for sure he was going to put up more of a fight for this, thrilled that he hadn't, and by the notion it meant Hunter had most likely been just as greedy to blow him as he'd been to experience it.

He was so caught up in it, he almost forgot about his other plans, almost buried himself deep, and held Hunter over him.

Almost.

Odin pulled Hunter off him suddenly and lifted him, turning to set him back on the table, this time on his beaten ass.

Hunter yelped and tried to stand, but Odin shoved him back down and gave him a warning look. For a second, the Huntsman remained taught, as if he was going to try and make a break for it the moment Odin removed the palm keeping him pinned, but then the tension eased and he made himself go lax.

Odin grinned at him and tweaked one of his nipples for good measure, laughing when that had Hunter's hips jerking and his dick twitching.

With his pants still caught, there was no way for Odin to get between his legs and he lifted them, bending Hunter on the table to expose his bright red ass to his gaze once more.

“Hold yourself up for me,” Odin demanded, doing it himself while Hunter hesitated. “There’s no room for your pride here, Huntsman. Do you want to get fucked or not?”

Hunter moved to grip just beneath the crease of his knees, pulling toward himself as if in silent offering. The switch from mild resistance to full-on obedience worked for them both. His face was bright red to match his ass now, and he was still sucking in deep breaths, recovering from having his oxygen practically cut off by Odin’s cock. He looked messed up and wanton, presenting his hole to him despite the handprints that still painted his flesh.

“Huntsman, Little Whisper, baby,” he taunted, stroking himself in the process. The sound of him slicking his precome and the remaining strings of Hunter’s saliva down his shaft easily alerted the other man to what he was up to. “I’ll call you whatever I want. Now, who’s your Shout, *baby*?”

Hunter pressed his lips into a stubborn line.

He pushed on his under thigh so Hunter’s ass was lifted even more and then gave him another sharp whack that had him howling. “Let’s try that again.”

“You are,” Hunter caved, voice husky even as the tears returned at the corner of his eyes and he continued to glower up at him. “You’re my Shout.”

“Who gets to fuck you?”

“You do.”

“Who else?”

“No one else.”

Odin searched his face, trying to see if bringing that up made Hunter uncomfortable. If he was still having lingering trauma from what Isa did to him, Odin wanted to know and prevent triggering him in the future.

“I’m only thinking about you,” Hunter said softly, as if able to read his mind. He adjusted his grip under his knees, reminding Odin that he’d been stuck in that position for a few minutes already. “Your cock is the only one I want, Snow.”

“That’s good,” he stepped forward and ran the tip of himself up and down Hunter’s crease, bumping against the bottom of his balls before trailing it lower to tap against his hole, “Because it’s the only one you’re going to get from here on out. You’re mine, Huntsman. My Little Whisper. You’ll never run from me.”

“Who said anything about running?” Hunter challenged, obviously impatient. “As I recall, there *was* talk about ensuring I wouldn’t be able to after you—”

Odin thrust his cock past that tight ring of muscle and plowed into his depths as far as he could go with little to no warning. The fact that he also hadn’t prepped the other man wasn’t lost on him, and Hunter’s mouth popped open in a silent scream.

He threw his head back against the table, body quaking as Odin stilled inside of him, waiting for him to adjust to the sudden intrusion.

“Bastard,” he snarled a moment later once he was able to catch his breath.

“I played with you enough this morning to ensure it wouldn’t hurt too badly,” Odin said.

“How long have you had this planned for?”

“Ever since I watched that security footage and saw you walk out.” Even if Hunter had taken the time to try and convey he’d be back, Odin’s gut reaction had been to find him and rut him on the nearest hard surface.

In their current position with Hunter’s legs practically closed thanks to the band of his pants around his knees, it was a tight fit, and Odin felt all of those inner muscles clenching around him. The second he felt Hunter begin to ease, he pulled out and drove forward again. His movements were aggressive, causing him to come into contact with Hunter’s battered ass

with each inward plunge, causing the other man to hiss at the combined sting and burst of pleasure as Odin's cock stroked against his prostate.

He took him fast and hard, leaning in to wrap his arms around Hunter's thighs and drag him closer so he practically hung off the edge of the table. The legs shook beneath them, clattering against the stone floor loud enough there was no way it went unheard by those passing by in the hall. Since this room was located on the second level of the club, that meant anyone who did overhear would be a Brumal member.

Odin growled at that thought, sliding his hands down so he could grab onto Hunter's hips instead, settling his legs over his right shoulder he got a better angle.

Part of him recognized how insane all of this was. How he'd gone from hating the man to wanting to taste and touch and own every part of him. But Odin didn't care. So long as Hunter Thorn was his, he didn't give a shit what that said about him or what anyone else thought either. So what if they'd once been enemies? So what if Hunter had shot him that day in the forest?

What mattered, the only thing that did, was that he'd finally gotten to test out that fantasy he'd had as a teen. He'd not only gotten to experience Hunter's body, but if he was to be believed, he now also had his love.

And damn it all to hell, Odin did believe him. That wasn't a word someone like his Huntsman would ever throw around lightly.

The smell of blood in the air caught his attention and his hips slowed but didn't still, eyes snapping up to Hunter's face.

He'd bitten his bottom lip again, harder this time, so that the well of blood there was larger. A single fat crimson drop threatened to spill down Hunter's chin at any moment.

Odin reacted without giving himself time to think, pulling out and stripping Hunter's pants all the way finally. He

dropped them to the floor and then spread his legs wide, moving between them.

Hunter didn't need much prompting when Odin grabbed him by the neck and pulled him up, his mouth already opening for him, tongue licking across Odin's lips.

That first hit of Whisper blood had Odin moaning, heatwaves traveling through his body, sparking his need to consume the man before him. He wrapped an arm around Hunter's waist and hauled him up, settling his body down over the length of the table without breaking the kiss.

He rolled his hips a few times, causing their cocks to rub together and Hunter to cry out and claw at his back. With a snarl, he pulled back and rolled Hunter onto his stomach, climbing onto the table and draping himself over him with his thighs caught between his knees. Odin peppered his spine with open-mouth kisses, fingers delving between his clenched cheeks to find and prod at his entrance just before he returned his cock to that place.

They both gasped as he slid in, his thrust slow at first due to the even tighter squeeze their new position provided. Once he'd sunk to his balls he sucked in another breath, adjusting himself with his forearms at either side of Hunter's head.

"You said you could tap into my power," he recalled their earlier discussion with the others just then. "Try for me, baby."

Hunter turned his head, pressing his cheek against the table, and frowned at him. "I could end up lighting us both on fire."

He chuckled. "I've got you. If I feel like it's too much I'll pull you back."

"Can you do that?" he didn't sound convinced.

Odin wasn't entirely certain, but he had faith in their connection. "If I concentrate, I can feel you even now. The invisible string linking us together. It's like this poking

sensation at the center of my chest. We'd never hurt each other."

"My ass says otherwise," he grumbled.

Odin buried himself deep and ground against him, causing him to cry out.

"All right," Hunter said. "I'll try. Where?"

He snorted. "Where do you think?"

Hunter blinked at him. "You really want to risk your dick?"

"You sound so concerned."

"Yeah," he admitted, "I'm pretty attached to it and I like it where it is."

He thrust in with the same level of force as before. "So do I."

"You know what I mean."

"It feels good when I do it for you," Odin reminded. "I want to see how it feels when you do it for me."

He was constantly pushing heat into Hunter when he was close to climax, and it seemed to give him that little extra something he needed to make him scream. It felt good for Odin too, but since it was his power, there were certain aspects of it he couldn't experience. The heat source he provided was internal, not external.

"Come on, baby," he coaxed, nipping at his shoulder blade, "squeeze my cock and set me on fire."

Hunter was silent beneath him, and just when he was about to give the order again, Odin felt the first tell-tale signs of heat down there. He didn't seem able to focus it, so his entire body began to warm, everywhere their skin pressed heating.

The velvety walls encasing his cock had already been hot, but now it was like he was dipping into a heated blanket. It wasn't painful at all, the burst of power calling to his own, urging him to respond in like.

Odin flipped them so that he was now lying on his back with Hunter on top of him. He was careful not to let his cock slip free in the process, settling Hunter's back over his front and using his knees to force his legs apart. He lifted his hips and drove himself in, simultaneously reaching down to wrap his hand around Hunter's neglected dick.

He began working him in time with his thrusts, chasing that burn, the air crackling around them as they both continued to pulse with power. It caused their skin to prickle and if they weren't quick, Odin actually did fear there was a chance Hunter had been right and they'd end up starting a fire in the room.

Hunter reached his orgasm first, coming in Odin's hand as he screamed and his body jerked in his hold. His ass clenched around his cock as he continued to ram into him, and it was enough to have him find his release less than a minute later.

Odin held Hunter tightly to himself as he came, plugging him up as he filled him, white lights bursting in front of his eyes with the ferocity of it.

As the wave of intense pleasure swept over him, he vaguely wondered how he'd gone his whole life before this. Before Hunter. How had he believed for even one second that he was going to be able to capture the other man and not end up like this? Because even though he was still shaking from the orgasm, his cock was already starting to harden again when he thought about how Hunter belonged to him.

By the time he came down and could focus, the other man had climbed off him and rolled onto his side. Hunter glanced down as soon as he realized Odin was looking at him, catching sight of his cock.

"I was too embarrassed by the idea of you carrying me upstairs and possibly being seen," Hunter told him with a breathless sigh, "but now I'm too exhausted to even consider walking on my own, so if you want to put that back inside of me, you're going to have to make good on your earlier promise and bring me to the bedroom."

“What?” Odin grinned. “Not a fan of doing it here again? I can sit in one of the fancy chairs and you can crawl into my lap and ride me.”

“As tempting as that sounds,” he tapped the surface they were lying on, “we already singed the table. Let’s not risk burning the place down.”

Odin pulled back to check, laughing when he saw that Hunter was right.

The spot just beneath him was slightly blackened.

“The bedroom it is.”

Hunter sat up and winced, but paused when Odin touched his arm before he could climb down.

“I love you, Huntsman.” He’d been too caught up in elation when Hunter had said those words to him, and by the time he’d realized he hadn’t said it back, it’d been too late. Odin had been waiting for the right moment, but that orgasm had been world-shattering and he hadn’t managed to get it out then either.

Still, he didn’t want to make Hunter wait any longer to hear it.

Smiling, he leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to Odin’s lips. “You fucking better after all that. My ass is going to hurt all day.”

Odin snorted. “Way to ruin the moment.”

“Romance was never our thing.”

“No,” he agreed. “Hurry and put your pants on so we can go upstairs and get back to—”

“Screwing?” Hunter interrupted.

“I was going to say ‘our thing,’” he shook his head. “But yeah.”

It took him a while to get off and he needed help from the table to balance once he was back on his feet, but just before Hunter went to pick up his discarded pants he paused

and glanced back at Odin with a vulnerable look on his flushed face.

“What is it, Little Whisper?” For a moment, Odin feared he’d given Hunter a bad flashback after all and was all set to apologize and comfort him, but then the Huntsman spoke and proved those fears wrong.

“I love you, too, Snow.” He licked his lips. “Odin. I love you, too.”

He was never going to get sick of hearing that, and he beamed before he could help it. His Huntsman was still a bit timid when it came to this sort of stuff—romance and confessions—so he quickly followed up his reaction with a comment to ease Hunter before he could close up on him again.

“I bet that still pisses you off,” he teased, and as he’d hoped, Hunter’s reaction didn’t disappoint.

He rolled his eyes and heaved a breath. “It really fucking does.”

“Tough, Huntsman.” Odin moved quickly, capturing him in his arms and pulling him forward to stand between his legs. “You’re mine now, and I’m never letting you go.”

Even if he had to burn everything to the ground to keep him.

Chapter 15:

Hunter grumbled and dragged the pillow over his head to block out the pounding on their bedroom door. Whatever it was it could wait. He was achy all over, his ass still hurt, and now he was covered in love bites to boot. It'd only been an hour since Odin had finally allowed him to stop fucking and try and get some sleep, and now someone dared interrupt that?

“Make them shut up,” he hissed when the noise continued, growling when he felt Odin lean over and plant a kiss on his shoulder. He shook him off, making another sound of annoyance when he heard the Shout chuckle in response and buried deeper beneath the heavy set of blankets.

He listened as Odin made his way to the door and answered it, but was already starting to slip back into unconsciousness and didn't catch anything that was said. He must have fallen back asleep because the next thing he knew he was being shaken awake again.

“There's a fire downstairs,” Odin told him, already in the process of getting dressed. “It may have been started by Frost soldiers. Stay here while I go put it out and deal with them.”

“You're joking?” They certainly had been earlier when they'd talked about accidentally starting one between them. Hunter sat up and rubbed at his eyes, not all that concerned since fire wasn't that big of a threat in the face of someone like the Snow Dominus. “Is it bad?”

“Not sure.” He brushed his lips against Hunter's forehead in a comically domestic move that would have made Hunter cringe if he'd been more awake. “Wait here.”

“Trust me,” he waved him off and plopped back down, “I have no interest in anything going on anywhere other than right here.”

“The door is locked and I'll come get you if—”

“I got it.” It's not like that was new news. The only difference now was Hunter could unlock it if he so wished,

which he didn't. "Seriously. You made me come at least seven times. I barely have enough energy for this conversation, let alone to bother being curious over a fire you can put out with a blink of your eyes."

"It's a little more complex than that," Odin drawled, and the fact he was willing to play into the banter was further proof whatever the situation downstairs was, it wasn't all that pressing, "but sure."

"Go." He waved him away again.

"You'll pay for that later," Odin promised, and after what he'd just been through, that was enough to pierce its way through Hunter's fuzzy brain.

He shot back into a seated position, wincing when that caused his ass to smart, but Snow was already shutting the door behind him. He hadn't been serious though...right? With a groan, he brushed wayward strands of hair off his face.

The sex was amazing but the Shout was incorrigible. There was no way Hunter could survive another night like the one they'd just had. He needed at least eight hours of sleep, some healing ointment, and a drink before he could even entertain the idea.

As if to further prove that, his entire body ached when he forced himself onto his feet to go use the bathroom. In the mirror he tried checking out the damage, scowling when he lost count of the hickeys after eleven. They peppered all over too, his thighs and his arms and across his ribs. There was even one on his left ass cheek. The marks from the spanking had started to fade, fortunately, but it still stung when he touched it.

The most annoying part was Hunter wished he could be mad about it all, and yet...He'd enjoyed every single slap and bite. Even so, they were going to have to discuss his role here, at the club, and in the Brumal as a whole.

Odin had given him two options in the beginning, and though he hadn't been entirely serious about them, they still applied. Either Hunter could be his mate or his sex slave, and

he'd chosen the first. That meant, while it was great and all, fucking wasn't the only thing Hunter wanted to be good for.

The rest of his life couldn't be spent in Snow's bed, no matter how much they both enjoyed him being there.

He used the restroom, washed his hands, and took another second to look himself over again. He'd put on weight and muscle and appeared five times more healthy than he had when he'd first been brought here against his will. There was a hint of stubble on his face and he considered taking the time to shave, but there was no telling how long it would take Odin to deal with the fire, and though he'd promised he'd let Hunter rest, there was also no telling what type of mood he'd be in when he got back.

There was a fifty-fifty chance Odin would toss him onto the bed and slip back inside before Hunter could even remind him he'd planned on sleeping.

He'd just stepped out of the bathroom when another knock came on the door, and with a frown, he made his way over snatching up a pair of black sweatpants from the floor as he went. Whoever it was, he wouldn't be greeting them naked, that was for sure.

Corbi's face appeared on the touch screen when he clicked the button causing his frown to deepen.

"Thorn," her voice came through the speaker but she kept her eyes on the door in front of her, "I've been sent to retrieve you."

"What?" He tried to remember what Odin had said to him earlier before leaving, but it was vague since he'd been so damn tired. One part stood out, however. "I was told to stay here."

"Things changed," she said, glancing down the hallway on her left, appearing a bit nervous.

It was rare to see her worried about much of anything, and Hunter felt his shoulders tensing as worry began to finally set in.

"What happened?" he asked.

“The fire was worse than anticipated,” she explained. “And it was a distraction. We’re under attack right now. I need to get you out of the building and to somewhere safe.”

There was nowhere safer than Club Cherry, that was why he was being kept there.

His hesitancy must have been obvious for she stopped waiting and opened the door herself, keying in the code that only Odin was meant to know.

If Snow had given it to her, that had to mean she was telling the truth.

Corbi didn’t have reason to lie. She was Odin’s most loyal follower.

The door swished open and the moment she spotted him she quickly averted her gaze.

“Let me grab a shirt.” And shoes. Hunter pulled on the first thing he could find and made his way back to her. “Where is he?” It must be really bad for Odin not to come to get him himself. “Shouldn’t we—”

“He’ll be safer without you around to distract him,” Corbi cut him off.

“I’m not that useless.” He stepped out of the room and entered the hallway, needing to pick up the pace when she immediately turned on her heel and headed toward the back stairwell on the opposite side of the floor.

“How many of Frost’s people are in the building?” he asked, trying to listen for any sounds of fighting but hearing nothing. Considering they were on the top level and the main area of the club open to the public was on the bottom, that wasn’t too surprising.

“I can’t be certain,” Corbi replied as she typed in the code to access the stairwell door and led him inside. “There were at least a few dozen when I left. There’s a good chance they’re just stirring the pot and checking for weaknesses in our defenses. We’ll get them under control before any real damage is done, but the guests are scattering and screaming and causing a fuss.”

“Well,” he shrugged, “they came here to screw and drink, not get caught in the middle of a Brumal battle. Can’t blame them.”

It did however make sense that Frost would send them to test the waters. He’d most likely sent in one undercover agent to start the first fire, distracting the employees so others could slip inside and begin the attack. The men on the street keeping watch wouldn’t be able to identify a random soldier, even with Frost’s numbers as low as they were.

Still, after all of Odin’s talk, Hunter would have assumed Club Cherry to be a fortress. If he’d been instructed to leave, something must have gone wrong. Knowing how crafty Isa could be, that wasn’t too surprising when he stopped to really consider it.

“Do you think he sent everyone he’s got?” Hunter pursed his lips as they stormed down the stairs to the back exit. “A few dozen sounds like most of them.”

“He doesn’t care what happens to his soldiers,” Corbi reminded. “And after you killed First? He’s probably acting on impulse. It may end up working in our favor.”

“How so?” They stepped out into the night and there was already a car waiting right in front of the door.

Three soldiers who’d been guarding it in case any Frost Brumal appeared nodded at Corbi and stepped aside to allow her to climb into the driver’s seat.

Hunter got in on the passenger side and frowned when none of the others followed, instead taking up position on either side of the door. “They’re not coming with?”

“Weren’t you just saying you aren’t useless and can handle yourself?” Corbi pulled the hovercar onto the street and started east.

“Yeah, but,” he glanced over his shoulder as they headed away from the club, a twisted feeling settling in his gut, “this doesn’t seem right. Snow really told you to take me alone? What if we’re ambushed on the way to this safehouse? Which,” he turned back to her, “where is that, exactly?”

Why was he getting a sense of déjà vu?

Tendrils of smoke drifted off the side of the club, and Hunter caught sight of them in the rearview mirror. Oddly, that helped ease some of his nerves. All of this had happened pretty fast, and now that he had a moment to sit and think, he'd started questioning things. But there really was a fire and Odin had gone to check on it so...

"I spoke with Vetle," Corbi said cryptically all of a sudden.

"Okay?"

"Did you mean it?"

"...Mean what?"

She took a sharp turn but was careful with the hovercar, clearly trying not to draw attention to them as they traveled. Since it made sense there would be others fleeing from the club—guests and employees who had nothing to do with the fighting—Hunter didn't think she needed to be nearly as subtle as she was being, but what did he know.

"You suggested playing bait." She didn't look at him as she said it, but the uncertainty was obvious.

And so was that coil of unease still unraveling in Hunter's gut.

"Corbi, I got into this car with you because you said it was an order from Odin."

"We found your sister," the topic changes were rapid-fire, and it was hard to gauge if that was by chance or by design. Was she trying to distract him while they made their getaway?

And what, exactly were they getting away from, because it was starting to seem a lot less like it was the Frost Brumal and more like...

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, trying to keep his internal fears from showing on either his face or in his tone. He was a suspicious person by nature, and all of this could just be a misunderstanding on his part because of that.

“Are you listening?” She gripped the steering wheel. “I know where Meg is.”

“Yes, I got that part. Where is she? Are we going there now?”

“She’s dead, Thorn.”

He was quiet for a moment, allowing that to sink in. Even though he’d made peace with her betrayal and understood on some level it wasn’t her fault to begin with, he expected there to be more of a reaction on his part. It sucked and he was sad. But he didn’t feel the hot press of tears or feel like his throat was closing up on him like he had the first time he’d heard that his sister was dead.

“Where is she?” he repeated, a bit more somber, but still not entirely sure what was happening or why she was telling him this now.

“She was discarded like trash. Yule managed to torture the information out of someone and we found her body dumped by the Lestial Woods. She’d been bitten all over, flesh was torn from her body. It looked like animals had gotten to her, but it was confirmed by a doctor that the damage was done by—”

“It was Isa.” Hunter sat back in the leather seat, a wave of guilt hitting him finally. He’d let on that he was a Whisper and considering they were siblings, Frost must have hoped Meg was the same.

“She must not have been like you,” Corbi said a moment later.

“The gene doesn’t present in everyone, and not nearly as common as it does in Shout progeny.” At one point he’d wondered himself whether or not Meg would have also been a Whisper if she’d lived. He wasn’t pleased now to have an answer though.

“I don’t mean to come off heartless, but it’s a good thing she wasn’t. If she had been, Frost would have used her.”

“Don’t follow that up with some bullshit about death being a mercy.” Even though he had to admit, at least silently

to himself, that she wasn't entirely wrong. He'd only been at Isa's disposal for eight hours and look how much damage he'd undergone. He couldn't even imagine being subjected to a lifetime of it.

Maybe it was the best outcome for her, but for him, that closed the book on any possibility of future reconciliation. For the rest of his life, that final look in her eye, the one of disinterest, would be the last he'd ever seen from her. That last encounter had painted over all of the other, better memories he'd had with her, and for that...

"Frost is going to pay."

"On that, we're in agreement."

She'd said Meg was found in the Lestial Woods. That was south. They were currently heading west now.

"What are you actually doing, Corbi?"

Seeing that she could no longer keep up the rouse, she did away with the pretenses. "Using you as bait, Thorn. The attack on the club was real, and they really are fighting with Frost Brumal as we speak. But we all know their target was to try and figure out a way to get to you. They'll never make it far enough to even locate which room you stay in, Snow would never let them get that close."

"So," he drawled, "you decided you'd trick me into going with you and...what? Draw Isa out? Just the two of us? With no backup?"

"I'm sticking within close range of the club," she replied coolly. "Now that we're far enough not to attract our own people, Frost should feel safe to show himself."

They'd been circling the same area and he hadn't even noticed because she'd brought up Meg.

"He's got to be nearby if he sent the remaining bit of his army here. He wouldn't stand back on his own without a way of seeing what's going down for himself," she said. "If we can catch his attention and draw him out, all we have to do is hold him off long enough to contact Snow."

“That is a terrible plan.” He may have been the one to have suggested it in the beginning—or, at least some semblance of it—but hearing it come from someone else, put plain and simply like that, made it obvious. “Neither one of us stands a chance against Frost, Corbi. He’ll kill you and either murder me as well or kidnap me. Not to mention, I did not agree to this. Think. The second Odin realizes what you’ve done, he’s going to be livid.”

“You think you’re more important to him than I am,” she surmised, and though usually he tried to be a bit more delicate when it came to people who weren’t named Odin Snow, Hunter didn’t hold back.

“I am,” he stated.

“Because you’re a Whisper?”

“Because I’m me.” Interesting how he didn’t even need to think it over before answering that. “Bring me back to the club, Corbi. Right now.”

“You’re putting him in danger,” she insisted. “You have to see that. Ever since you arrived it’s been one thing after the other, and now he killed his father for you, too? He has enough power to rival Frost. He doesn’t need your blood. Keeping you around will only make him vulnerable. Dominus aren’t allowed to have a weakness, Thorn. You grew up in this world. You know I’m right.”

“I’m confused,” he twisted in his seat, resting one hand over the dashboard, “Spell it out for me. Are you taking me as potential bait, or are you trying to get rid of me for Odin’s sake?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have anything against you.”

“Kind of seems like you do.”

“Snow comes first for me,” she told him. “He always has. I owe him everything.”

“Which is why you, of all people, shouldn’t be doing this to him.”

“I’m doing it *for* him.”

“Were you always this crazy,” he asked, “or is this new?”

“Things were fine before you arrived!” Corbi yelled. “We were on track to infiltrate and take over Frost territory, a war could have been avoided. Now there’s blood in the streets and our Dominus is constantly taking unnecessary risks *for you*. No one person is more important than every member of the Snow Brumal.”

“Including Odin?”

“Shut up!”

“Just pointing out the flaw in your argument.” Hunter was freaking out on the inside, but on the outside he remained stoic and sarcastic, needing that familiar armor to keep himself from having a full-blown panic attack.

Corbi had tricked him and he’d trusted her because she’d never given him any other reason but to. Before all of this, Hunter still wouldn’t have made that mistake. Clearly he’d gotten too comfortable by Odin’s side. Too comfortable with his Brumal and those he considered a part of his inner circle.

“He’s going to be so disappointed in you,” he said, realizing the truth in that. Odin would be crushed when he learned about this. The twins were like family to him, some of the very few people he truly trusted. Her betrayal would not only blindside him the same way it was Hunter, but it might also even snuff a part of him out.

For some reason, that concept really pissed Hunter off.

“You’re hurting him and spinning it to fit your own narrative,” he said.

“He can’t see things straight because of you,” she shot back.

“Neither can you,” he waved with his free hand outside the window. “This isn’t even a full-fledged plan. You’re just

hoping it works. You have to realize how stupid and risky this is for no real reason.”

She sent him a dark look before quickly returning her eyes to the road, but that told him everything he needed to know.

“There was a report, wasn’t there,” he guessed. “Someone spotted Isa nearby. You’re not guessing he’s here, you know he is. Did you inform Odin or did you put this whole suicide mission together without any failsafe?”

“He’ll find out as soon as they have everything under control at the club.”

“Corbi,” he pinched the bridge of his nose, “it could be too late by then.”

She took a left turn, still circling, and Hunter concluded that this conversation was getting him nowhere and he needed to take control of the situation and stop trusting she’d see reason. She wasn’t exactly the type to act impulsively, and if this cluster fuck was any indication, that was for good reason.

She was terrible at last-minute plans.

“For the record,” he said, “Loni has always been my favorite.”

Corbi turned her head to give him another glare, but he didn’t wait for it.

In less time than it took to blink, Hunter tapped into Odin’s abilities and summoned heat, pouring that power straight from the palm he had on the dash into the vehicle.

There was a loud banging sound and then the hood popped up, restricting their view. In a panic, Corbi twisted the wheel.

Directly into oncoming traffic.

Chapter 16:

“We’ve gotten the guests all under control,” Mr. Sun informed Odin as they waited in front of the elevators.

“You’re holding up fairly well.” While his manager may be used to the occasional brawl, this was the first time the club had been directly hit by a rival Brumal family, and yet Sun had gone about his duty without batting an eye, moving guests out of the way and sorting them into safer locations all without having to be told what to do.

“There’s a section in the handbook that lists protocol should we come under attack,” Sun told him absently.

Odin had been wiping the blood off his knuckles, but now he paused and glanced over at him. “There’s something like that in the employee handbook?”

“Jita recommended it, boss,” Arl said. The soldier was standing with them and had suffered a few minor injuries thanks to the scuffle, but nothing serious.

Sounded like something the Counselor would put in place to prevent future issues.

There’d only been around thirteen Frost members, and for the most part, Odin had left his men to it while he worked on putting out the three fires they’d started in separate locations on the first floor.

He was getting sick of these little experiments Isa was running. It was becoming more tedious than anything else.

“How’d we make out?” he asked.

“One of the guests tripped and sprained her ankle,” Sun replied swiftly. “I’ve already had her taken to the hospital and told her the bill will be paid for by us. She was given six months free membership on top of that.”

“Good work.” Odin glanced at Arl, waiting for him to answer next.

“Hin has a broken arm, Gunn a busted nose, but other than those two, it’s all cuts and bruises. More than what could

be said for the Frost people.”

Yes, because they were all dead.

“How’d they manage to make it past security?”

“The first one who entered was a member,” Sun said. “My guess is he has no previous connection to Frost and was merely selected from a list of possible pawns to be used and discarded. He was killed in the attack.” He bowed his head slightly. “Forgive me for not including him in the list of casualties.”

“No, you did the right thing. Traitors give up their right to be considered one of us, whether that’s as a member of the Brumal or Club Cherry.”

Isa must have found someone greedy enough to take a hefty bribe in exchange for starting a fire. The first one had been strategically placed near one of the side entrances, so the guards had all crowded there in an attempt to put it out before it spread throughout the rest of the club.

While they were distracted, the Frost soldiers had come in blasters blazing, shooting up the place. They’d either been terrible shots or had been ordered not to kill civilians, because somehow they’d avoided hitting any of the guests with a bullet.

Odin’s guess was on the first though, since none of his people were hit either.

“Looks like Frost only has idiots left in his arsenal, boss,” Arl said, probably thinking the same thing Odin just had.

Before he could answer, the elevator dinged and the doors opened to show Loni waiting to get off.

When he spotted her, Odin frowned. “What are you doing down here?”

She tilted her head, clearly just as confused as he was. “Sir?”

“It’s not a hard question.” Had someone informed her that the fighting was contained? “If I put you on security

detail, Loni, you aren't allowed to leave his side until I tell you otherwise. Haven't we been through this?"

"But..." She glanced between him and Arl, still obviously lost. "Didn't you have Corbi relieve me?"

"What?" He shook his head. "I did no such thing. Why would I do that?"

"She said you no longer trusted me to guard over Hunter," she explained. "That you wanted her to take my place...Sir, did you really not give her that order?"

Odin went cold.

He'd backed her into the elevator and hit the button for the top floor all in one move. The doors slid shut behind them, blocking the other two out, not that he noticed them any longer. "When? When did she tell you this?"

"It's been about ten minutes," Loni said, panic showing in her eyes. "The last I saw she was headed to your room."

The elevator came to a stop and he practically ran out of it, pounding the keycode to unlock his bedroom door with enough force it was a wonder the screen didn't crack. As soon as he got it open the fear he'd been feeling burst.

It was empty.

With a roar, he turned on Loni, grabbing her by the throat and pinning her to the hallway wall opposite the door. "Where the fuck are they?!"

"I don't know!" She gripped his wrist but didn't attempt to get him to release her. "I thought you'd given the order. It made sense. I'd messed up so many times already—"

"What the hell do you call this?!" Logically, he knew he wasn't being fair. He would have believed Corbi's lie too. Illogically, he wanted someone to blame, someone to take the brunt of his anger, and unfortunately for her, Loni was the only one here.

"Sir?!" Vetle rounded the corner, partially out of breath.

Arl must have informed him something was up.

“Check the security footage!” he snapped. “All of them! Find Hunter and Corbi *now!*”

“Wait,” Loni stopped him just before Vetle was about to go, tapping her multi-slate before Odin could curse at her again. “We can track her! We each have a trace in case one of us gets lost.”

Odin let her go. “Do it.”

Corbi was loyal, but there was no reason for her to have done any of this, which could only mean whatever she had planned, it wasn't anything Odin would approve of. The fact that Hunter had gone with her...

“Got her!” Loni held up her multi-slate so he could see the screen. “They're close! Just around the next block over!”

Odin took off, trusting that she and Vetle would follow without being told. Sure enough, he heard their steps come after him as he pounded down the stairs and out the nearest exit. Judging by the map on Loni's device, they were somewhere off to the right, and he started running in that direction, his only thought to get to Hunter before something bad happened.

“I'll grab a car!” Vetle called after them, Loni sticking only a pace or so behind Odin as they crossed the street.

In his desperation, Odin hadn't even considered that he wouldn't stand a chance of catching up to them if Corbi was driving. Still, he kept going, turning when Loni gave a new direction.

They were out in the open and just after a direct attack. There was no telling how many Frost soldiers were out here, lingering, having played it safe and not entered the club with the rest. Frost's people aside, the whole city knew Hunter was a Whisper by now, which meant every thug and his grandmother who was cocky enough to think they stood a chance would consider Hunter a prize.

They kidnap him and hold him for ransom? Sounded like an obvious plan. Even a moron could come up with it.

Hunter had gotten better at fighting, and could certainly hold his own, but what if someone held him at gunpoint? With a blaster in his face, he'd be forced to do whatever the other person said.

Damn Corbi for putting him at risk like this.

He was so caught up in his angry thoughts, he almost didn't process what he was seeing until he was less than twenty feet away.

Hunter was walking toward him, leaning against the side of a large stone building for support. The second he spotted Odin he stopped in his tracks. The overhang of the building helped keep him shrouded in shadows, that added to the fact the streetlights were far enough away to only cast a pale golden glow in his general direction, and Odin may have missed him if he hadn't been searching so closely.

"The time for running is over, Little Whisper," Odin growled as he approached, still furious and nervous about being out in the open like this. "I'll drag you from the dark kicking and screaming if I have to."

"That won't be necessary," Hunter replied, grimacing when Odin reached out and touched his shoulder.

"What happened?" There were no obvious injuries, but now that he was closer, he could tell that the Huntsman was favoring his left side.

"Where is my sister?" Loni ran up to them, stilling a few feet away when Odin let out a feral-sounding growl in warning.

"I didn't mean to," Hunter told them, and suddenly it was obvious he was also a little bit out of it, his vision not quite clear. "I just did it to get her to stop."

"Did what?" Odin shielded him from Loni's view and cupped his cheeks, tipping his head up so he could get a better look at him. Aside from the slightly cloudy look in his eyes, he seemed present enough to know what was going on. "Tell me, Huntsman. What happened?"

“I crashed the hovercar,” he said. “She wasn’t going to stop and I needed to get back to you.”

“She kidnapped you?” It took everything in him not to punch a hole into the stone wall Hunter was leaning against.

How could she? He’d trusted her the most out of everyone.

“She ended up swerving to avoid another vehicle and hit a pole. She was unconscious when I left.”

“Where?!” Loni made to run past them in the direction it was obvious Hunter had been coming from. But she didn’t get very far.

They were already close to the end of the street, and just then Corbi turned the corner. She had blood dripping from her forehead, but that was the least of her concern. The second she spotted them—more importantly Odin—she turned pale and her eyes widened with fear.

He had his blaster out and trained on her before he even knew what he was doing.

“Don’t!” Loni cried, jumping between him and her sister.

“Odin.” Hunter rested a hand on his arm and shook his head.

He opened his mouth to tell them both to stand down, but he didn’t get that far.

Corbi had been with him since she’d been a kid and he’d practically raised her. She’d done an unforgivable thing, but not a single one of them could say they’d never done anything wrong before. Maybe he would have forgiven her after a bit of a scare. Maybe he would have pulled the trigger after all.

Odin would never know.

Because before he could do anything else, a shadow stepped up behind Corbi.

Her scream echoed through the streets, louder than a canon.

Chapter 17:

They all watched in horror as frost coated Corbi's skin, skating over her, freezing her from both the inside and outside at the same time. The scream caught in her throat as her vocal cords were frozen, and though Odin had started toward her, there was no way he was going to be able to make it in time and he knew it.

The whole process happened in less than a minute. One second she was standing there trembling under his fury, and the next she was encased in a sheet of ice.

The shadow behind her gave a little shove, almost as if it was a chore for him to even bother, and her body toppled forward, hitting the concrete sidewalk and shattering into a million dark red pieces.

Loni dropped to her knees and vomited.

Odin didn't see Hunter's reaction, too busy backing up into him to block him from the threat.

Isa took another step forward, carelessly crunching shards of what had once been Corbi beneath his leather boots. He settled his hands on his hips and tipped his head, the corner of his mouth lifting in mockery. "Hello, brother."

"Monster!" Loni got back to her feet and charged forward.

Odin called out to her to stop, but Hunter was faster, slipping out from behind him in a flash.

Isa sent a blast of ice straight for her, but Hunter slammed into her from the side, taking them both down to the street, just evading the attack.

As soon as they were down, the Huntsman twisted onto his heels, putting himself directly in front of a now sobbing Loni, who remained on the ground.

Odin summoned fireballs, his palms blazing, and sent them flying before Isa could even think of aiming for Hunter. He kept them coming, backing the other Dominus off the

sidewalk and onto the adjacent street. Since it was late into the night, there were few cars in this area, and most of the traffic was on the opposite side where the more popular roads were located.

Unfortunately, that meant he couldn't simply blast him into an oncoming car and be done with this either.

Pushing Isa onto the street also put him directly under the glow of one of the street lights, and he was able to get a good look at him. His face in particular had taken a serious hit when Odin had set him on fire, the burns still apparent on the entire right side from his cheek down to his Adams apple. His arm on that side was also severely scarred, but he had a clear skin bandage similar to the one Hunter had on his shoulder over the bite mark. The bandage covered most of him from the shoulder to his wrist.

Even with it, Odin doubted he'd be able to completely heal. He could do skin grafts, but that wouldn't be possible until things between them were settled, and Odin didn't plan for that to happen in any way other than with Isa's death.

"You've looked better," he taunted once he felt confident he had Isa far enough away from where Hunter was crouched.

"It's good that my cock has always been your favorite part of me."

"Did I miss that? I thought for sure that was the first thing I set on fire." He'd certainly been aiming for it. Even now, thinking about how he'd walked in to find Isa fully erect and standing behind Hunter...

"Fortunately for us both, that isn't the case."

"You can't believe there's a chance for the two of us to get together."

"Now that you have a Whisper at your disposal?" Isa clicked his tongue. "It's seeming more and more unlikely."

Which meant Isa wasn't just here for a chat.

"Did you seriously come out here alone?" Odin asked.

“Do you seriously think I’m that stupid?” Isa countered.

“Snow,” Hunter’s voice, steady and strong, sounded behind him. “Don’t turn around.”

Odin wasn’t going to listen to that, was in the process of turning when Hunter spoke more firmly.

“Stop. Trust me.”

Odin hesitated but didn’t turn.

“There’s a knife to his throat,” Isa filled in the blank, and if the evil smirk twisting his lips was any indicator, he was telling the truth. “Don’t you want to see the life drain from his eyes?”

“Snow—” Hunter stopped with a hiss.

“Quiet,” another man spoke. Whoever had the Huntsman.

“If you nicked him at all just now,” Odin threw his voice over his shoulder at the would-be culprit, “I’m going to roast you alive. Slowly.”

“It’s just one guy,” Hunter said, letting out another pained sound a second later that had the fire in Odin’s hands growing.

It didn’t sound like any other footsteps were approaching, but he’d been so caught up with Isa, he hadn’t heard this guy either. There was no way to be certain Frost didn’t have backup waiting in the dark corners of the street, watching and biding their time until they were either signaled or saw a chance.

Another flicker of anger toward Corbi for bringing Hunter out here snapped its jaws in his chest, but he banked it down, gaze briefly dropping to the bits of her that were starting to thaw. The air was breezy, but it was Summer, definitely warm enough to melt a bit of ice.

Vetle had left to grab a hovercar and he’d yet to arrive, which meant he’d either been held up elsewhere, or he’d seen them and gone for reinforcements. While he was hopeful for

the latter, Odin wasn't holding his breath. If he stalled long enough, eventually someone would come looking, but if he was aware of that fact, Isa was as well.

"I admit," Isa lifted a finger, wagging it, "I was really upset when you started showing so much interest in Hunter Thorn, but now I understand. Of course you would get attached to the only known Whisper on the planet. It's just nature."

He'd been attached to the Huntsman long before he'd discovered what he was, but Odin didn't owe Frost an explanation, so he didn't bother giving one. Instead, he took the time to try and come up with a way to safely get Hunter away from whoever was holding him at knifepoint before Isa could react and try turning one or both of them into a Popsicle.

"That isn't going to change anything, however." Isa turned his palm, summoning a ball of ice.

"There's no way for you to win this," Odin said.

"You mean because my army is scattered and my home was burned to the ground?" He shrugged a single shoulder. "Unfortunate setbacks, but you're forgetting one very important detail, brother."

"What's that?" He knew he shouldn't ask, that it was playing right into Isa's hand, and yet he found himself doing it anyway.

"Taking everything *you* have is a specialty of mine."

In any other circumstances, he might have laughed. The only thing keeping him from doing so was the knife currently being held against Hunter's throat. Because even if everything else wasn't, Isa's ability to take his Huntsman was a real distinct possibility at the moment. One word from him was all it would take for the man holding Hunter to kill him.

"The Snow Brumal will never follow you." Where the hell was Vettle?

"They will if you're incapacitated," he replied, smirking wryly when Odin frowned. "Oh, I still have no intention of killing you, brother. We aren't blood-related and I

can't ink your ashes or take your power. You're no good to me dead. But alive...Let's see how many of your precious family hold out when I parade you around and the whole world knows you've been made into my bitch."

Odin wished he could turn and check to see what the hell Loni was doing. If there was only one man behind him and that man was currently keeping Hunter at bay, where the fuck was she, and why wasn't she doing anything? Was she too messed up after witnessing Corbi's murder?

If she didn't get her shit together she may be forced to see another one soon.

"There are witnesses here," Isa continued, "which means so long as I beat you, the Brumal will have to follow me whether they like it or not. Some will defect, no doubt, but not all. And once I'm a Shout with a Whisper? The rest of the city will fall back in line and kneel at my feet. You may have burned down the Faraway Mansion, but my businesses are still flourishing, not that money is an issue. I'll take over Club Cherry, too. What floor do you sleep on again? It's the upper level, correct? I hope your room is big enough. I'm not a fan of tight spaces, at least, not to sleep in."

Isa's gaze pointedly trailed over Odin's shoulder, landing on Hunter suggestively.

Odin stepped forward without thinking, freezing when Isa held up a hand and shook his head. Behind him, he heard Hunter suck in a breath and knew that he'd been threatened with the knife because of his action.

"It's really too bad that Whispers got the short end of the stick, don't you agree, brother?" Isa sighed as though he believed what he was saying. "They were made powerless, forced to tie themselves to a Shout in order to gain protection. I bet that's how you convinced Hunter isn't it? Or, did you perhaps force him into it? Trying to act all noble when in reality you're no better than me or any of the Shouts who've mated before you?"

"People in the past didn't force a mating bond," he growled. "Those who did were animals. The bond is stronger

when freely given.”

“And it’s permanent,” Hunter chimed in.

Odin wanted to scold him for doing so but didn’t want to risk Isa making another move so held his tongue.

“I won’t be able to use you for an extreme power boost,” Isa agreed nonchalantly. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t get some from taking your blood. I’m also curious about what it is about you that has my brother so wrapped around your finger. Is your ass really that amazing that he’d toss me and my offer of partnership aside just to keep fucking it?”

“Enough,” Odin snapped.

“What? It can’t be his sparkling personality,” Isa continued, pretending to think it over. “And he’s attractive, sure, but he’s got nothing on me—at least, he didn’t before you destroyed half my face.”

“You don’t seem all that upset about that.”

“I’m furious, actually, but I’ve been assured by a reputable doctor that things can be fixed. Once I’ve settled all our affairs here, I’ll get to that.”

“How do you think this is going to work?” he asked. “You’re going to threaten Hunter’s life and I’ll just stand here and let you beat me close to death? Is that it?”

“It’s not like your Whisper is going to be much help,” Isa said. “He’s weak and powerless. And your subordinate isn’t fairing much better, since she hasn’t stopped staring at the ground since Hunter saved her life.” He leaned to the side as if to get a better look at Loni and made a face. “She may even be catatonic at the moment.”

“You just murdered her sister right in front of her,” Odin growled.

“Was that one of the twins?” He glanced at the pieces of red, practically unidentifiable, bits scattered all over the sidewalk. They’d all but melted now, turning into gushy scraps of flesh.

The only upside was that having died the way she had, not a single piece looked like it'd come from a person. Even her clothes had turned into nothing but particles blowing across the street.

“I hadn't noticed.” Isa sounded disappointed. “What a bummer. I wanted to keep them. I know how important they are to you. It would have been nice to add them to my arsenal against you. I'll need ways to keep you in line once the literal knife is no longer aimed at Thorn's neck. I suppose now I'll simply have to settle for Jita and Vetle.”

“Better idea,” Hunter said, his words quickly followed by a scream.

Odin reacted without thinking, but by the time it registered that wasn't a sound coming from Hunter, he'd already spun on his heels.

The man who'd been holding Hunter was blond, but that was the only detail about him Odin was able to pick up because he was also currently on fire.

His screams continued to ring around them, echoing off the tall buildings as he struggled, flailing his arms as the flames engulfed him. The knife he'd been holding only a moment ago had clattered to the ground at Hunter's feet, but he clearly wasn't interested in it, or Hunter, any longer.

“Snow!” Hunter darted forward, but Odin reacted at the same time, moving off the side to evade whatever he was being warned of.

He shouldn't have taken his eyes off Isa.

A ball of ice sailed just past his head, missing its target by less than an inch. It ended up slamming directly into the chest of the burning man, swallowed by the flames just as easily as he had been.

While he moved out of the way, Hunter reacted, forming a fireball in his palm and sending it sailing straight toward Isa. He kept moving toward Odin in the process, slipping up to his side and snatching something from Odin's belt.

Isa sent a ball of ice to meet the fireball and stop it from hitting him, all of his attention on that task.

Which was why he didn't see the blaster Hunter lifted.

The shot rang out, zipping through the air faster than a fireball or a ball of ice could, giving him no time to react to it.

Hunter was an excellent marksman, and it hadn't taken him long at all to dust off those old skills. Odin had seen as much during the attack on the Storeroom. Even still, he was awestruck as he watched the event play out before him, almost as if in slow motion.

By the time Isa put out the flaming ball heading toward him and noticed the blaster, the bullet was already landing its mark. It shot right through the center of his throat and out the other side, causing his body to jerk once before he went still.

Isa's eyes were wide in shock, his mouth parting. The hole in his neck was clean through, so Odin could make out the golden glow of the street light through it for just a moment before blood welled and blocked it out. It dribbled down at first, staining the color of his white shirt before suddenly it was pouring, a small river gushing from him.

He wavered on his feet, still seemingly astonished as if he couldn't believe he was actually dying.

"I've always thought you talked too much," Hunter said. Then without another word, he aimed a second time and fired again.

When the bullet hit him in the center of his forehead, Isa's body finally gave out. He toppled backward right there in the middle of the street, the iceball he'd still been clutching in his right hand instantly snuffing out with his final breath.

Everything seemed to come to a standstill, the hum of the streetlights suddenly the only sound Odin could hear as his mind caught up with the series of events that had just happened before him.

Isa Frost was finally dead.

Chapter 18:

Vetle arrived shortly after, hovercar zooming onto the sidestreet they were standing on, screeching to a halt just before he would have run over Loni who was still sitting in the road.

Odin gave a brief explanation as backup pulled in afterward, sending half of the dozen men Vetle had brought along to secure the area and make sure no more Frost Brumal were hiding nearby. With Isa dead, they wouldn't have reason to fight against him any longer, but he didn't want to take his chances.

The remaining soldiers were ordered to clean up the bodies, mostly because they couldn't leave a barbecued dead guy on the sidewalk, and Corbi deserved better than what she'd gotten. Odin was still angry with her final actions, but that didn't erase all the years of loyalty she'd given, and he wasn't going to dishonor her corpse. Once everything was collected, he'd cremate her and give her a proper send off.

Finally, he'd told Vetle to take care of Loni, who was still completely out of it. He drove her back to the club and would call the doctor to have her checked. After what she'd witnessed, it was no wonder she was in a state of shock, and Odin didn't want to stress her out any more than necessary. Whatever the doctor said she needed, she'd be provided.

With all that settled, he stepped over to where Yule and Hunter stood staring down at Isa Frost's dead body. The butcher had shown and gone straight to it, staying by Hunter's side while Odin filled everyone else in and gave out instructions.

All Odin wanted to do was be with his Huntsman, but he'd known he couldn't just leave the scene of the crime without first handing out tasks.

"How...incredibly anticlimactic of you," Yule was saying when Odin approached.

Hunter's shoulders were tense, his body coiled as if about to spring into action at any given moment. It was obvious that he'd yet to really process that it was finally over, even while standing over Isa's dead body.

Blood had pooled beneath him and Isa's sightless eyes peered up at the inky black sky. His lips were still slightly parted, his shirt stained crimson, and his hair a mess. He'd never been disheveled in life and would loathe seeing himself like this now.

Odin took a second to pick apart his feelings. Even though this had always been his endgame, he'd never really stopped to worry about how the death of his step-brother might actually affect him. There was no relief of anger over the things Isa had done—he was still pissed when he thought about them—but he wasn't sad either. He didn't suddenly miss him and wish things had gone differently or any such bullshit.

If anything, he mostly just felt...indifferent.

When he looked at Hunter, it was the complete opposite.

He was so relieved that the Huntsman was okay, that they'd made it out of this alive and together, that his heart truly felt like it was about burst straight out of his chest. If there weren't so many people there, he would have scooped Hunter into his arms and captured his mouth, and kissed him with all the desperation and wildness swirling in his gut.

It'd all happened so fast, and yet for a moment there, he'd been all but consumed by the sheer panic that Hunter was going to get hurt. That he wouldn't be able to stop Isa from taking him, the same way he'd already stolen everything else from Odin in the past.

The whole ordeal, from start to finish, had been the most nerve-wracking, terrifying moment in Odin's entire life—including when he'd been on the run—and yet Yule, that bastard, dared to claim it'd been *anticlimactic*?

Most of it was still a blur in his mind because of how tense it'd all been, something that Odin would have to sit and

pick through later, when he was somewhere quiet and safe, with Hunter at his side.

Another hovercar pulled up then and Arl climbed out, bowing to Odin and handing over a set of keys. He glanced at Isa and then met Odin's gaze. "What should we do about the Frost Dominus, boss?"

"Technically," Yule turned toward them, slipping his hands causally into his pockets, as though there wasn't a dead mafia leader less than two feet away from his blood-stained boots, "since he was killed by another Brumal member, the one who defeated him takes the title. Hunter here is the new Frost Dominus."

Odin made a feral sound and took a step forward, momentarily seeing red, but Hunter put himself between the two, stopping him in his tracks before he could do something stupid and rash.

"He's just running his mouth as per usual," Hunter shrugged. "He didn't mean anything by it." He motioned to Yule with a hard expression. "Did you?"

"No," Yule shook his head, smartly taking the out. "Not at all."

While he wasn't wrong, Odin was already determined to kill the next person who tried tacking on the name Frost to *his* Huntsman.

"Take care of this," Hunter motioned to Isa, scowling. "Don't have the body destroyed just yet, we might need it to prove to any of Frost's remaining followers that he's actually dead. But get it out of here and put it somewhere safe for now."

"Sure thing, boss," Yule nodded, and he didn't sound like he meant the title mockingly when he said it. He even sobered some as he waved at Arl to help and immediately went to work following Hunter's order.

"Come." Odin held out his hand toward the Huntsman, waiting for him to take it before he led him to the car. Once the passenger side door was opened, Hunter didn't need any more

prompting and slipped quickly inside. The fact he wasn't resisting or being snarky told Odin everything he needed to know about his current mood, and he sighed as he entered the vehicle himself.

Their final fight with Isa had taken place only a couple of blocks from the club, and the drive itself would take less than five minutes typically. They'd only made it two, however, before the summer storm hit.

A boom of thunder clapped above them, followed by a burst of lightning bright enough to light up the darkened corners and alleyways. The downpour was sudden and intense, sheets of water slamming down all around them, instantly making it impossible to see even with the windshield wipers on at full blast.

"At least the evidence is being washed away in case the police decide to do their jobs for once," Hunter said.

"I own the police," Odin reminded.

"Right. Pull over," Hunter suggested, the rain still coming, only to have Odin refuse with a curt shake of his head.

Isa might have been defeated, and news may travel fast, but not that fast. He wouldn't feel at ease until they were off the streets and back in the club, where he could guarantee Hunter would be safe.

Instead of pushing it, Hunter leaned back in his seat, staring out the window as Odin inched the car along in a crawl.

The five-minute ride turned into fifteen, but they eventually pulled into the underground garage, the sound of the pounding rain instantly cut off, drawing attention to the fact neither of them had spoken the entire way.

Sun met them at the entrance, glancing between the two of them, no doubt noticing their matching stoic expressions. He stepped back from the doors when the two of them walked through, clearly unsure of what to say.

“We’re not to be disturbed,” Odin instructed. “Not for any reason.”

“Understood, sir.” Sun dipped his head and then turned, seemingly to relay the message.

Odin reached for Hunter’s hand once more, linking their fingers and tugging him after him toward the elevators. He kept hold of him even when the metal doors slid shut, sealing them in together, and keyed in the private code that would bring them up to the third floor.

“I know,” Hunter’s voice was soft, not so much timid as it was resigned. He kept his gaze straight ahead, staring at the fuzzy outline of the two of them reflected in the closed doors.

He tipped his head. “Know what?”

“I made the same mistake twice. Only a moron would have fallen for the same trick, but it was Corbi, and it barely even occurred to me that she would pull something like that. I feel so stupid.”

Was...that what he’d been thinking about all this time? Odin had been certain shooting Isa was what had Hunter so closed off but had he been wrong?

“You trusted her,” he said. “I’m the one who told you she was trustworthy. It isn’t the same as it was with Meg. You followed your sister that day knowing things might not turn out the way you hoped, but not wanting to lose the opportunity to reconnect with her. You went with Corbi because you had faith in her and her loyalty. You aren’t the only one she fooled. Loni was lied to as well.”

Hunter glanced at him from the corner of his eyes. “That sounds like you understand.”

“I do.” If there was anyone to blame here, it was Corbi, not the Huntsman. Even if this was the second occasion he’d willingly walked out of Club Cherry with a woman.

“So...you’re not mad?”

Odin grunted just as the elevator dinged and came to a stop, opening on their floor. “Oh no, Little Whisper. I’m downright *furious*. But not about that.”

He yanked Hunter out and into the hall, practically storming toward their bedroom. That urge to get him somewhere secluded and away from the rest of the world was back tenfold, and he feared he wouldn’t be able to breathe or think clearly until he made that happen. With Isa dead, his remaining followers would either flee, kneel, or fight one last time in the name of their fallen leader.

Those last lingering fights weren’t a concern overall and would be easily quelled, but Odin would prefer if the two of them stayed out of it.

“What then?” Hunter asked, stepping beneath the threshold first when Odin waved him inside. When he was in the bedroom he turned, waiting for an answer.

Odin closed and locked the door, letting out a long exhale as his nerves finally seemed to settle some. It wasn’t all magically better, but he at least felt like the worst was over and he could finally let down his guard and begin to process everything. Like, for instance...

He was already glaring when he finally spun around to face Hunter. “What the hell were you thinking back there?”

Hunter frowned. “Are you referring to my shooting Frost? I’m sorry, did you want to be the one to do it? Did I ruin your big, ten-year revenge plan that badly?”

“Don’t be sarcastic, Huntsman, I’m not in a joking mood.”

“I just murdered a guy in cold blood,” he snapped. “Neither am I.”

“You risked your life is what you did,” Odin countered. “What if you hadn’t been able to tap into my power and light that guy on fire?”

“I knew I could,” he said. “I waited for you to keep Isa distracted while I built it up inside myself. I grew up around Shouts, remember? I know how you guys operate. That was

how I was able to tap into it so easily the first time. When we were kids I asked you what it felt like when you summoned fire.”

It'd been a fleeting conversation in the middle of one of his father's pretentious parties. Odin had completely forgotten about it until now.

“It's not like it was my first time either,” Hunter continued. “And if I didn't do something soon, we were both going to be screwed. I knew the second Isa tried to insinuate I was useless because I was Whisper, and therefore less than a Shout, that he didn't know tapping into your power was something I was capable of.”

“He'd never been all that interested in learning about Whispers.” Though, neither had Odin or Wren, for that matter. The three of them had been so certain they'd never come across one in their lifetimes, as well as confident that even if they somehow miraculously did, as rulers of Sanctum, they'd be able to gather information then.

It was something Odin had been slowly but surely doing, but up until now, having to do so in secrecy had made it difficult. He hadn't gotten very far, and of the two of them, Hunter very clearly knew more than he.

Isa had still believed the only way to claim a Whisper was by viciously biting them. Of course he hadn't realized there was more to the connection between a bonded pair than simply bloodletting, pain, and abuse.

Still...

“What if you'd been wrong?”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “I wasn't. Clearly.”

“Huntsman.”

“I did what I had to do,” he insisted. “And look, we survived, didn't we?”

All at once the anger drained away and Odin wrapped his arms around him, holding him close as he buried his face against the curve of his neck and breathed him deep.

“Admit it,” Hunter spoke after giving him a minute, “you’re a little cross you wasted all these years planning when in the end it was actually pretty easy to take him out.”

He snorted. “Isa never would have let his guard down if things hadn’t played out exactly as they had. We got lucky, nothing more and nothing less. Same way we got lucky that day I rescued you from him. If he hadn’t been so mystified by the fact you’re a Whisper, and if I hadn’t gotten the jump on him while he was distracted—”

“And if it hadn’t been set in that tiny room with stone walls that hold heat, and you hadn’t killed your father and inked his ashes first, and if I hadn’t then made a sound that prevented you from ending Isa then and there, blah, blah, blah.” Hunter pulled back and gave him a stern look. “You don’t believe in luck, remember? Here are the facts, Snow, so listen closely. You’re mated to a Whisper who doesn’t like to cower and is prideful to the point of it almost being detrimental to his well-being. I’m never going to be the person standing on the sidelines, twiddling my thumbs, hoping you can win a fight without me.

“If I’m there, I’m jumping in. If I see you in danger, I’m going to do something about it. And if there’s ever a time like there was tonight, where you’re backed into a corner and about to literally lay down your life for mine, I’m sure as hell not going to let you take the fall alone.”

Odin wanted to argue, but none of that was wrong. He’d known who Hunter Thorn was, who he’d been, and who the man would become if and when they got back together. The whole reason he’d wanted Hunter to train again was for that very reason. It wasn’t simply to ease his mind and ensure himself that his Huntsman could hold his own in a fight, it was also because he knew as soon as the lock on the door was removed, Hunter wouldn’t shy from one either.

“Frost had you,” Hunter reached up and cupped Odin’s face, “You were trying to come up with a way out, but he had you and you were about to stand down.”

“He was going to hurt you.” Even thinking about it made his palms itch to call back the flames despite the fact the threat was gone.

“So you were ready to give up everything to prevent that? Your title as Dominus, the club, your people, your freedom—He wouldn’t have settled for anything less than everything.”

“I know that.”

“Then—”

“I love you, Hunter,” Odin reminded. “I love you, and I’d do anything for you, even if that means risking myself in the process.” That should be fairly obvious by now, and he was a bit annoyed that he had to explain it. That he was standing here, justifying his actions to the one person who should understand better than anyone else where he’d been coming from and why.

But then Hunter grinned at him deviously, dropping his hand and crossing his arms.

Everything the Huntsman had been telling him all this time came to mind then. He’d been clear from the very start of this when he’d finally agreed to the mating that he wanted a partner, an equal.

He’d just led him into a trap, made him see things from his perspective without even realizing it.

“I’m your Shout,” Odin said, but even to him, it sounded like an excuse.

“And I’m your Whisper,” Hunter stated.

“I had to lock you up just to get you to talk to me in the beginning.”

“First of all, talking was never on your original agenda. Second of all, that was then. I already told you that things are different now. I didn’t come back here because I have nowhere else to go, and I’m not staying because you’re forcing me to. I want to be here, Odin. I want to be with you.”

“If you were even one second slower,” Odin voiced the thing that had been bothering him the most, “one inch off at either side, Isa could have killed you.”

Frost had been distracted by the fireball, most likely reeling from discovering that Hunter did in fact have access to power just like they did. That was the only reason he hadn't been watching when Hunter had grabbed the blaster. It was also the reason he hadn't tossed one of those balls of ice at Hunter after he'd been shot too. He'd been surprised by it, his mind unable to process that he'd been bested, his body struggling to keep itself alive as his blood pooled out of the fresh hole in his neck.

If he'd missed that shot or Isa had seen it in time and evaded, Hunter would most likely be the dead one right now.

“We were out of time,” Hunter repeated. “If I didn't take the chance while I could, Isa would have made good on his threats. You don't believe there were just the two of them, do you? He had to have had more people waiting nearby. They got scared and scattered the moment his body hit the ground, but we'll receive a report soon enough that the men you sent to search found them. By the time Vetle made it to us, Isa would have had you crippled and forced him to bend the knee.”

“The only person on this planet who hates Frost more than me is you. I would never stand by and watch you surrender to him. I'd do anything for you, too, Odin. Even if that means risking myself.”

He groaned and ran a hand over his face and through his hair. “I hate when you use my own words against me. How is it you seem to remember every single thing I've ever said to you?”

“I have to arm myself somehow.” He shrugged, acting all innocent, and Odin gave a warning growl.

“Don't be cute.”

Hunter sneered, not liking that one bit. “Don't be gross.”

They stared at one another for a moment, the air seemingly thickening with tension. Sometime between when Odin had trapped Hunter in here and they'd mated, this place had stopped being his room and had started being theirs. The space no longer seemed like a cage. Hunter was right. Things between them were different.

"Isa is dead," he said solemnly. "Which means there's no longer a Brumal army out there with your name on their bounty list."

When he'd exposed Hunter's existence to Frost at the Octu Gala months ago, he'd had two missions. See how Isa would react when presented with the Huntsman, and ensure that the Huntsman had nowhere else to hide. It'd quickly become apparent that Frost wanted him dead and he wouldn't be safe on the streets of Ovid. That he'd need Odin from that moment on to just stay alive.

But now that threat was gone. There was nothing left to keep Hunter from realizing this wasn't the life he wanted. To keep him from walking out that door.

He'd be lying if Odin said he hadn't thought about that these past weeks, as things between them had seemingly solidified and become stronger than ever. Maybe that was why he hadn't gone out and joined the search for Isa himself, something he most certainly would have done prior to Hunter Thorn reentering his life.

He would have torn the streets apart searching for him even, unable to rest until he had Frost's head on a spike and his blood staining his hands. But with Hunter at home, it'd barely been a passing thought, and when it had come, he'd brushed it aside, given into the fear of what ending Isa might mean for the two of them in particular.

Odin may have won the war the second Hunter pulled that trigger, but there was a chance he'd lost something else. Something a lot more important.

He stepped back and placed his palm against the keypad, maintaining eye contact with Hunter the entire time. The Huntsman's brow was furrowed in obvious confusion, but

he didn't make to follow, allowing Odin to put space between them as the door clicked and opened on its own.

With his chin, Odin motioned to the empty hall.

"It's unguarded," he said. "There's no one standing outside waiting to wrestle you back in. You won't be stopped at the exit either. No one will follow you."

"Snow."

"If it's money that's stopping you, I'll give you enough to survive with. You won't have to worry about returning to that sad life you had before."

Hunter's frown only deepened. "Why are you doing this? Are you trying to pay me off? Tell me that now that the threat is gone, you no longer need me or something?"

"No," he shook his head. "I'm telling you that you don't need to force yourself to stay because I no longer will. If you wish to leave, Little Whisper, the door is open for you."

The look he gave him next was wary. "And you'll... just give me a bunch of money and let me go?"

"Yes." Odin barely resisted the urge to take it back, slam the door shut, and toss Hunter onto the bed. Instead, he made himself stand there, still as a statue, afraid if he moved even a little he'd cave and make a grab for Hunter and give his inner turmoil away.

"What if I say I want enough money for passage off planet?" Hunter asked. "You still going to give it to me?"

If he left Sanctum there'd be no way for Odin to ever locate him. He'd be well and truly gone with no hope of ever getting him back.

His jaw clenched tightly when he tried to say yes, the word getting caught in his throat.

Hunter hummed. "You wouldn't, would you?"

He hesitated but that was enough.

"While I appreciate this," the Huntsman waved a finger between them and the still-open door and took a step closer,

“you could always just skip the dramatics and use your words to tell me exactly what it is you’re trying to get across.”

“Why do I have the feeling you’re already aware of what I’m trying to get across?”

“Because I am. But I want you to say it.”

“If I do...” He cleared his throat. “Will you still go?”

Hunter quirked a brow. “I don’t recall ever saying I was going to go in the first place.”

“This is your one chance, Huntsman, and I’m barely holding myself back as it is. If you pass this up, I’m never letting you leave me. Ever. I’m not a good person. I’m the Dominus of the largest Brumal in the universe and now there’s no one left on the planet who can challenge me. No one will help you if you try to run.”

“There’s still Loni,” he pretended to consider it. “She’d probably get me out if I asked.”

“If you follow one more person out—”

He clicked his tongue, shaking his head for good measure. “No, no, that’s not the script you were going for this time, remember?”

Odin watched him silently for a second and then, “You’re fucking with me, aren’t you.”

It wasn’t a question because it was so obvious, but Hunter responded to it anyway.

“Not yet,” he said slyly. “But I do anticipate the fucking to begin shortly.”

“Huntsman.”

“Snow.”

“I’m trying to be a better person here, at least toward you.”

“I know.”

“So then please stop teasing me and just tell me whether or not you’re going to walk out on me before—”

Hunter shut him up with a kiss, a rough and possessive one. He practically pried Odin's mouth open with his tongue, forcing himself inside to trace the roof of his mouth. He nipped and bit at him and laved at the bites after, backing Odin up until he hit the wall hard, never once stopping the kiss.

He slammed his palm up by Odin's shoulder a second later, pulling him out of the lust-filled daze he'd been dropped into, and he blinked at Hunter, momentarily distracted.

The whooshing of the door closing and the click of the lock setting back into place snapped him out of it.

"I love you," Hunter said, slowly, like he was talking to an idiot. "Why would I leave and what happened to no more running? We're mated. That's for forever, or have you forgotten?"

"Careful, Little Whisper."

"Or you'll what?" He leaned in and lowered his voice. "Threaten to open the door again?" He reached for the keypad a second time before Odin could reply and typed. The lock unlatched, though it didn't open this time. "I have the code too now, remember?"

"You've made your point." Odin shifted and relocked it, not wanting to risk anyone walking in on them even though he was confident Sun would have delivered his order. He grabbed Hunter by the hips and spun, walking him backward until he hit the edge of the bed and toppled down onto the mattress. "Don't say I didn't warn you later."

"I know what I'm getting myself into." Hunter grinned when Odin followed him, sliding back so that the two of them were more comfortable in the center of the bed with him flat on his back and Odin holding himself up on all fours above him. When Odin leaned down to kiss him, he slapped a palm to his chest. "Wait."

"Why?"

"Do you want to talk about it first?"

"I was worried we were already getting dangerously close to romance, Huntsman, but if you're willing—"

He scowled. “I mean about the fact I shot your brother.”

“*Step*-brother.” Odin ran his fingers through Hunter’s hair, running the silky strands between the pad of his thumb. “I’m mostly just glad I wasn’t your target this time.”

“This again? You said you forgave me.”

“It really hurt you know.” He shifted his weight so he could lift his arm and turn it. “I still have a scar from the bullet.”

“You do not.”

“I do.”

“I’ve seen you naked a million times and no, you do not.”

Odin smirked. “A million? Were you counting?”

“Snow.”

He sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it right now because I honestly don’t know how I’m feeling. Relieved mostly. Just, give me some time to process. I promise I’ll tell you once I have.”

“Okay.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Meg—”

“You’re right,” Hunter cut him off loudly, flipping their positions before Odin could figure out what he was about to do and prevent him from doing it. Once he had Odin on his back, he straddled his hips. “Maybe it wasn’t a million. We should catch up.”

He rested his hands on his Huntsman’s thighs comfortably. “I’m here whenever you’re ready to talk about it.”

“There’s going to be a lot to talk about,” Hunter said. “With Frost dead—”

“We’ll figure out the changes as we go,” Odin promised. “Together.”

“As Whisper and Shout.”

“You’re so much more to me than just that.” He grasped the back of his head and lowered himself down so he could capture his mouth in a sensual kiss, knowing the slower pace would drive the other man wild and put an end to this melancholy mood.

There *was* a lot for them to discuss and figure out. But all of that could wait until tomorrow. Right now, Odin wanted one thing and one thing only.

“Tell me you’re mine, Huntsman.”

True to his stubborn nature to the last, Hunter merely grinned and then bit down hard enough on his own bottom lip to draw blood.

“How about I show you instead, Snow.”

Epilogue:

Hunter moaned, too lost in the heat waves pouring out of the both of them and the sparks of pleasure ricocheting throughout his body to care who might be listening on the other side of the closed and locked door.

They were in the Room with a View, just the two of them this time, with Odin seated in the center of the large leather couch same as he’d been that night he’d had Hunter dragged here. Only now, Hunter was the one in charge of his cock, not some stranger picked up at random from the bar.

He leaned back, settling his back against Odin’s chest, his head on his shoulder, as he continued to bounce up and down on that thick length. Snow had his hands secured on his hips, helping him move, rolling his hips to meet Hunter every time he dropped and buried him deep. His thighs were burning but he hardly noticed, the strain from this position only adding to the rush somehow.

Then Odin captured his chin and tilted his head, sealing their mouths together and it was enough to have

Hunter tipping over the edge.

He screamed and stilled, come splattering over his thighs and onto the floor. Before he could start to feel embarrassed about making a mess that someone was no doubt going to be ordered to clean up, he found himself pressed down into the couch.

Odin repositioned himself at Hunter's back, forcing his thighs apart, and then thrust his cock back inside. He took him hard and fast, chasing his own release, shushing Hunter when he started to sputter as oversensitivity took over.

"Tell me again, Huntsman," he demanded, and if not for the collecting heat in his lower region, Hunter might have rolled his eyes.

"It's literally our wedding day," he reminded, only to have Odin drive in as deep as he could go as punishment, causing him to cry out again as his abused ass was made to take it.

They'd agreed not to do anything fancy since it wasn't Hunter's style and had never been something he'd wanted. There was a party happening in the club with an open bar available for the entire night but that was about it. They'd signed the papers with Wren and Jita present as witnesses and the latter had taken them off to be officialized. Since that'd been a couple of hours ago, it was safe to assume they were considered married by now.

He'd almost suggested they skip it since things had run pretty smoothly since Frost's death a month ago, but it'd been so obvious Odin wouldn't drop it, Hunter had eventually opted to go through with it just to make the other guy happy. It wasn't like being married was some great hardship for him in any case. Now, not only would he be recognized as Odin's partner in the Brumal, but by the government.

Though, he was pretty sure he could have just asked the new Emperor to do him a favor and change the law to include Whispers.

“Tell me,” Odin said against the curve of his ear, the gruffness of his voice a good indicator that he was close.

“I’m yours,” Hunter moaned after a particularly rough thrust.

“And?”

He needed a second to catch his breath since Snow was picking up the pace and it was making it hard for him to breathe let alone formulate words.

But Odin didn’t like that, and he growled in warning.

“I love you,” Hunter said, inhaling sharply when he finally felt Odin release inside of him. They both gasped as he emptied, dropping down to blanket Hunter with his heavy body, making it uncomfortable and impossible for him to move.

“Get off,” he demanded after Odin seemed to come back to himself.

“I just did.” He chuckled. “I need a minute to recover and then I can do so again.”

“Absolutely not.” This was already the fourth time. “You know how much we’re paying for this party? The one that *you* wanted to throw?”

Odin chuckled and nuzzled the back of his neck. “Oh, Little Whisper, haven’t you realized I only did that to keep everyone else distracted so I could sequester you away and fuck you to my heart’s content without interruption?”

He opened his mouth and closed it. Tried again. “You did not.”

“I would never lie to you, baby.” Before Hunter could argue there he settled his chin on his shoulder and asked, “Why did you want to come here again?”

After Odin’s confession, he didn’t seem like that big of a deal, so he didn’t bother to hide it.

“This is the first place I saw your dick.” He shrugged when Odin was silent as though he was waiting for there to be

more to it than that.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

He laughed. “How romantic of you, Huntsman.”

Despite his comment about only needing a minute, experience had taught Hunter that after how many times they’d already gone, Odin was going to need at least three, which meant they had time to focus on other things that needed discussing, at least for a short while.

“Loni looked a lot better today,” he said, almost regretting bringing it up when Odin briefly tensed behind him before he got ahold of himself and relaxed again.

After what she’d experienced, it’d taken her a lot of time to get to a place where she was even somewhat back to her old self. Since it’d been too difficult for her to cope here in the club, where she’d grown up with her sister, Odin had agreed to loan her out to Wren for a bit. Both she and Mr. Sun had taken up temporary residence on the Yellow Brick Road, but Hunter had checked in frequently since they’d moved.

All three of them had attended the party and were still outside having fun.

Corbi’s funeral had taken place less than a week after her death. Odin had said a few things but had kept his composure amongst his people. The second he’d been alone with Hunter, however, he’d cried for the girl he’d helped raise and how horribly she’d been taken away from them.

“Loni is strong,” Odin told him confidently. “She’ll get through this.”

“I sent Madam Moon to Wren’s earlier to help her get ready. She told me once she liked when she got to attend fancy events with you and dress up a bit.”

He chuckled. “Corbi always hated them.”

“They were so different.”

“Yeah.”

Odin had thrown a separate funeral for Meg as well. This one had been a lot smaller at Hunter's behest, with just the two of them in attendance. It felt different this time, having an actual body to lay to rest, and though their last encounter had been sour, Hunter had decided not to allow that to ruin the memories he had of her growing up.

Isa Frost had already taken enough from them over the years. He refused to allow him to have anything else.

Which was also why Frost had been denied a funeral, and instead Odin had turned his body into a pile of ash in the middle of the forest and left it there for the wind to take care of. There'd be no marked grave for him.

"Let's get back to the party," Hunter suggested. "We can get wasted."

"Or," Odin drawled, "we can skip that and get right to the part where we fuck."

Sure enough, as if summoned by the sound of the F word, Odin's cock started to lengthen again.

Hunter's gaze wandered to the other side of the room where he'd set his multi-slate aside when they'd entered, not wanting it to get damaged during their rough sex play. The day after he'd reassured Odin he had no intentions of running, he'd woken to find the device next to him on the pillow.

Ever since he'd felt less and less like a prisoner and more like an equal. Even the other members of the Brumal bowed their heads at him the same as they did for their Dominus.

"Thinking of calling for help?" Odin teased, nipping at Hunter's cheek. "I'm sure Yule would be more than willing to risk his neck and storm in here like some damn knight in shining armor for you if you asked."

He huffed. "When are you going to get over that?"

Yule was spending more and more time at Club Cherry as of late, and for some reason, Odin was convinced it was because he'd taken a liking to Hunter.

“We’re friends,” he insisted. “That’s all it is.”

“He wants to sleep with you.”

“He does not want to do that,” Hunter stated, “and you know it, otherwise you wouldn’t even be having this conversation with me. You’d be—”

“Murdering him?” He hummed. “True. Still. If he comes to the door and tells you I ordered him to take you somewhere super secretively, what do you say?”

“Code word?” He still wasn’t sure if Odin was entirely serious about that, but...He wouldn’t put it past him. After what happened with Meg and Corbi, they’d come up with a new system to prevent anyone from being able to lie to either of them in the name of the other.

If for some reason they couldn’t get in touch on their multi-slates and did have to send a messenger in an emergency, they each had a specific word they would share with said messenger to pass along as well so they’d know it legitimately came from one of them. They’d yet to have to utilize it, but it was better to be prepared, especially now that Hunter was officially married to the King of the Brumal.

Isa Frost may be dead, but that didn’t mean Odin was completely free of enemies.

Odin was fully hard now, and he lifted his hips, finding his target and slipping back into Hunter before he could protest.

He moaned despite the burn, dropping his sweaty forehead to the leather couch as Odin began to rock against him, taking things easy to start with.

Like a fucking tease.

“You made it seem like you didn’t want to,” Odin said, “but look at you lifting your ass for me, Little Whisper. Your mouth likes to argue, but your hole is always so greedy for my cock.”

Hunter swore and Odin laughed.

“Shut up.” He would have given him a warning glare over his shoulder, but he was too busy trying to keep from groaning too loudly.

The leather creaked beneath them as Odin picked up the pace.

“Huntsman?” He licked at his shoulder and then blew cool air over the wet stripe, causing Hunter to shiver.

“What?”

“I’ve got another one now.”

He frowned. “Another what?”

“Huntsman,” Odin punctuated each word with a pump of his hips, “Little Whisper. Baby.” He brought his lips to the curve of Hunter’s ear, burying himself deep and holding himself there until he had Hunter a squirming mess beneath him, desperate for some friction to go along with the stretch.

“Snow.”

“Yes,” Odin’s lips curved into a smile, “husband?”

“Oh come on.”

Odin pressed his palms down into the cushion of the couch to brace himself better, then he pulled out to the tip and then rammed himself back in, hushing Hunter when he cried out.

“I’ve got you. You can take it, Huntsman.” He fucked him deep again. “Little whisper.” And again. “Baby.” Again, this time hard enough Hunter’s eyes rolled back in his head. “Husband.”

“I hate you,” Hunter griped, clawing at the leather now, unable to find a good purchase.

Odin pressed a kiss to his jawline. “I love you, Hunter Thorn.”

In retaliation for the brutal fucking he was receiving, Hunter clenched his jaw shut pointedly, but that only caused Odin to laugh again.

Because they both knew the truth even if he didn't want to say it.

Hunter loved Odin, too.

Looking for more Brumal? Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Echo*, a Dark MM Sci-Fi College Romance set in the same galaxy as Sanctum!

Echo

Prologue:

One Year Ago

Music had never been his thing, especially not classical music. As the heir to the Vitality Brumal Mafia, Baikal Void had better things to do with his time than sit around listening to anything that wasn't the sound of a person taking his fist or his cock.

Or, at least that's what he'd thought initially when his Scientific Theory professor had announced they'd be required to sit in on Friday's recital. The music program at Vail University was so good students came from all over the galaxy to attend, and even then, the spots were limited, but that was the extent of knowledge Baikal had when it came to them.

The music building and the business building were on opposite sides of their large campus, so he never crossed paths with any of them, and on top of that, his social circle tended to be of a particular breed. Everyone at Vail University knew who he was, but that didn't mean he'd bothered getting to know any of them, and it would have stayed that way if not for this stupid assignment.

He'd mostly zoned out for the previous twelve or so performances, only staying awake because sleeping in a public space would leave him vulnerable and he'd learned from a young age that wasn't something a person in his position could afford being. His cousin, however, didn't seem to care as much and was busy snoring at his side.

Their professor, seated down on the end of the row, had yet to notice but when the final performer was announced he made a big deal of alerting his students to pay attention. The finale was traditionally done by the most promising pupil, and according to their professor this particular person was the whole reason he'd dragged them there in the first place.

Baikal had been prepared to listen just enough he'd be able to successfully answer questions afterward, but only just. That plan changed rather quickly, however, when the last performer made his way onto the stage.

He was beautiful, and beautiful wasn't a word Baikal often threw around.

Since it was a recital, they were all dressed in the classical white, the gauzy long sleeved shirt hugging the man's graceful frame as he walked to the center of the stage, an intricate instrument clutched in his left hand. His pants matched the same snow color, though made of a thicker material, and he was wearing leather boots that stopped at his ankle.

Every single performer thus far had been dressed in a similar fashion, and Baikal hadn't so much as batted an eyelash, but now he found himself gazing appreciatively across the auditorium, taking in everything down to the most miniscule of details.

Like how the man's hands shook slightly when he finally lifted the instrument and rested the wider end of it against the top of his left shoulder. Or how his strawberry red lips thinned as he clenched his jaw a moment before he noticeably gulped. His spine remained straight and when he lifted his arms he was poised and ready. He appeared as though nervous and lost, yet confident and strong all at once and the juxtaposition caught Baikal's interest like a sharp gambrel hook in meaty flesh.

It took Baikal a second to place the instrument, having overheard others in the audience chatting amongst themselves about a special performance by a prodigy or whatever. They'd mentioned the bieska and he'd conjured a vague image of one

in his head at the time. Looking at it now, it was clear that was the instrument the attractive man held.

The bieska was a rare instrument that only a small few could play. It had a similar appearance to a violin but with six strings. Two on the outside were gold, and four on the inside were silver. The body was made of solid star crystal, a material as hard as diamond but completely clear like glass unless it hit the light just right, then it had a rainbow refraction. There were just as a few musicians who could master it as there were instruments created in the universe, and while he'd heard they had one on planet, Baikal had never been interested in learning more about who that may be.

Until now.

The man's silver-white hair sparkled as the lights shining down on the stage dimmed, casting him in a pale glow similar to moonlight. That seemed to be the signal he'd been waiting for and he lifted his right hand and brought it over the strings, the tips of his fingers only barely making contact as he began to play.

The notes started off slow and almost dreamy, melancholy in their lilt, as a complete and a total hush fell over the entire audience. The bieska, like most string instruments, created sound through vibration, but what set it apart from others was the way it connected with its player and, through them, could produce colors to accompany the sounds.

Soft wisps of neon green and blue seemed to trail off the strings like smoke, twisting and tangling in the air as they floated upward and dissipated. Each one was quickly replaced with another, until a dozen or so of them moved around the man and his instrument, the dim spotlight and his white clothing allowing them to stand out more vividly. As the notes changed, the speed of his playing increasing, so did the colors, until shoots of electric pink and buttery yellow joined in with the blues and greens.

Baikal leaned forward, completely enthralled as he watched the performer.

A range of emotions passed over his face, each one every bit as intriguing as the colors and sounds he was manipulating with his deft fingers. With that crystal on his shoulder, he controlled the mood and emotions of every single person seated in the audience, almost as though he'd become their master and they his slave.

Even Baikal felt a prickle at the center of his chest, and without thinking he lifted his palm and pressed against that spot. A warmth there he hadn't felt in a long time took bloom, spreading throughout his entire system the longer he sat there and watched. Life had become heavy as of late, and it'd gotten more and more difficult for him to find anything to look forward to, let alone actually enjoy.

Though he'd always been a fan of patterns in the past, the consistent routine of home, school, and gym had become tedious on top of it all. Even trips to the clubhouse had proven uneventful, and he'd come close to causing trouble for no reason other than for a change of pace on more than one occasion the past few months. It'd gotten to the point he'd truly believed he was going to be resigned to a fate of soulless existence, forced to grin and bear it for the sake of his last name and all the responsibility that came with it.

He wasn't feeling that way now, however. In fact, a million and one emotions seemed to be going off within him all at once, vying for attention, with one in particular raging louder than the others.

Desire.

Baikal didn't even know the man's name, but suddenly he knew one thing with absolute perfect clarity.

The beautiful performer would belong to him.

The sound came to an end and the auditorium erupted, people all but leaping from their seats as they applauded and cheered. He was one of the few who took their time rising to their feet, his six' two" height allowing him to easily set his gaze back on his target the moment he was standing.

He watched as the man dipped into a low bow and then turned and steadily made his way off the stage and to the back, disappearing behind a large black velvet curtain. Even after he'd gone his presence lingered, urging Baikal to go after him and get him back within his sights. But he'd never been one to hand the reins over to anything, least of all his emotions, and instead of listening he slipped his hands into the front pockets of his pants and rocked on his heels as he considered where he'd go from here.

Suddenly the world didn't seem so dull or suffocating, instead filled with as much color and possibility as the *bieska* had created, and he gave himself a moment to drink it all in and fully experience it. After, he'd get to work.

His new tiny obsession might be an unknown right now, but he'd be changing that.

A Devil of Vitality never failed to catch his mark.

Acknowledgements:

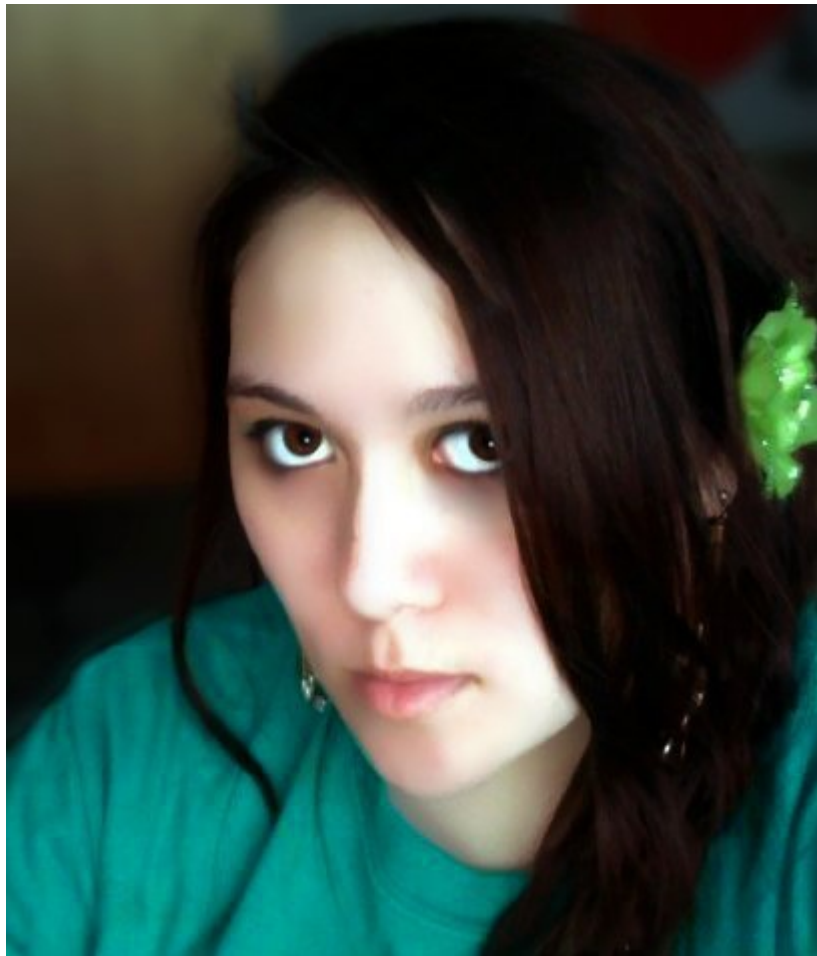
We've made it to the end of Odin and Hunter's story! It's going to be hard saying goodbye to these two, but I hope you enjoyed their HEA as much as I enjoyed writing it. Please be sure to check back for the spinoff novel, *A Shout in the Light: I Will Never Tell*, which will tell Wren and Sun's story. I guess I'm just not quite ready to let this planet go.

Big thanks to everyone on my street team who helped with these three books and loved these characters. There were some rough patches throughout and it was helpful having you guys there to push me to keep going! Special thanks to Amy and Emma for really hyping me up, and helping with editing.

As usual, thanks to all my friends and family, and thanks to Matt and Lisa.

Finally, thanks to you, the reader! I hope you come back for more now that this story is done and check out my upcoming releases even though Odin and Hunter won't be in them!

Happy reading, everyone!



Chani Lynn Feener has wanted to be a writer since the age of ten during fifth grade story time. She majored in Creative Writing at Johnson State College in Vermont. To pay her bills, she has worked many odd jobs, including, but not limited to, telemarketing, order picking in a warehouse, and filling ink cartridges. When she isn't writing, she's bingeing TV shows, drawing, or frequenting zoos/aquariums. Chani is also the author of teen paranormal series, *The Underworld Saga*, originally written under the penname Tempest C. Avery. She currently resides in Connecticut, but lives on Goodreads.com.

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