

CHANI LYNN FEENER



ECHO

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Chani Lynn Feener

ALSO BY CHANI LYNN FEENER

*For a list of YA books by this author, please check her website. All of the books listed below are Adult.

Bad Things Play Here

Gods of Mist and Mayhem

A Bright Celestial Sea

A Sea of Endless Light

A Whisper in the Dark Trilogy

You Will Never Know

Don't Breathe a Word

Don't Let Me Go

Abandoned Things

Between the Devil and the Sea

Echo

Chani Lynn Feener

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Even if you've read one of my books before please do not skip this note. As some of the triggers couldn't be included on the books main listing, I wanted to take the time to include them here.

This book is a Dark MM Romance, and as such it contains certain situations and themes not suitable for all readers. Baikal Void is a spoiled mafia prince who's never been seriously told the word no a day in his life. While he's not the darkest character I've ever written, he's no Fairytale prince either. If you're looking for a redemption story, this isn't it. Baikal is all about unapologetically pushing limits. Rabbit is dealing with some serious trauma, including but not limited to, abuse from a parent. This book does have a HEA, but please mind your triggers!

I want to be clear that I don't condone anything that takes place in this book in real life. This book is purely fiction. These characters are not real and this takes place on a made up planet in a made up galaxy. None of my characters are human, though I sometimes use the word humanoid, and this galaxy is nowhere near ours. If you or someone you know is ever in a toxic relationship, please seek help. You deserve better. And if you ever meet a Baikal, run.

Now onto the triggers. **If you aren't easily triggered or you want to avoid potential spoilers, feel free to skip the rest of this note.**

I tried to note down all of the ones I can think of, but please keep in mind I may have missed one or two. Your mental health is important, if any of these do not sound appealing or may put you at risk, please skip this book. I have other MM books that don't fall under the Dark category that may be better suited for you.

Most, but possibly not all, notable triggers include: Non con, dub con, mild bondage, choking, rejection from family, physical and mental abuse from a parent, stage fright, described panic attacks, murder, torture (not shown on page), stalking, conditioning of the main character, blackmail, exhibitionism (mild), forced proximity, and graphic sex scenes. Finally, lube is only sometimes used. I know that's a big one for some people. Please practice safe sex in real life and remember this is completely fiction and they're not human.

Again, **this book does have a HEA.** Still, this relationship is messy, twisted, and in many ways, wrong. I in no way, shape, or form condone anything mentioned above in real life. This is purely fiction.

This book is intended for a mature adult audience only.

Remember, your mental health and well-being is more important than reading this book. Always put yourself first, and be responsible for your own triggers. You're worth it and you matter.

Blurb

The Devils of Vitality always hit their mark.

Rabbit Trace is a musical prodigy with a secret.

Ever since an event that took place a year ago, he gets terrible stage fright before every performance. With a famous mother who's dedicated her entire life to her craft, and the weight of her expectations heavy on his shoulders, Rabbit is only one panic attack away from crumbling. He knows it'll be easier to escape if he stops running from the memory of that night, but he's stubborn and doesn't want to remember something so horrible his mind thought fit to erase it for him. Monotony has helped him make it through, and he's settled into a dull routine that keeps his mind occupied, the worst of the attacks limited to just before performances. That is until one of the infamous Devils of Vitality suddenly takes notice and decides to invade his life, whether he reciprocates or not.

Baikal Void has many titles.

Each of them comes with a responsibility attached to it. Future Dominus, head of the Vitality Brumal Mafia, is just one of them. He's always known he'd one day have to take the crown, he just never realized it'd be so soon. With his father dying and the inevitable changing of power looming, Baikal struggles to keep his deranged nature under control as he grapples with the upcoming loss. Then one night he's dragged to a recital for his university and sees him for the first time. After one glance he knows he's found his saving grace in Rabbit, the reserved musician who looks like he's battling demons of his own. Just like that, he's got a new title to add to the list. He's going to be the owner of one little ethereal bunny.

Rabbit doesn't understand Baikal's sudden and intense interest, or why the Brumal Prince has gone out of his way to collect enough dirt on his mom to force his hand. Blackmailed into a relationship of sorts, Rabbit fights against Baikal's constant advances and his own tumultuous feelings. Everything Baikal inflicts on him is wrong and twisted, and yet the longer he's made to endure, the more codependent Rabbit finds himself becoming. Baikal promises freedom from the predetermined fate he's always been a slave to, but only if he gives himself over to him completely.

And if he doesn't do so willingly? A devil is always prepared to take what they want, and Baikal Void is no exception.

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 it.

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.

As soon as Baikal took the position of Dominus from his father, he'd name his cousin, Kazimir, his Underboss. Which meant the guy really needed to start getting his shit together and soon.

Not that Kazimir—or anyone else for that matter—was aware of just how close that actually was.

At the reminder that his father was dying, Baikal clenched his hands over his thighs, that urge to wreak havoc on the world around him momentarily blotting out everything else. He fought against it, knowing this wasn't the time or the place to cause a scene. Still wisps of shadow spiraled out of his closed palms, his power getting away from him.

Shouts had the ability to manipulate the elements, but only one per person. Originally from another planet far from here, Baikal's ancestors had all been Shouts, each with a specific gift of their own. His father could control the temperature of things, freezing them at a mere touch.

Kal's power was a bit different. He could manipulate and create shadow, an ability that hadn't been witnessed for a couple of centuries, long before the Void family had relocated to Vitality.

Their professor, seated down on the end of the row, had yet to notice Kazimir napping, 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 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 minuscule 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.

That agitation within him seemed to lighten and dissipate the more he watched the musician. That feeling he'd been carrying around for a few months now, ever since his father's diagnosis, was suddenly replaced by an all-consuming need to know more.

To know everything.

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 beiska and he'd conjured a vague image of one in his head at the time. Looking at it now, it was clear that was what the attractive man held.

The beiska 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 rainbow refraction. There were just as 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 slow and almost dreamy, melancholy in their lilt, as a complete and total hush fell over the entire audience. The beiska, 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 increased, and 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 in 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 song came to an end too quickly 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, 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 tedious or suffocating, instead filled with as much color and possibility as the beiska 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 hit his mark.

Chapter 1:

Rabbit Trace fiddled with the unopened bar of chocolate in his pocket, debating whether or not he could go another hour or so without eating a piece. Since he typically only allowed himself the one, unless he had a performance scheduled that day, he had to make the four-piece snap bar last.

Resolutely, he removed his hand from his pocket and picked up the fork he'd been using to spread his uninviting lunch around his meal tray, continuing right where he'd left off.

Across from him, his one and only friend finally glanced up from the screen of his multi-slate—the body-born computer they all wore strapped to their wrists that acted as both a communicator and computer—and took notice.

“Something up?” Sila asked, pointedly tapping the device off in a show of giving Rabbit his full, undivided attention.

He sighed and pushed more of his prim berries into the cali mash. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk about it, but the two of them, while friends, didn't have all that much in common aside from being loners, and that had changed at the start of this year fairly quickly.

As a sophomore, Sila was dressed in the traditional shade of light gray that was required of him, the top three buttons undone to give a glimpse down the front of his shirt whenever he leaned forward even a little. He'd always had a toned body, but showing it off was new, as was the confidence in his stride whenever Rabbit spotted him around campus. Since they didn't share the same major, and were a couple of years apart, they didn't have any classes with one another. Still, they'd been sitting at lunch together since last year when Sila had quietly asked Rabbit if the seat across from him was taken.

When he thought about it, he supposed it made sense that the younger man had changed from that quiet reserved kid. Freshman year was always scary, but add to the fact Sila had traveled all the way from a different galaxy and it must have been heightened for him. Now that he was a sophomore and had a better grasp of things and the planet, he'd found his footing.

Rabbit really wished he'd find his own already, damn.

As a senior, he was dressed in a black shirt, buttoned to the top. Since it was the beginning of the semester and chilly out, he'd thrown on his black bomber jacket, the one that was big enough on him he felt he could hunch his shoulders and hide a bit from prying eyes. The color-coordinated dress code was a big deal at the university, and he'd traded in his dark gray one with the white stripes on the arms for this new one, knowing full well he'd hate it.

Black didn't blend on campus as well as the two shades of gray, lighter for sophomores and darker for juniors. It stood out in the crowd in a similar fashion to the way the all-white freshmen were ordered to wear did. The only difference was as a senior he had more choice in style and could even wear things with detailing in one of the other three shades.

While his black ensemble made him stand out, it was also meant to be met with respect from younger students, though admittedly, Rabbit wasn't a fan of that type of attention either.

“How are you so...” he waved his hand in the air and then blew out a breath, realizing he was failing miserably to start this conversation.

“I'm not following,” Sila said, tearing a chunk off his roll and popping it into his mouth as he waited for Rabbit to try again.

That was one thing that hadn't changed about his friend. Sila was patient, impressively so.

The guy could sit still for hours losing himself in one thing or another, sometimes just his own mind.

“You seem to be getting on with people fairly well,” he blurted, cringing at himself afterward.

To his credit, Sila merely hummed in understanding and kept on eating. “People are easy once you know how to get to them.”

He frowned, but his friend was thankfully not finished.

“What’s this about? It’s only the third week and you’ve already taken notice that I’ve made more friends. Usually you’d be too wrapped up in studies for that. Are you trying to branch out?”

Rabbit wasn’t even offended by the comment because it was the truth. He could count on one hand all the personal details about Sila that he knew. They were friends in the sense that they’d bonded over being loners, and sure, every now and again one of them opened up a little—like he was trying to do right now—but for the most part, they admittedly functioned more like close acquaintances than actual friends. Aside from their lunches, it was rare for the two of them to meet up anywhere else or hang out since Rabbit was typically busy practicing.

There was also the matter of him not really being allowed to have friends, but that part he smartly kept to himself. He may not be close with anyone, but he was hardly a social pariah, and he intended to keep it that way if only because he had to.

His interactions with Sila were the one small thing he allowed himself, and it appeared he was even messing that up.

“I’m sorry,” he found himself saying. “I’ve been neglectful.”

“Not at all,” Sila corrected. “I enjoy your company. There are different levels to friendship, Trace. We don’t need to exchange diaries for me to consider us as such. I’m only curious what incited this change in you, that’s all.”

He snorted. “Shouldn’t I be the one saying that about you?”

“I’m a sophomore,” he shrugged. “I have to open up sometime.”

“Ouch.”

Instead of apologizing, Sila merely grinned and tapped the table. “Tell me what’s up. Maybe I can help, maybe I can’t, but neither of us will know until you ask me.”

“I have a date,” he said, opting to just rip the Band-Aid off and be done with it. “I’ve noticed you a few times with…” He paused, realizing he actually didn’t know if any of the people he’d spotted Sila with were potential romantic partners or merely other classmates he was getting to know.

“Ah,” he tapped his fingers again, the smile still in place. “You’re asking for dating advice. Is this your first date?”

He glanced around, a bit embarrassed by that, but if any of the other students packed into the cafeteria was paying them notice he couldn’t tell. “Yeah.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Sila reassured. “Everyone’s got their own pace. Who’s the person?”

“I don’t know,” Rabbit said, elaborating when that had his friend quirked a questioning brow. “I mean, I haven’t met her yet. It’s an arranged meeting by our parents.”

“Potential marriage match?”

“Basically.”

“Do they go here?”

“No, they attend Guest.”

“The Fine Arts Academy?” Sila let out a low whistle. “Nice. Sounds like you two will have plenty to talk about.”

“Does it?” He wasn’t so sure.

“You’re both artists,” he shrugged.

“Dating someone like me doesn’t sound appealing.” As if it had a mind of its own, Rabbit’s hand slipped back into his pocket and this time he pulled the candy bar out, turning it a few times as he considered. His music kept him busy and distracted, but that now familiar panic always found a way to attack when he least expected it.

“Why not? You’re a catch,” Sila said. “You’re a prodigy with a set future, rich, hot, and you’ve got that whole mysterious thing men and women both eat up.”

Aside from that last part—which he wasn’t entirely sure he agreed with—all of those things simply meant Rabbit looked good on paper. In reality, he was an anxious mess with mommy issues. The only real thing he had going for him that he could see was at least he was self-aware enough to realize it.

“Is it a guy or a girl?” Sila asked absently, gulping down half his can of soda while he waited for a reply.

“Girl. She’s the daughter of this famous composer, Bin Zamir.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

It wouldn’t since Sila wasn’t all that interested in the music scene despite it being a major cultural component to native Vitals—the people who originally populated the planet before intergalactic travel had come about over five hundred years ago.

“Did they show you a picture?” Sila motioned with his fingers for Rabbit to show him when he nodded in the affirmative and hummed when the picture was pulled up on his multi-slate and passed over for him to see. “She your type? We never discussed this before, have we?”

“We haven’t,” he said, taking the device back to peer down at the smiling image himself, “and yeah. She’s pretty.”

Arlet Zamir was a senior same as him and was apparently interested in getting married as soon as graduation. Her father was well-known throughout not only their galaxy, but the neighboring one as well, and Rabbit’s mother hadn’t held back when she’d pointed out how being a part of their family could aid his career in the future.

Because to December Trace, Rabbit would never be good enough to make it on his own.

He shoved that thought aside and focused on the picture, noting how friendly and open Arlet appeared to be. She had lovely lilac hair, silky and straight, shoulder length. Her eyes were round and the color of honey, practically gold in their luster.

Lilac was a color he’d yet to unlock with his beiska.

“The frown on your face says otherwise,” Sila said.

“It’s not her,” he replied cryptically, not wanting to get into his playing for fear his friend would eventually recognize the truth Rabbit had so carefully and painstakingly hidden from the world. “She’s incredibly attractive. Anyone would be lucky to have a chance with her.”

“Except for you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“What if she doesn’t like me?”

“The real question,” Sila corrected, “is what if you don’t like her?”

His mother would be incredibly disappointed in him, that’s what. And she would retaliate.

“Let me guess,” his friend added, “this match was brought to your mother, not the other way around.”

“How’d you know?”

“She keeps you on a tight leash, Trace.” He smirked when Rabbit showed his surprise. “I don’t look like it, but I pay attention. She’d probably hate hearing that you and I eat lunch together, wouldn’t she. Would most likely say something about how you’re wasting precious time you could be scarfing something down and getting back to the practice room.”

“That’s uncanny.” She would tell him that verbatim.

But then she’d do something about it. December wasn’t all talk, and that was half the problem.

Sila leaned back in the booth and shrugged. “We come from similar backgrounds. My parents are insanely controlling too. Why do you think my brother and I chose to travel to a completely different galaxy?”

Tibera, his home world, was located in the Crystal Sea, whereas Vitality was a part of the Dual galaxy. Sila and his birthmate had come all the way here because they’d wanted to study different things and their parents had been strongly against the two of them separating. In the end, they’d agreed to allow it so long as they remained on the same planet as one another. Because of this, Sila was here at Vail University, and his twin attended the Academy on the other side of the city.

Rabbit hadn’t met his twin but Sila had told him in passing in the beginning of their friendship that they were identical, so it was easy to picture what Rin Varun might be like.

“So what’s the plan?” Sila set the can down. “You going to marry this girl if your mom tells you to?”

He already played beiska because she told him to, and she already controlled the trajectory of his life. She’d kept him so busy with it, in fact, that he’d never had the time to meet anyone he could even begin to consider a potential romantic partner. At twenty-two, Rabbit had never even been on a date, therefore he’d never gotten far enough for marriage to even be a thought crossing his mind.

His father had died when he was a baby and his mother had remarried a couple of times, the relationships never lasting. Everything he knew about the concept of romance came from outside sources, he had no personal experience with it himself.

Which meant to him, marriage was sadly nothing special. Another transaction made between two people.

“If I like her,” he said, lying through his teeth. He’d have to accept the proposal even if he didn’t. The alternative was too distressing. “I mean, I don’t want to be stuck with someone I don’t get along with for the rest of my life, but if we do? Sure. Why not? Our parents already approve.”

“Of course,” Sila drawled, “because this Zamir guy’s daughter is the one that suggested it and your mother already sees all the possible ways she can leech off of him and boost her own reputation.”

For the second time in this conversation, Rabbit blinked at him. He’d never openly discussed the relationship dynamics between himself and his mother, and yet Sila had hit that nail on the head seamlessly. Still...

“All I know is Bin Zamir is the one who brought the proposal to my mother,” he said. “I don’t know if Arlet asked him to do so. Why would she?”

“Because she’s seen you?” Sila said it like he thought Rabbit was an idiot for not having put that together himself. “And she’s most likely also seen you play. Who on this planet hasn’t?”

“You think she wants me for my music?” Rabbit’s chest constricted.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

He dropped his gaze.

“Hey,” seeming to realize his mistake, Sila shook his head, “I didn’t mean it like that. Look, you and I are friends and I couldn’t care less about music, remember? I only meant that she probably

heard you and saw you and fell for you. That's all. You've got to remember who you are. Rabbit Trace, beiska prodigy, rising intergalactic star, and son of one of the most famous and influential musicians of all time."

Rabbit slipped the paper wrapper off the candy bar and peeled back an edge of the foil, snapping a piece off and slipping it into his mouth. As the mixture of mint and chocolate exploded on his tongue, he folded the wrapper back over, covering the rest of the bar, and slid it back into his pocket.

That overwhelming anxiety that had started to rush over him dissipated, the comforting taste of mint helping to soothe his disgruntled nerves. It wasn't just all this talk of his mother that was threatening to give him a panic attack in the middle of the cafeteria. It was the idea of having to meet someone new who possibly was only interested because of his music.

Because all that did was draw attention to the fact that, at the end of the day, that's all Rabbit was ever going to be or be good for.

If he didn't play the beiska, he'd be nothing.

On the same token, his mother having already approved of this merger should be giving him some sense of relief. If he and Arlet hit it off, he'd have someone he could count on and confide in for real. Someone he wouldn't have to be afraid his mother would disapprove and get rid of.

Like the last time.

Sila's gaze slipped past his shoulder, catching interest in something, but the moment he noticed Rabbit was done chewing the piece of candy he returned his attention to him and smiled comfortingly. "When's it scheduled?"

"Friday."

"That's two days from now." Sila thought it over. "I have a date that night too. Want to double? It might be easier for you to have a wingman since it's obvious you're hopeful this works out and you can check the fiancé box off your To-Do list."

"Shut up." Rabbit rolled his eyes but didn't deny it. Once he'd graduated, he would go on to perform and build his actual career. Since he wasn't a pop star or anything of the like, staying single wouldn't be beneficial to him. Instead, presenting himself as a family man with a loving partner and a flourishing relationship would.

Or, at least, that's what his mother had told him when she'd announced this plan in the three-minute-long communication she'd left him this morning.

"She already booked the restaurant," he said. "If I change plans and she finds out she'll disown me."

If he was lucky. Which he never had been before.

"Her future cash cow?" Sila teased. "Yeah right. But I get it. You can call me if you need anything, or if it ends up going well and you want to take it somewhere else, send me a text and I can meet you guys somewhere."

Rabbit hadn't considered what they'd do if the date did end up going well. They were scheduled to have dinner, but he wasn't so naïve that he wasn't aware dates could continue past that point if both parties were amicable. Maybe they could grab coffee or something...Should he look up what other things were in the area of the restaurant?

Sila's multi-slate chimed and he checked it quickly before his gaze slid over Rabbit's shoulder one more time. "I've got to get to class. Aren't you going to be late too?"

Cursing, Rabbit realized he was right, getting up and snatching his bag and his tray in a harried rush. He opened his mouth to agree, turning at the same time, and ended up colliding into a

hard surface that most definitely shouldn't have been there.

The momentum had him stumbling back a step, just barely catching himself with his right hand on the edge of the table to keep from completely falling on his ass. The mostly full lunch tray he'd been holding clattered to the ground with a loud sound that caused his ears to ring, but it wasn't the only one.

Another joined it, food splattering all over the black marble floor. The contents also landed on a set of black shin-high boots, smearing condiments that hadn't been on Rabbit's tray all over them and the charcoal-black pants that were tucked into them.

"I am so sorry!" Rabbit looked up at the person he'd just rudely bumped into, about to offer to buy them another lunch, processing too late that a hush had fallen over the entire cafeteria and all eyes were on them.

He met a steely teal-blue gaze and sucked in a sharp breath.

Baikal Void, one of the Devils of Vitality, stood in all his intimidating glory less than three feet away. And he was scowling.

Like Rabbit, he was a senior and therefore dressed in all black, the leather accents of his clothing making everything he wore from head to toe appear expensive—which it most likely was considering what school they went to and who the Void family was.

They were well-known mafia, with criminal ties to other organizations located throughout the galaxy, but they also happened to own or have a hand in more than half the businesses on planet as well. As the only child of CEO/Dominus Sullivan Void, Baikal was set to inherit it all, which would make him the most powerful person on Vitality, even above the Emperor himself.

And Rabbit had just spilled food on his shoes.

He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and pressed against the table, straightening to his full height. He was only an inch or two shorter than Baikal and yet somehow he felt small in the presence of the other man, a feeling he wasn't overly fond of. That added to the realization of where he was and how many people were watching, had him tucking away the insecurity and anxiety, expertly hiding them away from view.

Like a switch was flipping inside of himself, Rabbit's spine straightened and his shoulders squared, his voice lacking the franticness it'd held only a moment prior before he'd realized exactly who it was he'd bumped into.

"Sorry," he said, "seems like neither of us was watching where we were going."

On the one hand, antagonizing the heir to the Brumal was idiotic, on the other, Rabbit's reputation was on the line, and if rumors got around that he allowed anyone—even one of the famous Devils of Vitality—to intimidate him publicly, his mother would be on the first ship back to planet.

Even thinking of that possibility added to his already solid resolve.

From a young age, he'd been taught the importance of public perception. Rabbit was constantly in the limelight wherever he went and his official career hadn't even begun. Forget the planet, the whole galaxy was watching thanks to his being the one and only child of December Trace. If he was weak he'd be stomped on, and having already had personal experience with being berated and told he wasn't good enough, that was something he was certain he did not want for his future.

The hope had been Void would be level-headed enough to accept Rabbit placing the blame on both of them, that way neither had to lose face in front of the entire cafeteria.

Wishful thinking.

Another man standing just over Baikal's shoulder sneered at the suggestion, catching Rabbit's attention with the sound. Though he'd never had any personal interaction with either, like Baikal, his

cousin Kazimir was equally famous on campus, and Rabbit easily recognized him.

Both of the cousins had the same dark, inky hair, but Baikal's was full on the top, whereas Kazimir wore his shorter. The latter also had a set of garnet-colored eyes that would have been gorgeous if they weren't currently trying to light Rabbit on fire through a mixture of sheer will and fury.

"Watch where you're fucking going," Kazimir practically growled. He went to step forward, but Baikal held him back with a raised arm.

Rabbit held his ground, but couldn't help the hint of suspicion from entering his gaze when he set it back on the man he'd bumped into. Behind him, he heard Sila slowly rise to his feet, but while Kazimir looked over, Baikal kept his gaze locked with Rabbit's.

"You look familiar," Void spoke lazily, his disposition the complete opposite of his still-fuming cousin's.

Kazimir sent Baikal an odd look but then told him, "He's the campus prince."

Rabbit grimaced. He'd always hated those stupid fake titles. They were given to the most attractive students—supposedly—and while he was confident enough in the looks department, he was almost certain he'd been given the title based on his social status and not actually due to his face.

A stupid thing to be upset over, and yet he was.

Void tipped his head. "The doctor?"

There were a couple of campus princes, not that Rabbit had ever paid much attention to any of them so wasn't sure who he was actually referring to other than it wasn't him.

"Music," Sila ended up replying, smirking a bit. "Thought you'd be better with faces as the heir to a criminal organization and all that."

A few hushed whispers cut through the silence of the students, but they died down quickly when Baikal's gaze darkened and he set it on Sila.

"He's just a sophomore," Rabbit said, not liking that his one and only friend was getting involved and potentially putting himself in harm's way. "He didn't mean anything by it."

"Sophomore means he's been here long enough to understand how things work around here," Kazimir disagreed. "Respect your seniors is the first rule told during freshman orientation, and I didn't see him giving you any lip."

Ignoring his cousin, Baikal stepped forward, placing a foot directly onto one of the trays as if it wasn't even there. "Instead of wasting energy defending him," he told Rabbit, "you should be worrying about handling yourself. My shoes are ruined."

"If that's the problem," Rabbit replied coolly, "I'll pay for them."

"Think you can just toss money at me and make me go away?"

"It's not about the money," he lowered his voice, making sure the words stayed between the two of them despite all the straining ears. "This is about reputation. So, you need me to pay for a pair of shoes? Fine."

Rabbit wouldn't lose out. Everyone here would praise him for being the bigger person. Rumors around campus would be that he'd cared so little about the whole ordeal, he'd offered to pay just to put an end to it, and for the most part, they'd be correct.

Except he did care, enough that inside his heart was beating a mile a minute. He was careful to keep his expression detached, however, wearing the disguise of the polite yet unapproachable Rabbit Trace. It was almost ironic, how even here, off the stage, he was still putting on a performance.

They stayed like that, caught in a charged moment for a while before the corner of Baikal's

lips twitched. The look was gone as soon as it'd come, but in the next instant, he stepped back and stooped down, picking up both trays from the ground.

"You have no idea what this is about." Baikal shoved one of the trays into Rabbit's chest, forcing him to take it. "See you around, Bunny."

No one had ever dared call him that before. The odd nickname had his mouth dropping open, but he didn't get a chance to react further than that.

Void dismissed Rabbit by walking away without another word.

Kazimir swore under his breath, having clearly been in the mood for a fight, and gave him one last glare as he passed, but Rabbit wasn't paying him any heed, too distracted watching Baikal's broad back as he wandered over to the discard station and dropped his dirty tray into the pile.

Time, which up until then had seemed to magically freeze, kicked back into overdrive the second he slammed his palm against one of the double doors and exited, the cafeteria erupting the second he was gone as if on cue.

"Did you see that?!"

"I know!"

"I can't believe I was here for that!"

"The Princes of Vail are so hot!"

"Forget that, did you see Kazimir? Good Light."

Rabbit tried not to listen to the loud whispers or the chatter, but it was hard when they were only partially trying to be polite about literally talking about him while he was standing right there.

"Careful, Prince of Music," Sila was suddenly at his side, clapping a heavy hand down on his shoulder to shake him out of his daze, forcing Rabbit to finally tear his eyes off the closed door that Baikal had walked through.

He shook his friend off. "Don't call me that."

Rabbit had always hated the nickname, but there was nothing that could be done about it. He'd been dubbed the Prince of Music his freshman year, a title that drew far too much attention. It didn't help that the words "cold and aloof" had been attached as time had gone on, somehow only making people *more* curious about him instead of less.

Fortunately, at the end of the day, it was still nothing more than a dumb college nickname, one he'd leave behind as soon as he graduated.

The same couldn't be said about Baikal Void.

"Seriously though," Sila sobered, dropping the teasing tone. "Being on the Brumal Prince's radar isn't a safe place to be."

"It was an accident," Rabbit reminded, glancing down at the mess of food still on the floor with a sigh. A worker was already coming over with a mop, and he stepped aside, giving the man an apologetic look. "Besides, he's got to have better things to do than waste his time on me."

Sila stared at him silently, but just before Rabbit could ask him why, he shook his head and swung his backpack over his shoulder. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Reminded that he was also now going to be very late, Rabbit clicked his tongue and followed his one and only friend out of the cafeteria, keeping his head held high and his expression blank as he moved through the throngs.

Pretending like he didn't notice all the glances and the giggles and the whispers.

And how he'd never gotten around to actually telling Baikal Void his name.

Chapter 2:

“Your table is right this way, Mr. Trace,” the blonde waitress smiled brightly at him as she waved him to the right of the large restaurant located on the grounds of Club Vigor.

Rabbit’s mom had made the reservation for him, not caring that the price of the place was so far outside the normal university student’s budget he would be the youngest diner there. At least he wouldn’t have to worry about running into any classmates that could recognize him and whisper like they did whenever he passed by on campus.

The restaurant took up an entire floor, the walls on three sides made up of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the hismul court—or were those draftclone courts? Rabbit couldn’t tell, his mother hadn’t allowed him to play sports for fear he’d injure his hands and end his career before it’d even begun. The color scheme was dark warm tones with glass and metal accents, a floating candle orb hovering perfectly four inches over the center of each table.

Uniform, all of it.

Boring.

Like Rabbit.

At the beginning of the semester, Sila had plopped down at the table across from Rabbit, given him one look, and then asked when he was going to stop behaving like a zombie.

Rabbit still wasn’t sure if it’d been meant as an insult or a joke.

“I had the pleasure of watching you play once,” the waitress said as she led him to a table closer to the windows on the right of the entrance. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear when he looked at her. “You were amazing.”

“Thank you.” He tried not to sound too standoffish, but the words came off tight and the way he forced his pursed lips into a partial smile wasn’t much better. It would fit into his image, at least, the unobtainable Rabbit Trace.

Sure enough, instead of being offended her smile widened, and then she was motioning to one of the tables. “Here you are, Mr. Trace. You can scan the code located beneath your holo-orb to access the menu. Will you be needing anything else?”

“Water,” he said. “Two.”

“Oh,” her smile faltered but she caught herself and corrected it, “Of course. Will your guest be arriving shortly?”

“Water sounds lovely,” an airy voice said then, and they both turned to find a young woman dressed in a light green chiffon dress approaching them. “I’ll have one as well, thank you.”

Rabbit had been in the process of taking a seat but stood immediately.

The waitress glanced between the two of them and seemed to realize the woman was his guest. “Of course.”

“Bet that happens all the time, huh?” the woman asked, stepping up to the other side of the table and holding out a hand. “Hi, I’m Arlet.”

“Rabbit.” He took her hand and shook it before pulling back and motioning toward her chair. “Please.”

“Rumor is you’re cold and standoffish,” she told him as she sat, grinning when he followed suit and frowned at her. “I’m glad to see that rumors are wrong. But then, they so often are, aren’t they?”

"I try not to listen." Rabbit had done his best to look into the types of things that were appropriate for a first date, and was at least happy to hear he hadn't botched it from the very beginning.

"Me either," she waved at him, "Besides, I totally get it. You're an artist, right? We tend to be spacy and so caught up in our own worlds from the outside it seems like we're arrogant when in reality, we're space cadets."

Rabbit chuckled and joked, "So it isn't just me then?"

"Not at all." She held her multi-slate beneath the holo-orb light hovering over their table and opened the menu. "Whenever I'm caught up in a piece I walk around like I'm a zombie. I've even been known to bump into walls now and again."

There was that word again. Maybe it hadn't been an insult after all.

"Really?" He tried to picture it. "That's cute."

"Tell that to the bruise I got the last time it happened."

He gave her a once-over and activated the menu himself. "You seem unmarred at the moment."

"I'm between projects," she explained. "That's why I asked my dad to set this up now, actually. I knew I would be present enough for it and I didn't want to mess it up." She stopped and covered her mouth suddenly, seeming to realize what she'd said. "I'm so sorry. That was so pathetic, wasn't it?"

"No," Rabbit shook his head. "No, I appreciate the honesty. I do have to ask though...I'm pretty sure we've never met before?"

"I saw you in Upcoming Magazine," she told him. "The interview you gave was really interesting, and after that, I watched a couple clips of you playing online. You're so charismatic when you're speaking to reporters."

Meaning she'd been physically attracted to him before she'd heard his music. It was stupid, and he didn't really understand why that mattered to him, but it did. He already had one woman in his life who only saw him for the instrument he could play. Rabbit didn't think he could handle having another, no matter how sweet and funny Arlet was turning out to be.

"But no pressure," she held up a hand, the delicate golden bracelet she had around her wrist gleaming in the dim light, "I'm just glad you agreed to this date. If by the end of the night, one or both of us isn't feeling it, at least we got a good meal out of it, right?"

"We haven't tried the food yet," he pointed out, but he laughed again.

It wasn't that he struggled with conversing with people—he'd been called pleasant and polite by every interviewer he'd ever encountered—it was just he so rarely had time for it that when an opportunity presented itself, his anxiety tended to get the best of him. He'd panicked and eaten an entire snap bar in his hovercar before gathering enough courage to step into the club, but now that he was sitting here across from Arlet, all of that anxiety was gone.

"That's fair," she giggled at his comment and then glanced at the menu. "Do you have any dietary restrictions?"

"I don't. What about you?"

"I can, and will, eat anything." She tapped her finger on one of the dishes and a holographic image appeared, projected above her multi-slate. "This looks good. I've only been here one other time with my father and I was too nervous about an upcoming gallery showing to really taste the food."

"I'm technically a member, but I've actually never eaten here," he said.

"It's sort of like it's new for the both of us then," she smiled. "Our first first together."

Her assumption that things would continue going well between them and they'd make it to a second date didn't bother him. Instead, Rabbit found himself nodding like it made all the sense in the world and he was eager to experience new things with her, a complete stranger.

Maybe he was. That's how people stopped being strangers and became something more, wasn't it?

The relief he felt intensified. He'd been so concerned this would be a flop and he'd have to call his mother later and inform her things weren't going to work. If she'd really been banking on this family merger that would most likely be enough to get her on a spaceship home.

"Wow," Arlet was staring over Rabbit's shoulder, a mixture of awe and trepidation causing her earlier smile to wane some, "I heard they were members here, but I didn't think we'd actually run into one."

"Who?" Rabbit swiveled in his seat, immediately spotting the person who'd caught her attention standing in front of the hostess at the entrance to the restaurant.

"The Devils of Vitality," Arlet answered anyway, her voice lowering despite the fact there was no way she could be heard from the other side of the room where the new topic of conversation was. "He goes to your school, doesn't he? The Brumal Prince?"

"Baikal Void," Rabbit said, taking him in one more time before turning back to face forward. "Yeah, he does."

So much for not having to worry about running into anyone from Vail.

"Do you know him?" She asked, and he shook his head slightly, feigning sudden interest in the menu even though he'd already decided what he was going to order a few minutes ago. "Then...why is he coming over here?"

"What?" Before he could look a second time, a figure stepped up to the side of their table, and even without glancing up the tension in the air made it obvious who it was. Still, with nothing else to do but look, Rabbit tipped his head back, sucking in a breath when he found that same teal-blue gaze already on him.

"Um," Arlet cleared her throat, and glanced between the two of them, nervous, "Can we help you?"

"You owe me a meal," Baikal's voice was smooth and rich, deeper than Rabbit expected, and somehow...intimate sounding. Even when he spoke he kept staring directly at Rabbit, paying no mind to the girl sitting across from him who was growing antsy with each passing second.

Rabbit recovered from his initial confusion and rested his elbows on the arms of his chair in a false sense of confidence he was not feeling. "I'm not sure what you're referring to, but we're actually in the middle of something and you're interrupting."

"Am I?" He lifted a dark brow and finally tilted his head toward Arlet. "You're the composer's daughter, right? I heard all about you from Rabbit. Doesn't your father have a contract with Void Quality Sound?"

There hadn't been a threat in that statement, and yet...

"That's not—" Rabbit tried to correct the situation, but she must have caught it too because she didn't give him a chance to explain.

"I'm sorry," Arlet got to her feet and collected her purse, "I didn't realize the two of you already had plans. We can reschedule, it's no big deal."

"Wait," Rabbit stood and went to go after her when she practically raced from the table without sparing him a second glance, "He's not—"

Baikal planted a hand on the space between his neck and shoulder and shoved him back down

into his chair, holding him there with a strength that was uncanny when Rabbit attempted to struggle against it. His grip tightened and he leaned in, bringing his face close enough that Rabbit paused.

“Careful,” he glanced casually around the restaurant, “we’re being watched. Wouldn’t want to tarnish your sparkling reputation as the sophisticated prodigy by causing a public fuss, now would you?”

He was right; all of the people at nearby tables were trying and failing to act like they weren’t eavesdropping. Even though he’d yet to graduate or officially start his career, the entire planet knew his face. The magazine article Arlet had read had been one of the dozens he’d been forced to partake in over the years.

Baikal’s face wasn’t any less unrecognizable.

Vitality was a planet under rare circumstances, governed equally by the Imperial family and the Brumal Mafia. The terms of their alliance weren’t publicly known, but neither party had ever tried to keep their connection a secret. The Emperor ruled in the light, but there was a seedy underbelly that operated untouched by the same laws and regulations that applied to regular citizens.

As soon as Rabbit relaxed back against the wood, Baikal hummed in approval and released him, making his way into the empty chair that Arlet had just been sitting in.

Without skipping a beat, he motioned to a nearby waiter, jumping right in as soon as the man was before them. “I’ll have H4, medium rare.” He scowled at the water Arlet had been given. “And bring me lycaon, on the rocks.”

“Of course, sir.” The waiter turned to Rabbit. “And for you?”

“I’m not staying,” Rabbit said, though he didn’t make another move to leave just yet, seemingly glued to his seat when his words had Baikal sending him a warning look across the small table.

“He’ll have C2,” Baikal corrected. “And put it all on his tab.”

The waiter didn’t confirm with Rabbit whether or not any of that was correct, merely bobbed his head once and backed away.

Rabbit glowered as he watched him go. “Why exactly am I paying for your dinner?”

“Don’t you remember?” He slid his foot out from beneath the table and shook it to get his attention. The boots on his feet were different from the ones he’d been wearing that day in the cafeteria, but his point was apparent.

Shit.

“Fine,” Rabbit conceded since it had been him who’d made the mistake. “I’ll go pay now and —”

“Sit down, Trace.”

The steel in his tone had him hovering with his ass only a few inches above the seat. He may hate what being the son of December Trace made him, but it had come with certain perks, like the fact that no one dared talk to him like that aside from his music teachers and his actual mother.

For a moment, he debated whether or not to try his luck and storm out anyway, but survival instinct got the better of him at the last minute and he ended up obeying the command.

He’d gone his entire life living on this planet and hadn’t once gotten involved in any Brumal affairs. He so didn’t want to start now, meaning if he had to sit here and grin and bear it like every other unpleasant experience in his life just to be done with it? Whatever. He could do that.

“Why are you talking to me?” he asked, opting for the breezy approach. Maybe if he acted like he wasn’t intimidated and didn’t care that his date was just chased off, Baikal would get bored and end this whole thing sooner. “We don’t know each other.”

“Of course we do,” Baikal disagreed just as his drink arrived. He took it directly off the tray before the waiter could place it on the table and took a deep drag of the fuchsia-colored alcohol. “We’re classmates.”

“We attend the same school,” Rabbit nodded, “but the only interaction we’ve ever had with one another was an accident.”

“Was it?”

“Are you messing with me right now?”

Baikal cocked his head, seemingly finding interest in that comment. Enough to make Rabbit question whether or not he’d said the right thing. “Are you up for being messed with, Trace?”

“No, I am not, Void,” he stated firmly. “I owe you for the ruined shoes. I’ll pay for dinner. But what you did just now—”

“It didn’t take much, did it?” He glanced at the exit and chuckled. “She must not have liked you as much as she claimed if she was able to get that scared just from a look.”

A look from the next in line to rule the Brumal couldn’t really be considered *just a look*, but all right. The first part was a little confusing until Rabbit rethought what had happened at the cafeteria and put two and two together.

“You were listening in on my conversation, weren’t you?”

“It was hard not to,” Baikal said. “I was sitting right behind you and you weren’t exactly being quiet.”

Rabbit was actually known for the way he spoke, in an even, low tone. He tried to think back to see if he’d lost his cool that day due to his anxiety about the date, but he was pretty sure that wasn’t the case.

“So,” Baikal settled more comfortably, crossing his legs and lifting the glass to swirl the contents as he spoke, “now that you’ve seen her in person, how do you feel?”

“About what?” He pretended not to understand, grateful when their food was delivered, cutting off the awkwardness at least for a minute.

“She still your type?” the question came as the waiter was still in the process of turning away and Rabbit glared at Baikal.

“That’s really none of your business,” he hissed.

“I wondered if that title had gone to your head,” Baikal drawled. “The whole school treats you like you’re someone important. Looks like you’ve forgotten there are wolves among you.”

“Is that a threat?” Rabbit couldn’t help but frown. “I don’t understand, why are you bothering with me at all right now? This can’t be about a single pair of shoes, can it? They weren’t *that* expensive, and no one from Vail is going to see us here.”

“Putting up a front isn’t nearly as important to me as it is to you, actually, in the same way that money isn’t really all that important to you,” he said. “We all know your family has enough of it to keep you more than comfortable, after all.”

“Please take a look at where we are currently sitting,” Rabbit stated, “*together*. Since you can afford a membership at this club, I’d say money isn’t an issue for you either. If you’re going to try and insult me, at least don’t implicate yourself in the process. It’s sloppy.”

The corner of his mouth tipped up. “Caution, bunny, you’re starting to be more fun than I even imagined. Shouldn’t we take things slow?”

“What?” Confused didn’t even begin to describe what he was feeling. “Did I step into some weird alternate reality or something?” Since they’d already established Void could more than afford his own meal, that wasn’t why he was doing this. It had to be out of pride, which, okay, but all the

cryptic nonsense was adding to what had already turned into a seriously stressful situation for Rabbit.

What the fuck was he going to tell his mom later? And what about Arlet? She'd asked if he knew Baikal and he'd answered honestly...only for the asshole to come around and make it seem like they were chummy.

"That depends," Baikal said. "In this reality, was she still your type, or not?"

Rabbit paused and considered another possibility. "Are you interested in Arlet? Is that what this is about?"

The two of them had gotten along, but the interaction hadn't even lasted ten minutes before Void had arrived and ruined it. If she was up for giving him another chance, that would be great, but if dating her was going to attract this kind of negative attention...Surely his mother would understand that wasn't something that would be good for her career and allow him to pull out of the potential marriage match, right?

Still...

"She didn't seem to reciprocate your sentiments when she ran out of here," he pointed out, only to have Baikal laugh.

"Oh, she and I feel exactly the same about the exact same thing, actually."

Why did Rabbit get the feeling he was missing out on some private joke?

Chapter 3:

When he'd overheard Rabbit telling his friend he was considering the marriage match, Baikal had just about lost it. He'd stood, ready to give the other man a piece of his mind, only to catch himself at the last second when he recalled...they didn't know one another.

Sure, he knew Rabbit Trace, but that didn't mean Rabbit knew him in return.

More importantly, Rabbit didn't know that Baikal was his owner.

But he'd learn.

Soon.

Just, maybe not tonight.

Unable to contain himself entirely, he'd bumped into Rabbit at the exact moment he'd gotten up from the table, ensuring both of their lunch trays had clattered to the floor and the attention of the entire cafeteria had been instantly on them. He'd been curious what Rabbit's expression would be when their eyes met.

It'd been clear he'd recognized who Baikal was, but that was the extent of things. If he'd gotten the same overwhelming sensation of need that had gripped Kal when he'd first laid eyes on Rabbit on that stage a year ago, there were no signs of it.

Admittedly, part of him was pissed off about that. But the other part understood. Rabbit and Baikal were very different people. He couldn't expect him to have the same instantaneous reaction that he'd had. That wouldn't be fair, and considering all the other unfair things he planned to eventually do to the other man, the least Baikal could be in their first official meeting was understanding.

But that was where his patience ebbed.

It hadn't been too hard to find out where this so-called date was taking place, and he'd unashamedly come all the way with the intention to ruin it before Rabbit could attempt to form a connection with someone else.

Baikal wouldn't stand for that. Period.

Now, seated across from him, his tiny obsession was fuming, equal parts affronted at having his date interrupted by a virtual stranger, and flustered because he couldn't figure out why. Rabbit was a smart guy; he knew Baikal must have a reason, he just didn't know what that reason was.

It was cute, watching him try so hard to get a read on Baikal.

It was also infuriating because the more he tried the more apparent it became he wasn't going to be able to hit the mark.

Kal was going to have to spell it out for him, and he was in no mood to do that after witnessing the way Rabbit had laughed with Arlet.

Let him stew a bit longer, Baikal had already waited a year. What was another couple of nights?

"The entire campus is still talking about it," he said then, twirling the contents of his drink so the ice clinked against the glass. "They're all waiting to see how I'll retaliate against you." He grunted. "They're all so certain I will."

"Is that what's going on here?" Rabbit asked, a sliver of nervousness slipping through his otherwise standoffish tone.

He was doing an impressive job of keeping his cool, but after a year of watching him play,

Baikal could see through him easily enough to know how on edge he actually was. Rabbit didn't like the unknown. Wasn't a fan of having things out of his control or understanding, and yet here was a man he'd never spoken to before chasing off his date and talking to him like they were old acquaintances. It should be driving him absolutely mad.

This was why Baikal had settled for this exact approach when he'd decided it was finally time for him to make his claim known.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for being into cliché university drama." Rabbit was getting snarky, that mask of indifference he typically wore on campus cracking. It was a mere fissure, but it was enough to further prove Baikal was getting under his skin and making him take notice.

Finally.

His tiny obsession had the uncanny ability to ignore everything and one around him, moving through life so caught up in his own head it was a wonder he'd managed to make even the one friend.

"Between you and me," Baikal said, "I'm not. My cousin, however...Well, he's a petty asshole. But don't worry, I'll protect you from the big bad wolf, little bunny rabbit."

"Pass," Rabbit's nostrils flared, "And stop calling me that."

Kal had been digging into his food all the while, but Rabbit made a big show of crossing his arms, refusing to do the same.

"You're paying for it either way," he reminded. "But you need to correct that habit of not taking care of yourself. You need to eat."

Rabbit would be the one going home hungry if he kept being stubborn, and while he wasn't pleased with that possibility, Baikal wasn't going to force the man. Not yet, and not with this. Tonight wasn't about dominating, he was simply here to break up that farce of a date and get a feel for the other man. Even after a year, he had no idea what type of proclivities Rabbit was interested in aside from music.

He'd told his friend he was attracted to Arlet. Did that mean he was dead set on a female partner? If Rabbit turned out to be straight, Baikal would most likely attempt to put his obsession to bed. He wasn't above forcing someone to accept him, but *only* if he knew he was their type. Wasting his time on a straight man wouldn't be a fun time for either of them.

"That costs fifty till," Rabbit motioned with his chin at Baikal's plate, "Don't tell me you don't like it. You look like you just ate dirt."

"I was thinking about something unpleasant," he explained, taking another bite of the meat and chewing slowly.

Rabbit watched him for another moment before he heaved a sigh and gave in. He cut into the fish dish Kal had chosen for him with more force than necessary for such a lump of delicate meat and practically shoved the end of the fork past his strawberry-colored lips.

"The Prince of Music knows how to sulk," Baikal teased. "And I get to witness it. Must be my lucky day."

"I like to eat in silence," Rabbit quipped, only to receive a snort in response.

"You're forgetting how I sat behind you in the cafeteria. You and your friend weren't quiet at all."

His fork stilled as he seemed to piece something together, his brow furrowing ever so slightly. "Did you...Come here specifically to mess up my date?"

Though he was happy Rabbit was finally picking up on something that should have been incredibly obvious, Baikal made himself roll his eyes. It wasn't yet time to reveal his dark motives. Too soon and he'd scare the man away, and while he was more than up for a good chase, he'd yet to

sort and organize his many cards.

When he did finally come for Rabbit, everything needed to be in place so he could trap him completely and totally.

His little bunny needed a keeper, and Baikal was the best man for the job.

Fortunately, the perfect excuse chose that moment to walk in through the front door and Baikal grinned, pointing over Rabbit's shoulder. "I was passing the time, actually."

Kelevra Diar, Imperial Prince Third in line for the throne, spotted Kal almost immediately, no doubt sensing eyes on him. He was dressed in a charcoal three-piece suit, but instead of a regular vest he had on one of his infamous corsets, this one black with silver vertical stripes. A single curl of his dark brown hair hung over his right eye, highlighting that scar that ran straight through his brow over the rise of his cheekbone. The eye itself, a computer implant designed to appear just like any other eye, was hazel to match his real one. A slight shimmer of gold was the only thing that gave it away.

The two of them had been thrown together since childhood, the political alliance between their families too important to botch, and luckily they got along well enough. Baikal would consider the Imperial a friend even, though they mostly kept their lives separate and didn't tread on the other's territory.

Which was why Kelevra's gaze lingering a second too long on Rabbit had Baikal's hackles rising.

"I'd invite you to join us, Rabbit," he absolutely would never, "but something tells me you've hit the limit in your socialize meter." Kal stood and adjusted his leather jacket, staring Kelevra down as the Imperial made his way over toward the bar area of the restaurant.

Rabbit stood as well and waved his multi-slate beneath the light until it chimed in payment confirmation. He glanced pointedly at Baikal's half-finished meal. "Let's call this even, shall we."

"Still trying to get rid of me?"

"Your friend is waiting." Rabbit indicated Kelevra who was now seated at the bar with his seat swiveled toward them.

The fact that he'd taken notice of the Imperial when he hadn't once spotted Baikal in a year's time was almost enough to make Kal rethink his entire plan for the night and skip ahead despite his earlier assessment.

"Run along, little bunny," he warned. "The wolves are here to play."

Rabbit grunted. "Since when were devils wolves?"

Baikal almost stopped him when he turned on his heels and crossed the room, but since he'd wanted Rabbit gone and out of Kelevra's sights, he allowed him to have the last word.

This time.

He waited until his tiny obsession had exited the restaurant before he sauntered over to the long bar and took the seat next to Kel. "Perfect timing."

"Is that so?" the Imperial drawled. "And here I was thinking I'd interrupted something."

"Nope." Baikal ordered a drink, waiting for it to be poured and delivered by the bartender before he asked, "What brings you here tonight?"

Kelevra shrugged. "Boredom."

He hummed casually, but in his head made a mental note to himself to warn Kazimir to tread carefully if he happened upon the Imperial in the coming days. A bored Kelevra meant blood at random in the streets, and while Kal wasn't squeamish, covering up murders he didn't personally commit was never his idea of a good time.

"I'll drink to that." He clinked his glass against Kelevra's and gulped down half the contents

in one go.

“I don’t know,” Kelevra smirked at him knowingly, “didn’t seem like you were having a bad time when I walked in.”

“He’s Brumal claimed,” Baikal warned, keeping his tone light despite the way his insides seemed to coil and want to physically strike the man.

“Daddy dearest approved of that?”

“My father doesn’t get a say in things like this.”

“Things like?” Kelevra lifted a curious brow.

Refusing to answer, Baikal sipped at the rest of his drink.

“I’m messing with you,” Kel told him with a shake of his head. “Interesting choice, that’s all. Is this plaything going to be a new permanent fixture?”

“That’s the plan.” Baikal grinned. “I just have to snare him first.”

“Friction on Saturday?” As he was wont to do, he changed topics without skipping a beat.

“Can’t.”

“More important things to do than ensure the future rulers of the planet continue getting along?” Kelevra was only partially being serious. Friction was a place where the members of the Brumal Baikal’s age and the Royals whom Kelevra was forced to interact with could get together to blow off steam.

As in, they’d beat the shit out of each other and call it “passing the time”.

“Ask Kaz,” Baikal suggested. “Maybe he’s free.”

He considered. “He rarely says no to a fight.”

“The two of you have that in common. It’s a wonder you aren’t closer.” Kazimir and Kelevra only got on because they’d been told to by their parents and for no other reason. If not for Baikal between them, one or both of them would have ended up dead by now, and even though they were family, Baikal’s money would have been on Kel coming out as the winner.

Kazimir didn’t stand a chance against the sociopathic Imperial currently lounging at Kal’s side.

“Do something about that,” he stated. “Whenever you’re bored I end up getting a call in the middle of the night wrecking my beauty sleep.”

“Hate to break it to you,” Kelevra said, “but you aren’t all that attractive to begin with.”

“How very like a politician of you, Imperial Prince.” Baikal finished off his drink and set the glass down on the table with a clack. “You’re all good liars.”

“It takes one to know one, Heir to the Brumal throne,” he shot back.

Baikal flipped him the bird as he left, shaking his head when he heard Kelevra laugh. He felt lighter as he made his way to the parking lot, knowing that he’d placed a claim on Rabbit and the Imperial wouldn’t interfere from here on out.

He pulled out his multi-slate and sent a quick set of instructions to one of his grunts, Rhodes, just as he reached his hovercar.

It was hunting season, and he had his eye on one particular bunny.

Chapter 4:

It felt like his chest was about to explode.

Rabbit pressed against the spot over his heart and squeezed his eyes shut, focusing on his breathing like the doctor had instructed when he'd first begun exhibiting signs of panic attacks. Both he and Rabbit's mother thought he'd gotten past them, but really he'd just gotten better at dealing with them on his own.

Not having to listen to her disappointment was at least one less thing for him to be stressed about, and really, that's what his life had come down to. How many moments he could gather in a week, a month, where he didn't actively feel like he was being swallowed alive.

Rabbit!

That voice from his forgotten memories echoed in his mind like a ghostly mantra, and he struggled to repress it.

When they'd first started, the doctor had told him the brain sometimes forgot things in order to protect the person. Whatever Rabbit had forgotten about the horrendous night that had sparked all of this, he didn't want it coming back.

He didn't want to remember.

Rabbit!

His free hand struggled to unzip his black bag which he'd placed on the table in the private dressing room he'd been given before the show. As a senior, it was one of the perks afforded him, a silver lining to add to the abysmally minuscule list. Last year he'd had to sneak off to the bathroom and hideout in the stall to have these attacks. Now at least he could do so in the comfort of his own space without fear of being walked in on.

After what felt like a million years, he finally managed to get the zipper to open, hand diving into the bag to feel around for the half-eaten snap bar he'd placed in there before leaving home. As soon as he got it, he tore the foil wrapper and shoved a piece of mint and chocolate candy into his mouth.

The second the flavors hit his tongue, some of the ringing in his ears abated, and the longer he chewed, the better it got.

He hated this.

He hated how it made him hate performing.

He hated himself for allowing things to get this bad.

When he'd been younger, getting on stage had meant everything to him. Every waking moment had been spent trying to achieve what, at the time, had felt unachievable. He'd idolized his mother and wanted more than anything to be just like her. His very first time playing in front of an audience had been thrilling. Invigorating. Rabbit had walked away from that experience feeling alive.

It hadn't been like that for him in a long time.

Planting his palms on the table, he steadied himself, his breathing starting to even out as he calmed. Were the attacks getting worse? This wasn't even a big show, just a small recital put on by the music department. He'd been asked last minute if he would fill the final slot because they'd needed something impressive due to possible investors in the crowd or some such nonsense. Rabbit had tried to turn it down, citing his busy practice schedule, but then his professor had told him Bin Zimir was going to be in attendance.

Trying to explain that things hadn't gone well to his mother after the botched date had been... horrible was too light a word. She'd screamed at him for well over ten minutes and gone on and on about how this could possibly be a career-ending move. He'd almost blurted that he'd be happy with that, only catching himself at the last minute.

The call had ended with her ordering him to figure out a way to make things right with Arlet, and Rabbit had bitten his tongue and kept to himself that the two hadn't even made it far enough into their date to get to the exchanging of numbers portion.

He'd found her account easily enough on Inspire, the popular social media app that practically everyone in the galaxy used, but she'd set her account to private and had yet to accept his message request. If she blocked him he wouldn't blame her.

Baikal Void might be popular and heir to a massive conglomerate, but he was also Brumal, and even though everyone on campus and in town whispered about how hot he was, that didn't mean they wouldn't scatter the second he glared their way. Like how he'd done the other night to Arlet.

Rabbit still didn't understand what any of that was about, but he figured Void had been waiting on his Imperial friend to arrive and had decided to have some fun with him while he was at it. All that talk about overhearing his conversation about the date with Sila was probably just added in to make him uncomfortable—and it'd worked. He'd been on edge ever since that stupid encounter even though the likelihood of the two of them running into one another again was slim.

They'd gone three years on the same campus, using the same cafeteria even though there were five, without ever having once bumped into one another before. It must have been a fluke that day, a very unfortunate example of the wrong place at the wrong time. Now that he'd messed with him a little, Baikal would no doubt forget all about Rabbit and they could go back to orbiting in their own universes.

And his, whether he liked it or not, involved the beiska.

He glanced at his instrument set carefully on its glass stand in the corner. The crystal hourglass shape winked in the harsh overhanging florescent orb lights that bobbed around the ceiling of the small rectangular room. There was a leather sofa, his makeup table, a single chair, and then another long table that took up the length of an entire wall on the opposite side. Whenever he returned from the stage that table would be filled with gifts and flowers and words of congratulations.

The buzz Rabbit used to get from such things had also dwindled, with one exception.

He turned and leaned back against the edge of his makeup table, staring at the empty space across from him, trying to picture the large bouquet that would await him once he returned. There'd yet to be a single performance in the past year that didn't end exactly that way, though he couldn't quite put his finger on when that particular flower delivery had started to mean more to him than any of the rest.

Flowers that were even now dried and decorating his entire practice room back home. His pathetic attempt to brighten that place where the worst of his mother's punishments had happened.

And so long as he did this, got his shit together, and went out on that stage again tonight, he'd be able to add to that collection.

It was sad, but that's what he needed. Something, anything, to cling to, to make this whole ordeal more bearable. To make it feel worth it again.

A knock came on the closed door and he realized with a start that his mind had wandered to his secret admirer, and in doing so, he hadn't noticed his panic attack was dwindling. When a voice on the other side informed him he was due outside in three minutes, Rabbit straightened from the table and reached for his instrument.

He'd dressed in all white as per usual, the flowy material of his long-sleeved shirt drifting around him as he exited the room and made his way down the wide black hallway toward the stage area. Workers and other students bowed their heads to him in greeting as he passed, but he paid them little to no attention, too focused on talking himself down from any lingering negative emotions that may try to creep their way forward now that he was growing ever nearer to the stage.

What if he messed up and embarrassed himself in front of everyone?

What if it made its way into the news and his mother found out?

What if it somehow ruined her reputation?

What if she decided to hurt him for it?

She'd told him in no uncertain terms on many occasions that he was nothing more than an extension of her, and therefore everything he did had to be carefully controlled and considered. He couldn't afford to act rashly, not when she'd worked so hard to get herself to the place in her career that she had.

Maybe once upon a time, she'd been an attentive mother, but if that were so, he couldn't remember it very well, just snippets here and there. It'd taken December over a decade to master three colors on the beiska. Rabbit had done it by age seven.

It'd pretty much been downhill for him from there. Everything became about the instrument and music. She'd enrolled him in more programs than he could count, with a revolving door of tutors. If he didn't perform up to her standards, she'd punish him—sometimes with something minor, like withholding food or locking him in the dark. Other times refusing to allow him to sleep until he got something right. She very rarely hit him, but she was a pro at finding the heaviest object around and flinging it so it would do the most damage without leaving marks on his arms or face, where they might have been seen.

On some level, he was able to acknowledge this was abuse. But her methods had gained her the results she'd wanted, so there was no chance of convincing her she was in the wrong.

Rabbit was only two colors away from being able to claim the universal record.

Not that he'd ever actually accomplish that. It'd been almost two years since he'd last made any progress, and with the way things were going, it seemed unlikely that would change any time soon, if ever. The only reason she hadn't done something about it already was because she'd been off-planet for most of that time.

The beiska was a rare instrument crafted from a special gemstone found only on Vitality. The stone, though not sentient in any sense of the word, was believed to be made from a special component that allowed for the energy exchange. When turned into an instrument, that exchange of energy was able to turn soundwaves into vivid colors. The catch was, most people's energy wasn't compatible, and even if it was, that didn't mean they'd be able to unlock the stone and play the beiska the way it was meant to be played. His family had originated on planet, and there'd been several beiska players in their history.

Rabbit stopped at the foot of the stairs at the side of the stage and waited for the announcer to present him to the crowd, his hand tightening on his instrument. Since the connection made to the stone had nothing to do with an individual hunk of rock, he could smash his instrument to bits right now and go out and get a new one—for a hefty sum, but the point was he'd be able to play it just the same.

It'd been studied thoroughly, but there was still so much they didn't understand about how and why some people were able to tap into that connection and exchange energy when others weren't. It didn't help research any that the sensation was often described differently by different users.

For December Trace, when she opened herself up to the beiska and played, there was

apparently a warmth that wrapped itself around her. She'd described it as the feeling of coming home, whatever the hell that meant.

For Rabbit, it felt more literal. The exchange was just that, an exchange. When he strummed his fingers across those strings and orchestrated them to his bidding, he felt them tug back at him. There was an invisible pull there, between them, a siphoning sensation that always tangled him up in his own emotions and spat him back out at the end. More often than not, the crowd and the stage and the lights, all of it, disappeared when he was playing. It was just him and the music and the colors and the feelings gripped him and charged through him like bright, shocking electricity.

By the end of it, he'd be exhausted, both mentally and physically drained, but even that felt amazing.

Sometimes, when he was particularly upset at his mother, he liked to convince himself that feeling was the only reason he was still doing this. That he was staying for him and not for her. Not because she'd set this path in stone for him before he'd even been old enough to crawl, let alone walk.

He was good at pretending.

Even with himself.

His name was announced and he found his feet taking him forward, climbing up to the stage only to come to a stop once he'd reached the center where a glass chair had been set out for him that he had no intention of using. He always stood when he performed; most beiska players did.

The lights were bright enough to blind, turning the faces of the crowd into a blurry dark mass. Vaguely, he wondered if Bin Zimir was among them, watching and waiting to be wowed so he could either tell his daughter to forget all about Rabbit or convince her to give him another chance.

He wondered if a man like Bin Zimir had time like that to waste, and thought probably not.

Then the lights dimmed some, signaling it was time for him to begin, and he wiped all thoughts from his mind except one.

If his secret admirer were here tonight, he deserved a show.

Rabbit inhaled through his nose and let the air settle in his lungs for half a beat, then he exhaled as his fingers found the strings and he drew out his first note. The sound was sharp, a wisp of golden yellow shooting from it into the air, followed by another and another as he strummed until it would appear as though sparks were flickering off the instrument.

The gasps from the audience faded into the background as he focused on it, on that tugging that had already begun from his core, urging him to give more to the music. To give it all.

He picked up the pace, hitting a different combo that had yellows and reds springing into the air and mixing to create a smoke cloud of orange. He'd chosen a more upbeat song, wanting to end the night on a high note for the audience and the colors reflected that. Like with all of the songs he played, there was a story to the tune even if it lacked words, and he pictured it in his mind, the raucous laughter and the feeling of being free that the sound elicited.

He thought of the good times and recalled what they'd felt like. When he'd unlocked his first color and how proud he'd felt when his mother had caught him up in her arms and spun him in circles, elated at his progress. When she'd called him her perfect little musician and put him to sleep with whispered stories about how when he was older he'd take the world by storm with his genius.

A thread of anger managed to escape then, and he changed trajectory before it could affect the colors, shifting his thoughts back to his secret admirer instead and how excited he was to go back to his dressing room and look at the new flowers he'd no doubt receive. How confident, and therefore cocky, that probably made him, to think without a shadow of a doubt that there was a person out there

who was still impressed by him enough to continue sending anonymous, and expensive bouquets.

The corner of his mouth tipped up because he was that sure, and being that certain about anything when everything else in his life had been shrouded in the murky unknown brought a sense of relief and excitement.

By the time he came to the end of the song, there was a lightness in his chest, almost as though someone had filled him up with helium and if he wasn't careful he'd try to take a step and simply float away.

The crowd erupted the second his last note faded, the twirling ribbon of gold dissipating directly over his head.

He lowered the instrument and gave a deep bow, sucking in oxygen while they couldn't see his face to help steady himself. Those feelings of intense joy couldn't be expressed the same way the colors of the beiska could. His persona had been carefully crafted by his mother every bit as much as her musical skills had been, and cheerful wasn't an attribute she'd allotted him.

Rabbit Trace, the Prince of Music, straightened and gave one last long look out at the crowd before bowing politely a second time. Then he vacated the stage, the continued cheers and applause fading as he strode down the hallway back the way he'd come only seven minutes prior.

"Great job as always," Professor Ludo told him when he made it to the door of his dressing room. "And if my word isn't good enough for it," he pushed open the door and nodded inside, "all of that should be."

As anticipated, the room, which had been practically barren save his backpack when he'd left, was now filled entirely on one side with wrapped gift boxes and flowers held in vases and a range of colorful papers.

"You'd think you were an intergalactic pop star with how much stuff you get," the professor said, though his smile never wavered and it was clear it was all in good fun. "Thanks for agreeing to fill the spot, Rabbit."

"Of course." He bowed and then the professor was thankfully called away, leaving Rabbit alone. He kept his composure until the door was clicked shut behind him and he was safe from any prying eyes, but then he practically darted across the small space toward the center of the table where one gift in particular seemed to beam at him.

The number of flowers increased with every performance, and Rabbit grinned as he lifted the bouquet from the black opaque vase and buried his nose in the blooms. Twelve in all.

The Rose Ephemeral was a rare breed that cost a small fortune all on its own, a ridiculous splurge Rabbit would never have considered making on himself. Before he'd received his first one, he hadn't even seen one in real life.

The unofficial name for them was mood roses because they started with dark, blood-red petals, velvety soft to the touch, but their colors changed as they wilted and dried up. There was a range of different colors they could be, but aside from the rosarian who'd cultivated them, there was no way of knowing exactly what color they would end up being in the end.

So far, Rabbit had collected a blue the same shade as the ocean on a warm summer evening, a white that glittered silver in direct light, several variations of red to reddish-pink to pink, and a pale purple. He'd looked up all the varieties and had sort of turned it into a game. He was hopeful that one of the ones he was holding now would end up being a buttery yellow, one of the few colors he'd yet to collect.

He set the bouquet back and plucked the black card from the clip. The paper was smooth to the touch with gold foiling on the outside, the word congratulations shining at him. Every card was the

same, and he'd found himself relying on seeing that word almost as much as he did his candy bar. Logically, he knew the sender meant to congratulate him on his performance itself, but Rabbit had begun to associate it with praise for making it through another ordeal. Another panic attack brought on by another performance in front of another crowd that he hadn't wanted to do.

Flipping the card open, he smiled to himself when he saw the scrawled sentence written across the white inside in red ink.

I enjoyed tonight.

As per usual, the single sentence had no signature after it.

Slipping the card back, Rabbit turned his attention to some of the other items, wanting to hurry up and get out of there before the recital was officially over and the hallways flooded with other performers and people from the crowd.

His gaze caught on a small blue box that had been set directly next to his flower delivery, and he opened it to find a silver necklace. He pulled it from the box and inspected the fine chain it'd been strung on before running his finger over the center, tracing the one-line rabbit depicted on it.

The charm was rectangular, a bit smaller than the pad of his thumb. And the delicate engraving of the rabbit showed the creature mid-leap. There weren't many on Vitality, since the creature wasn't native to the planet, but they were common on others in this and most galaxies, so it wasn't too odd that the sender had been able to find jewelry with an image of one. Still, it was a pretty unique gift, definitely not something a random fan would have sent considering the craftsmanship, and therefore, most likely the cost.

It was also very to his style. Rabbit wore a single silver ring with a sapphire stone set in the center on the middle finger of his right hand when he wasn't performing. He also had a thin silver rope twist chain bracelet on the same wrist which he never took off.

There was a card, but he was already anticipating the gift having come from Sila, since he was the only person on the entire planet he was close with. It was a fancy gift coming from a friend, but since he was usually given flowers and stuffed animals, he didn't expect something that expensive to come from anyone else.

Which was why he was so surprised when he opened the card to find the gift had come from Arlet. It was typed and not handwritten, so most likely sent directly from whatever jewelry store she'd selected the necklace from, but was signed with her name. The note itself expressed her desire to give their date another try, with an invite to the Seaside Cinema, a local movie theater located on the other side of town near the beach. The time was listed as tomorrow evening, and she'd apparently already booked them a viewing room.

The only thing missing from the card was her number, so there was no way for him to contact her to confirm other than to simply show up. He checked his multi-slate which he'd left on the table when he'd gone to perform, but she still hadn't accepted his friend request or responded to his message on Inspire. Maybe she didn't actually use the app that often.

Thinking about their botched first date made him recall Baikal Void, and his good mood soured some.

Should he figure out a way to turn down Arlet's invite after all? Rabbit was already mentally drained from the performance today, and he didn't think he could handle going out in public so soon and putting on that fake mask of his for the entirety of a movie and, most likely, dinner afterward.

As if able to read his thoughts, his multi-slate chimed then, and when he glanced at it his spine stiffened.

His mother had sent him a message from Ignite, the planet she was currently holding a concert

on, asking how the show had gone and whether or not Arlet had come to support him.

The necklace still in his hand suddenly seemed like a lifeline. If she'd given him it, didn't that mean she'd attended the recital with her father? Had she been in the audience just now? Should he try and go find her?

He knew what his mother would say if she were here. She'd tell him to leave and do just that, to chat up Bin Zimir while he was at it and make a good impression. But...that sounded exhausting.

His only other option was to go on this second date and hope things went better this time than they had the first.

Mind made up, Rabbit shoved the necklace into his pocket and sent a reply to his mom that he'd fixed things with Arlet and everything was now back on track.

Then he shoved the rest of his snap candy bar into his mouth, barely even tasting the chocolate or mint as he chewed.

Chapter 5:

The darkening azure blue sky had Rabbit tipping his head back and taking a moment to take it and the briny seaside air in. The two moons that rotated around Vitality—Illusion, and Echo—were tinged gold. The sound of hovercar engines and the soft lapping of waves in the distance created a hum that could have lulled him into a sense of easiness...If not for the massive building looming before him.

Rabbit didn't have time for movies so he'd never visited the Seaside Cinema before, but knew it was one of Sila's new favorite date locations due to the privacy features it offered. The Seaside held a couple of main auditoriums, but for the most part, people came here to rent out the private viewing rooms. There was apparently a range of films one could choose from, with the promise of anonymity, and though he didn't quite understand what that meant or why it would be so important to someone to hide their movie preference from others, that wasn't the reason he was here anyway.

He'd come for a redo date with Arlet, whom he still hadn't been able to get ahold of since yesterday. The necklace she'd gifted him was around his neck, and he'd chosen an all-black outfit, this time with a matching tie. The silver and white multi-slate and the candy bar shoved into his left front pocket were the only two items on him. He'd debated whether or not he should come with a gift but opted to wait it out. If things went well, he could get her something next time, with a better understanding of her likes and dislikes.

He fiddled with the rabbit charm as he entered through one of the sets of eight doors leading into the black and red building. It was a thoughtful gift, and he didn't want to come off ungrateful by simply purchasing the first thing he saw and passing that off to her as though he'd put as much effort into it as she clearly had.

The thin carpet of the theater was inky black with random stars and constellations in gold throughout. There were two check-in booths, one on each side, and straight ahead was the concessions stand. The station to his right had a sign that said it was for public viewings, whereas the one to the left was for private, so Rabbit headed that way.

A woman dressed in the Seaside uniform of red ribbons and a sleek white dress shirt greeted him with a polite smile as he approached. "Good evening. How can I help you?"

"I've got a reservation," Rabbit explained. "It should be under Zimir."

The worker clicked on the flat screen before her, typing in the name and scrolling with her finger through the list before finding it. She tapped on it and scanned the number of guests and the location of the room and then hit another button to print out one of the tickets on a heavy clear plastic card.

"You can either keep this with you or scan the barcode into your multi-slate for easier access. There's a bathroom on each floor, and all doors to private rooms lock automatically when they're closed. You've selected our premium package, so there's no need to be concerned about being overheard so long as the door is shut. The room itself is soundproof."

"Great," that sounded like a lot, but sure, "Thanks."

Rabbit took the card and immediately added it to his multi-slate. He didn't think he'd leave to go to the bathroom, too eager to get this done and over with, and hopeful their chemistry was as good as that night at dinner, but better safe than sorry. How embarrassing would it be if he did leave only to

be locked out?

“Your preselected menu is on its way up to your room now,” she added just as he was about to step away. “It should be there by the time you arrive. If you need anything else, there’s a call button located by the door. Thank you, and we here at Seaside hope you enjoy yourself this evening.” She placed her hands over her stomach and bowed.

Rabbit nodded his head a bit awkwardly and then turned to find which of the two hallways set between the check-in stations and the concessions he’d need to take. As he went to find the room, he thought about how considerate it’d been of Arlet to also order them food ahead of time. It seemed like she was interested in trying it again, and the set of his shoulders relaxed some.

He’d had more time to adjust to the idea of getting married, and while it wasn’t necessarily something he would have chosen for himself, so long as the two of them got along, he couldn’t come up with a good enough reason why they shouldn’t. The positives far outweighed the negatives, especially since their parents had arranged everything and were on board with this merger.

Besides, if he did agree to date her, that meant he’d be able to spend time outside of the practice room. His mom wouldn’t say no to him having to go out with his girlfriend or meet her friends.

Rabbit could maybe start having an actual life.

He had to take an elevator to reach his level, but finding the door to his room was easy enough since large golden numbers were nailed to each, matching the one on his ticket. He’d kept hold of the card and used that on the panel, listening to the soft click of the lock a second before the thick black wood swung inward on its own.

The room inside was on the smallish size, more intimate than he’d been expecting, with a single loveseat in black leather set a little bit closer to the large glass screen that took up the entire wall opposite the entrance. Currently, it was blank, and he wondered if Arlet had also chosen the movie in advance or if that was something they were going to do together.

Those nerves returned tenfold as he realized he’d have absolutely nothing to contribute if that ended up being the case. Rabbit couldn’t even recall the last time he’d seen a movie. Since he didn’t bother surfing around online, he didn’t even know any of the latest titles of ones that were out and popular.

Arlet came from a musical background though, surely she’d understand that he had to dedicate most of his time to practicing the beiska. If there’d even been a slight chance that she would hinder his future career, his mother would have never agreed to the arrangement, of that he was positive.

A small table set off to the side had a spread of various movie theater foods, from the traditional gummy jiggles to the salty and buttery puff pops. The puff pops reminded Rabbit of a cereal he used to eat as a kid and he picked one of the small, circular balls from the top of the pile and smiled at the buttery taste when it hit his tongue.

There were several bottles lined up behind the food, but when he checked them, they were all alcoholic beverages. Some of the name brands stood out from fancy dinners he’d been forced to attend with his mother and some big-wig over the years, but since he didn’t typically partake himself, they weren’t all recognizable.

Was Arlet a big drinker? They’d both had water at the restaurant. Had he made a mistake by assuming she’d want to start with that and check the menu herself? He was so bad at this.

The sound of a screen coming on distracted him, and he turned with a frown, watching as it flickered to life. Since she wasn’t here yet, he expected there to be a beginning sequence, something monotonous yet informative, like a video explaining where the exits were located or what to do in the

chance of a fire.

Instead, a movie began to play, skipping completely over any type of credits. The camera trailed down a dark, empty hall and then turned into a room cast in the same shadowy ambiance. There was a bed and it seemed to be heading toward that, but Rabbit was busy searching the loveseat and the wall for the remote so he could pause it, not wanting Arlet to miss anything.

He was so frustrated over not being able to locate one, that it took him a minute longer to process the new sounds coming from the surround sound speakers.

Heavy breathing.

A gasp followed by a moan.

Brow furrowing more, Rabbit turned back toward the screen, eyes widening slightly when he was met with an erotic scene straight from a porno.

Not figuratively.

Literally.

A muscular man held down a smaller one with a hand on his throat. The smaller man had his wrists bound and attached to the head of the bed with a red ribbon, a blindfold over his eyes. They were both nude, and hard, and Rabbit shifted on his feet when suddenly the camera focused on a rather large cock just before it pressed against the smaller man's entrance and began to push its way inside his body.

The smaller man jerked and cried out, but the one on top merely chuckled and kept going.

Rabbit had watched porn before, but his experience with that was limited. Though he was bisexual, he'd only checked out male and female couplings, mostly because he'd typed in just the one word—sex—those handfuls of times he'd gathered enough courage to do so. He didn't see anything wrong with people enjoying this type of thing, and even though he'd never experienced it himself, he didn't think there was anything wrong with sex either. But his mother...

He'd always been too afraid to really explore, even just on the internet. Once when he'd been eleven, she'd searched his history on his multi-slate and had punished him for a week after finding out he'd watched a three-minute clip of a dog running in a field that a classmate had sent him. She'd called it a massive waste of time, three minutes he'd never get back that he could have spent improving his skills with the beiska, yada, yada.

Even at that young age, he'd understood she was overreacting. But knowing something and being able to stand up against it were two different things, and Rabbit, even with his mother currently off-planet, was too afraid to push her to bother trying.

The muscular man was all the way in now, giving shallow thrusts that had the other one groaning.

Rabbit's dick bumped against the candy bar in his pocket and he gasped, shocked to find he was semi-hard. He needed to turn this off before—

The door opened and he spun on his heels, ready to explain to Arlet, only the person who stepped into the room wasn't her.

Baikal Void closed the door behind him and stopped, slipping his hands into the front pockets of the leather jacket he was wearing. He'd dressed in black as well but was also wearing dark-framed glasses. Despite the fact the screen had started playing, the lights were still on at full brightness, some catching the small silver dagger earring in his left ear and the trail of silver studs that traveled over his lobe.

Even though they were in the same color, and Rabbit's clothing was name brand every bit as much as Baikal's, it looked better on the Brumal Prince. Something about the way he carried himself,

about the aurora he gave off, made him seem both alluring and deadly at the same time.

For some reason, Rabbit was reminded of the poisonous plant they were learning about in Vital Sciences, the tundra. It was a low growing plant that bloomed perfectly triangular petals the same teal blue shade as Baikal's eyes. Their vibrancy attracted insects and small rodents who supped on them, completely unaware that the plant was poisonous. In the wild, beautiful things tended to be.

There was no question anyone who got too close to Void would end up no better than those who ate from the tundra plant. On the contrary, their deaths would probably be slower and more agonizing even.

At least in the cafeteria and the restaurant there'd been space and tons of it, plenty of room for Rabbit to feel like he could still breathe, even under the other man's scrutiny. But now, in the confined viewing room that wasn't the case. The danger was palpable, alarm bells ringing in his head so loud, he almost forgot himself and gave in to it.

At the last second, he somehow managed to pull himself together and keep his composure, though he did nothing to hide his displeasure at finding Baikal instead of Arlet.

"You aren't supposed to be here," he quipped, pleased when his voice came out firm.

Baikal remained by the door but tipped his head toward the food table. "You tried the puff pops? Interesting. I expected you to go straight for the sweets."

There were more sugary snacks included than salty ones. Rabbit hadn't noticed before.

He frowned before he could help it, glancing at the paper bucket he'd nibbled from earlier. There was no way anyone could tell he'd eaten anything from it.

"And that," Baikal's voice trailed off, catching Rabbit's attention and forcing his eyes back on him only to find the Brumal Prince was staring at the spot between his legs. "That is also interesting."

With a start, Rabbit recalled his state of partial arousal and moved to cover himself, freezing when Baikal let out a deep, guttural sound that had the hairs on the back of his neck rising.

"Did you just..." He blinked. "Did you just *growl* at me?"

"I guess that answers that question," Baikal said, though it was clear the words were more for himself and he was merely speaking out loud to get under Rabbit's skin.

Which he was succeeding at.

"What question?" Rabbit huffed, moving both palms in front of his, thankfully, quickly deflating dick. "What are you even doing here? I—"

"Waiting for someone?" He quirked a dark brow. "The necklace looks good on you, by the way."

"You—" Rabbit reached for it and would have torn it from his throat but Baikal's gaze hardened in warning and for some incomprehensible reason, Rabbit's body reacted the same way it had when he'd growled a moment ago.

His muscles locked up and he stood there, unable to get his own limbs to obey. He wanted to tear the necklace off, toss it at the other man, and storm out of here, appearances be damned. But it was like his feet were rooted to the ground.

"You tricked me, didn't you?" he could speak at least, though the words came out tight.

"It's not my fault you fell for it so easily."

"Why?" He'd worry about what he was going to tell his mom about this botched date—that apparently had never really existed in the first place—later. Right now, he was more concerned over what the Brumal Prince wanted him for. "Why can't you just leave me alone? It was an accident. It's not like I meant to spill food on you."

"You're smarter than that." Baikal took a single, calculative step away from the door. "You

know this has nothing to do with what happened in the cafeteria.”

He’d sort of figured, yeah, but he’d hoped he was wrong.

“That’s literally the only interaction we’ve ever had,” Rabbit said. “What other possible reason could you have for manipulating me to this extent? Arlet—”

“Stop bringing her up,” he stated. “Not only does she not matter, you’re also never going to see her again. Understand?”

“Not even a little,” Rabbit admitted.

“That’s okay. We’ll get you there.”

Rabbit had left practice early for this, and only because he’d believed it was set up by Arlet to give him a second chance to impress her and please their parents. He didn’t have time to waste fooling around with anyone, let alone someone like Baikal Void. Knowing he’d been tricked had his blood boiling, but knowing that also meant he’d wasted precious time?

“I’m leaving.” Even though it meant he’d have to walk right past him, Rabbit boldly moved to the door, intent on getting out of there before the intensity in the other man’s gaze unraveled his nerves even further.

He only made it to the center of the room where Baikal was standing before his arm was snatched and he was roughly shoved backward.

Rabbit stumbled into the back of the loveseat, catching himself over the top and steadying himself on his feet. He wanted to be angry—was angry—but the fear was greater, blanketing over him so he momentarily couldn’t think straight as he stared in shock at the Brumal Prince.

And that’s when it really hit him who he was here with. The Devils of Vitality weren’t only called that because they were the sons of the most powerful and influential men on the entire planet. They were straight-A students who excelled at every subject and sport they attempted, who had enough money to buy anything they wanted. Including silence.

Which was why it was well-known they tended to be vicious and capricious when crossed.

Only, for the life of him, Rabbit couldn’t figure out where or how he’d managed to piss one of them off this badly, and Baikal Void no less. It just didn’t make sense.

“You seem skittish,” Void pointed out, a slight frown marring his face now. “Just from that?”

Rabbit’s mouth hung open a moment before he was able to get himself together. “You tricked me into coming here for reasons still unknown and just physically assaulted me! Of course this is my reaction!”

“Would you have come if I’d sent you the invitation with my name on it?” he asked, grunting when Rabbit didn’t reply. “That’s what I figured.”

“We don’t have anything to do with one another,” Rabbit reminded him.

“That,” Baikal advanced, watching when Rabbit’s spine stiffened, “is where you’re wrong, tiny obsession.”

“What—” The rest of that sentence died in his throat when suddenly Baikal’s arms were at either side of him, caging him in against the back of the couch. Even though they weren’t touching anywhere, Rabbit could still feel the heat of him, could smell the eucalyptus and oddly a burnt wood scent wafting from his toned body.

It was a unique smell and not one he was unbound of.

In the span of a blink, he forgot all about the weird nickname and was instead hyperaware of the few inches of space left between them, the other man’s mouth hovering close enough all he had to do was take half a step forward and he could capture Rabbit’s mouth.

“What naughty thoughts are racing through that sensual little head of yours now, hmm?” Baikal

drawled, husky and low, in a way that had Rabbit shivering. He laughed. "I'm pleased. I was worried you wouldn't reciprocate. It would have needlessly complicated things, and I'm not a fan of complications. I've got enough of them cluttering up my life already."

Rabbit was having trouble following but he was trying. The problem was, none of this made any more sense to him than it did when Baikal had interrupted his date and chosen to stay and eat dinner at his table.

"You're talking to me like you know me," he said, because that was one thing he had picked up on at the restaurant, and something Void was still doing now. "You don't."

"Wrong." Baikal lifted a hand and lightly patted the top of his head as if testing out the silky feel of Rabbit's silver-white hair. "I know all about you. But we're not here to talk about that."

He should slap that hand away, but Rabbit's arms hung uselessly at his sides.

His mom had always told him the importance of controlling a room, and yet here he was, completely overshadowed by Baikal and that thick, cloying energy he emitted.

"What are we here for?" he asked quietly, hating himself for sounding so weak after a single push and one caress that he'd barely even felt on his head. Something was seriously wrong with him because while he was still scared, there was something else lurking beneath the surface as well, something potent and strong, almost foreign.

Everyone on campus gushed about how sexy Baikal Void was, but Rabbit had never paid much attention to really notice.

Until now.

Maybe it was the way he was standing so close, that intoxicating scent of his still reeling Rabbit in. Or maybe it was lingering sensations brought on by the gay porn still playing behind him, the sounds slicing through the silence as he waited for the other man to give him an answer he wasn't entirely sure he actually wanted to hear.

Rabbit Trace was used to being the center of attention wherever he went, even when it was the last thing he wanted to be. But here, now, being the object of Baikal Void's observation was ten billion times worse than merely having to ignore the chatter and various glances tossed his way when he passed by in the halls.

"Quick question first," Baikal said, and when Rabbit didn't argue continued. "What do you think of me?"

Rabbit waited, sure there was more to it than that, but when he didn't add anything else or elaborate he scowled. "What?"

"It's a simple question."

"It is not," he disagreed. "But okay. I think you're a manipulative prick who gets off on throwing his weight around and intimidating others. Happy?"

"Are you intimidated by me, little bunny?" the corner of his mouth tipped up in a partial smirk.

Rabbit planted a hand against his chest and tried to shove him away, but despite their similar heights, the other man was much stronger than he. "Move. I'm leaving."

"You tried that already," he reminded. "Didn't work out so well for you. Sure you want to give it another go? I might lose my patience and really scare you."

"Remember that part about me thinking you're a prick?" he snapped. "Correction. You're an asshole. Didn't your father ever teach you how to play nice with the other kids?"

"My father is the Dominus of the Vitality Brumal Mafia," Baikal Void said. "He taught me many things, how to be nice wasn't one of them. Now, how to get what I want..." His look turned sly. "That he taught me how to do in spades."

“What is this?” There was sexual tension in the air, and he didn’t have to have experience to know that. He wasn’t quite sure when the shift had started, maybe it’d been there the whole time and he was just too stupid to have noticed, but it was pretty obvious now that Baikal was coming onto him, and that was almost more confusing than when he’d thought the guy was just messing with him to relieve some boredom.

“What’s it look like?”

“It looks like you’ve lost your mind.” He tried to get him to move a second time, but that only had Void reacting with more aggression.

Baikal captured the space between them, pinning Rabbit between his solid front and the couch so that Rabbit was practically bending backward in an attempt to get away from him. With a hand on his nape, he hauled him back, fingernails digging into Rabbit’s scalp threateningly when he struggled.

“You can’t do this,” he sounded shaky, and Rabbit forced himself to calm down, urging his racing heart to get a grip. If he suffered one of his panic attacks now, he’d be completely at the other man’s mercy.

“Please follow that up with a statement about how it’s illegal,” Baikal told him. “Seriously. I could use a good laugh.”

Right, because he was Brumal and also friends with the Emperor’s son.

Shit.

Rabbit had always known the planet he’d grown up on had its fair share of corruption, but since it’d always been that way and it hadn’t personally affected his life, he’d been pretty unconcerned about any of it. Now though...

“I’m not just a nobody off the street,” he tried, deciding a switch in tactics might fare better.

“You’re popular,” Baikal hummed in agreement. “I know. I bought a magazine with your face on it just this afternoon. Are you suggesting I find myself an easier target? Not very altruistic of you. How will the rest of the galaxy perceive you if they found out you’re not as dashing as you’ve led them to believe? That really, you’re just like the rest of us, hiding behind a disguise, trying to fool the world.”

Rabbit snorted before he could help it, and when that caught Void off guard, he smiled triumphantly. “Is that the card you have to play? You’re going to threaten to ruin my career?”

He’d be doing him a favor, but he didn’t bother voicing that last part. In fact...

“I don’t believe you,” he goaded.

“Don’t believe I’m capable of fucking your life up,” Baikal drawled, glancing down at Rabbit’s lips pointedly before he locked eyes with him once more, “Or don’t believe I’m capable of fucking you, little bunny?”

“Unlikely to the first, impossible to the second.”

“Too late,” Baikal clicked his tongue. “No matter what you say, it’s already been decided. I want you? I’ll have you.”

“Why me?” It would make more sense if Rabbit had accidentally hit him over the head with that lunch tray, but alas...He’d gone from roaming the halls in his own little world, minding his own business, to suddenly being held against the most dangerous man at Vail, and he still didn’t fully understand why.

Baikal tilted his head, inspecting him. “You don’t believe me.”

“It’s kind of hard to.”

“Haven’t you ever seen something and just instantly coveted it?”

Rabbit didn’t pay enough attention to anything other than his music for that. Although...His

hand absently pressed against the candy bar in his front pocket and when Baikal pulled back enough to recognize the shape of the item he snorted.

“You did not just compare my desire for you to wanting a piece of chocolate.” When Rabbit didn’t respond, Baikal sighed. “Fine. Why you? Because I need a new plaything and you happen to fit the bill. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

“I’m not interested,” Rabbit stated firmly.

“Well then get interested, fast. You’ll submit, little bunny, or it’ll only be worse for you.”

“What will?” And why didn’t he like the sound of that?

“What happens once I have you on your back.”

Rabbit sucked in a breath and Baikal grinned wickedly, those damn teal eyes lighting up with glee. The door was locked, the room was soundproof, and Void had already proven to them both that he could physically overpower him. If he really wanted to, he could force himself on him. Rabbit had suffered abuse before, but not *that* kind of abuse. No one had ever dared to try to touch him like that.

“I’m not scared of you, Void.” That was a lie, but it sounded truthful enough.

Hopefully.

“So long as you obey,” Baikal leaned in ever closer so that his mouth was a mere whisper away, “there’s no reason for you to be.”

“And if I don’t?”

The Brumal Prince grinned and then pulled back only enough to tap at his multi-slate. A second later, the sounds from the video changed. He jutted out his chin, indicating Rabbit should turn around and take a look.

Even though he didn’t want to do what he said, curiosity got the best of him, and he ended up listening, glancing over his shoulder.

Whatever was playing now wasn’t porn.

It was a video of Rabbit’s mother.

Chapter 6:

For over a year now he'd been content watching from afar, prowling the outskirts of Rabbit's orbit, never crossing that line, sure to not be seen.

But Baikal wanted to be seen now and he wasn't going to take rejection. The dynamics of this poignant thing between them had altered the moment Rabbit had casually told his friend he might get married. Now that he'd gone and done that, all bets were off.

"It was surprisingly easy to get," Baikal said, watching Rabbit closely as his tiny obsession's gaze glued itself to the screen. "Even after all that money she's been making, she must have forgotten to cover her tracks and pay someone to delete the security footage."

The black and white images were captured just outside Vail University's main auditorium. Baikal had spliced footage from inside the building as well to track exactly when December had pulled the male victim from the auditorium and led him to the back where he'd been almost immediately jumped. He'd opted not to play the whole thing from the beginning, figuring the main event would be more than enough for Rabbit, but he had it on hand just in case.

"This is the best part." He tossed an arm over Rabbit's shoulders, and it was clear he'd caught the other man off guard with the video when there was no resistance to his clinginess. He seized the opportunity to turn his face toward the curve of his neck, breathing in deeply.

Mint chocolate.

Rabbit's addiction to that specific flavor was endearing.

There was no sound but December's mouth could be seen moving, and in the next instant she was waving the thug she'd hired off and taking part in the violence herself. She used the heel of her stiletto to smash down on the victim's hand repeatedly, ignoring the way he jerked. It was obvious he was screaming even without being able to hear.

"It's hard to tell who the man is," Baikal said just as December spat on him before turning toward the door leading back into the building. "None of the cameras were able to pick up his face very well, but I'm sure I could find out if I did some digging."

The only reason he hadn't bothered already was because it shouldn't matter. The point wasn't that there was a wronged person somewhere out in the galaxy, it was that the sweet, motherly figure known to said galaxy was a fake.

"This is vicious even by my standards," he lied. Honestly, if it'd been him, he wouldn't have walked away so easily. He would have first ensured the man had been thoroughly crippled. "If it gets leaked, her career will be over."

It hadn't been three months into watching Rabbit that Baikal had put the pieces together and uncovered his greatest truth.

Rabbit hated playing the beiska, not because of the instrument itself, but because of all of the responsibility that came with it. Since his mother had been away for most of the year, Baikal had yet to witness their dynamics in person, but it couldn't be all that great considering she'd left her one and only son in a massive house alone for over twelve months.

The glasses Kal was wearing weren't for helping his regular vision, the built-in computer scanner constantly gave him body readings on the people around him. When you could figure out what made a person's heart rate leap, it was a lot easier to manipulate them, and right now the tiny neon blue numbers in the right corner of the glass told him Rabbit's heartbeat was going through the roof.

Noticing the telltale signs that he was about to experience one of his episodes, Baikal reached into his pocket to pull out the candy bar. Rabbit never went anywhere without one of these on his person.

Breaking off one of the rectangles, Baikal brought it to Rabbit's lips, sliding the chocolate into his mouth when he parted for him.

"Either you've wised up and decided to be a good boy," Baikal teased, "or you're so shocked you're broken. Which is it?"

"I'm not an idiot," Rabbit said. He chewed the candy slowly, the cloudy look in his eyes dissipating as he chewed until he seemed to come more to himself. The second he did, he noticed Baikal touching him and quickly shoved his arm off with a glare. "You're trying to claim my mom is a violent person."

"I don't have to claim anything." He motioned to the screen. "It's all right there for everyone to see. If I leak the video, of course. Unlike your mom, I cover my tracks. This is the only copy left. I deleted it from the school's main server."

"How did you even find this?"

The events recorded had taken place over a year ago. The date stamp in the corner told them as much.

"I'm good at digging," Baikal said casually. "I'm also ruthless when it comes to getting what I want. If this isn't enough to convince you, I'm sure there are many other skeletons in her closet that I'm more than happy to uncover. You see that guy there," he pointed to the burly one kicking the man, "imagine my absolute delight when I recognized him as one of mine."

"He isn't."

"Afraid so."

"My mother doesn't have any connections with the Brumal," Rabbit insisted.

"He was muscle for hire back then," Baikal explained. "He didn't enter the family until about six months or so ago. What matters is that *now* he is family, which means he'll be more than happy to speak out against your mother if I tell him to."

Rabbit's mind seemed to be racing a mile a minute. "He'd implicate himself."

"The Brumal has more than enough money to make a little incarceration worth his while."

Rabbit had gone pale, but at least he no longer appeared to be on the verge of a breakdown. Baikal had only seen him suffering a panic attack once or twice, and it'd never been pretty.

"Did you know?" he asked. "That your mom once beat a man to an inch of his life?"

"I knew."

"Then you must have thought about it, right? How if this got out her career would be over." Baikal had gone straight for the jugular since he'd known he couldn't simply threaten Rabbit's future. It was hard to blackmail someone with something they didn't care about, and if he'd pulled the plug on him being a professional musician? Something told him Rabbit would be grateful.

Baikal still didn't understand why. But he would.

"Everything your mother built in her thirty years of performing would crumble to the ground like a house of cards. You," he lifted a single shoulder in a shrug, "You'd probably be fine. They'd suspect you for a while and people would whisper behind your back, but that's not really any different from how things are now. Although, I guess right now people are only saying nice things about you, aren't they? You can't walk anywhere on campus without hearing 'The Music Prince is so hot' or 'The Music Prince is so mysterious'."

"Is that why you sought me out?" Rabbit asked, a flash of that stubbornness back as he held his

gaze. “You got curious what all the fuss was about?”

He hadn’t given a shit about any of it until after he’d been forced to attend that recital, but Baikal didn’t tell him that. Instead, he made a point of trailing his gaze over Rabbit’s face, across the sharp rise of his cheekbones, and down the elegant slope of his nose. That silky, white and silver hair with lilac highlights beckoned to be touched and he almost gave in, catching himself at the last second.

Soon.

But first...

“The talk is well deserved,” Baikal told him appreciatively. “You’re gorgeous. Entirely to my taste.”

“Well, you’re not to mine.” Rabbit’s fists tightened at his sides, and Baikal noticed.

“Careful, little bunny. Wouldn’t want this video getting out into the world now would we?”

“You’re so certain I’ll do what you say for my mother’s sake?” Rabbit shook his head slightly. “That woman has made my life a living hell for years. Why would I care what happens to her?”

“So, what you’re trying to say is all you have to do is screw your mom over to be free, is that it?” Baikal propped his hip against the couch and crossed his arms, feigning an indifference he wasn’t feeling. If this plan didn’t work, he was confident enough that he could come up with something else, but he was growing impatient, and he really didn’t want to wait another night before he could finally get his hands on the object of his obsession.

He wanted Rabbit. And he wanted him that night.

“Is she why you don’t like performing anymore?” He knew he’d hit the nail on the head when Rabbit tensed all over again. “Is it the pressure? She asks too much of you so you panic on stage thinking you’ll make a mistake?”

“This where you try to make a connection by saying we have that in common and your dad does the same thing to you?” he sneered.

“No,” Baikal said. “My old man is great. Taught me all the important things and let me loose on the world to make use of his teachings. He doesn’t hover. I didn’t think your mom did either considering she’s never around.”

A hint of suspicion entered Rabbit’s eyes. “How do you know that?”

“Easy enough to search her concert schedule,” he lied. He didn’t think the other man was ready to hear about how Baikal had been keeping secret tabs on him. Best to keep that a secret for a while longer. “I did my homework in order to corner you, obviously.”

“You did all of that just because...?”

In response, Baikal switched the video back to the porn he’d selected earlier. It picked up right where it’d left off, with the larger man—whoever had created this particular movie hadn’t bothered giving the characters names—shoving the smaller one’s face into a pillow and his cock into his hole.

He stretched out his arm and pointed directly at the screen. “I want that.”

Rabbit blinked at him. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am.”

“No.” His cheeks stained pink in an adorable show of shyness Baikal hadn’t expected. When the men in the video moaned, the color bloomed even brighter. “Find someone else.”

“You really have to stop saying that,” he chided. “It’s starting to piss me off.”

“I’ll tell everyone the video is fake.” Rabbit was grasping at straws and they both knew it.

“It’ll be easy enough to prove once the police look into it. But, then again, you said you didn’t

care, right? Screw your mom.” Would he? Baikal had assumed because Rabbit was still pushing himself to get on stage that he was doing it out of love for his mother, but...Had he misinterpreted things?

“I won’t do it,” Rabbit finally said, though he’d gotten nervous again at the mention of getting the police involved. “I’m not a whore.”

He started across the room, clearly intent on leaving even after all of this, and Baikal ground his teeth and went after him. Rabbit let out a startled sound when he was twirled around and slammed back against the closed door, his hands finding purchase on Baikal’s shoulders.

“What was that about not being scared?” Baikal taunted, noting the fear in the other man’s eyes.

“I said no.”

“Admittedly, this was a gamble that could have gone either way.”

“Then back off.”

“I meant either way for me,” Baikal corrected. “Not for you. Tonight I make you mine, it’s just a matter of how violent things have to progress before we get there.”

“You wouldn’t,” his voice was meek now, and Baikal almost regretted frightening him to this extent.

Almost.

The reality of the situation was, he needed to get Rabbit to agree, and if he had to do that by upping the ante...So be it. It was perfect timing really, because things back home had started getting worse and the only thing that had been getting him through it was Rabbit and his music. Baikal refused to let either slip through his fingers.

“You’ve heard the rumors about me,” Baikal said. “Everyone has.”

That he was a devil disguised as an angel, more twisted than his father and twice as cruel when he wanted to be. They said he was deranged. They talked about his Shout ability and what it could be, how he might use it without any of them knowing. Those who had seen called him a monster, a beautiful psycho with malicious tendencies.

Baikal wasn’t a psychopath though. He just wasn’t afraid to do whatever it took to get what he wanted, and no one was safe from that fact, not even his tiny obsession.

“None of them say you’re a rapist!” Rabbit exclaimed, unaware of the dark turn of his thoughts.

“Because I’m not.”

“So...” he swallowed, his throat bobbing in a seductive way that almost had Baikal groaning, “You won’t force me? You’ll take no for an answer?”

“I won’t force you,” he confirmed. “But I won’t be taking no. That’s unacceptable. You’ll bow, Rabbit. Or you’ll break until you do. The only real question is whether or not you drag your mother down with you on your descent into hell.”

Baikal shifted focus. “I bet she’ll get even harder on you once her own career is over and she has nothing else to do with her time. There also won’t be any more trips around the galaxy, meaning she’ll be home twenty-four –seven, just the two of you in that big house alone together.”

Rabbit’s eyes went wide. “No.”

That caught his attention and he paused. There was something there, something a lot like the fear he’d been displaying earlier, only more raw. Rabbit was afraid of that idea for some reason.

Baikal shelved that information to dig into later. If something was scaring his tiny obsession, something other than him, of course, he’d deal with it. No one got to touch Rabbit and live. Not even

the guy's mother.

For the sake of getting what he wanted, however, he was going to have to be the asshole Rabbit had accused him of being and press the issue for his gain. He felt a little bad about it, but not enough to change his mind.

Baikal hadn't been raised to put the emotional well-being of others before his own personal wants and needs. Rabbit may be special to him, more so than anyone else could claim to be or have been, but that wouldn't change who Baikal was at his core.

A Devil Prince.

One soon to be king.

"She might even work these fingers to the bone." Baikal took Rabbit's left hand, idly playing with those long, pale fingers. "You'll be the family cash cow. Which means you'll never get to quit playing, no matter how badly you want to."

That last part wouldn't be too bad, since that's what Kal ultimately wanted as well, but not if it meant losing his tiny obsession in the process.

Rabbit gave him another doe-eyed look, one that had Baikal's dick jerking to life in his tight black jeans. He'd seen many expressions painted across the musician's face in the time he'd been following him, most of them some variation of haughty or lonely, but this one...

Baikal licked his lips, suddenly famished.

They needed to speed this whole thing up before he lost his cool and pounced for real.

"I want to fuck you," he stated plainly. "But more than that, I want you to want it."

He prepared himself for more pushback, certain Rabbit would throw that admission in his face. His relationship with his mom must be seriously bad, however, because that's not what happened.

Rabbit hesitated. "And then...you'll delete the video?"

Baikal snorted. "You said you aren't a whore. Is it always this easy to get you into bed, Rabbit?" He pinned that hand he was still holding by the wrist high above Rabbit's head, watching that fire spark back to life in his rainstorm-gray eyes. He seemed to react whenever Baikal overpowered him, but those reactions flip-flopped between fear and anger.

No matter which, though, there was a very obvious thread of intrigue underneath it all, something Rabbit was clearly trying to hide.

Baikal saw it though. This wasn't as one-sided as the other man wanted him to believe. If nothing else, Rabbit was attracted to him. Scared and confused as well, sure. But he just needed reassurance for those emotions to be quelled.

He wanted his tiny obsession to kneel for him.

He didn't want him afraid in the process.

His long-term goals wouldn't fare well if that ended up happening.

"If you truly thought I was easy," Rabbit asserted, "you wouldn't have gone through all of this trouble."

Baikal liked that spark, that fire. It was something else he'd noticed and wanted to coax out of the other man. He'd need it if things between them were going to escalate as far as he intended. The Brumal was no place for the weak, but neither was high society, and whether Rabbit got involved with Kal or not, he was a part of the latter already.

Rabbit's famous mother had paved his way to high-class tables and invitations to events and galas already. As the only son of Sullivan Void, the biggest corporate tycoon on this side of the galaxy, Baikal was often granted the same invites.

He'd yet to see Rabbit at a single one all year, however. Not that he attended many himself. Still, it'd be nice to have a partner there with him in the future, someone he could trust to have his back.

And to sneak away with him to have a quickie.

"You give yourself to me," he reiterated. "And I'll delete the video."

"There needs to be more to it than that." Rabbit was shaking, but it was hard to tell if it was due to anticipation, fury, or fear.

"Does there?"

Rabbit tried to pull away from the door and Baikal flattened his entire body over his front to keep him there.

"I'm already going so easy on you," Baikal quipped. He didn't say it, but he added "when I don't have to be" rang loud and clear anyway.

"I just have to have sex with you?"

"You do. But the longer you make me wait, the more I want to rethink things. Maybe I'll just kidnap you. We can spend the next month, the next two, locked up in my bedroom. I'm fine with failing all my classes and having to retake a semester." Considering all the things he wanted to do to his tiny obsession, two months wouldn't even be nearly long enough.

"You're joking." He searched Baikal's expression.

"Rarely," he said. "And definitely not when it comes to my dick."

"That was a joke right there."

"Trying to get us off track again?" He settled more of his weight over him. "Go ahead. I can stand here like this all night. You'll only be putting off the inevitable. I want to own you, all of you."

Something about that seemed funny to him and Rabbit grunted. "I already have a keeper."

"Your mom? What's so scary about her?"

December Trace was a petite woman. She'd even had to hire a thug to beat that poor guy in the video up for her, only getting her licks in once the man was already down. Surely no matter how strict she was about his studies, she would never stoop so low and turn to physical violence against her own kid. At least, not to that extent, in any case, and even if she'd tried, Rabbit didn't appear to be too weak to take her on.

Not that Baikal suggested violence against one's parents. Even in the Brumal that was typically frowned upon unless a legitimate challenge had been issued. There had to be some rules in place that separated them from their filthy origins. When Baikal's great-grandfather had saved up enough money to relocate his entire Brumal family off the planet Sanctum, he'd sworn he'd give them all a better life.

Better things required more work to maintain their luster.

Like his little obsession.

Rabbit had a nasty habit of not taking care of his basic needs properly. More times than Baikal could count, he'd witnessed him play with the food on his plate at lunch instead of actually eating it. He stayed later than anyone else in the music building, working himself into exhaustion, and then drove home in that state.

Sila, the friend, had once referred to him as a zombie, and Baikal could see it. If someone didn't step in and take over, there was no telling what kind of trouble Rabbit was capable of getting himself into.

That girl Arlet had thought she could swoop in at the final hour and take over the role of his caretaker. She was sorely mistaken.

Already this conversation had gone on far longer than Baikal had planned for, and while he was impatient, he found the whole thing rather enjoyable. After all this time unable to approach or talk to Rabbit, getting to do so now stroked against some deep part of himself that craved the musician's attention.

"Turn me down then." That wouldn't be happening, but he could give the guy a false sense of control. The truth of the matter would remain; Rabbit had a choice, it was just all choices led straight into Baikal's arms. "Screw the bitch over if you hate her so much. Sounds like you want that. Want to be free, little bunny?"

"My name is Rabbit."

"It's a little late to correct me, don't you think?" He hummed as if thinking it over anyway. "Should I call you what I call you in my head then?"

Rabbit's gaze turned even more suspicious and Baikal laughed.

"Don't look so nervous, *tiny obsession*." He leaned in and pressed his mouth to the curve of Rabbit's ear, the heated contact causing the musician to jolt in his hold. "I like it too much."

He gulped. "If you're not going to call me by my name—"

"I'm not," Baikal confirmed.

"—then fine. Bunny. That one."

Baikal made it a side mission to accustom Rabbit to both.

"How very agreeable of you," he teased. "More of that. You'll end up in my bed anyway, and I'd prefer not to have to force you there."

"What exactly do you call this?" Rabbit asked incredulously.

"You said it yourself," he reminded. "You wouldn't have agreed to date me if I'd taken the direct approach."

"According to everything you're saying, you don't want to date me."

"Is it because I'm Brumal?" Baikal ignored that very true statement. "You don't want to cause trouble for your mom?" It couldn't be out of fear he'd wreck his own future considering Rabbit didn't want one in the music industry anyway. "When did you start hating playing?"

"Stop with the personal questions. I won't answer them," Rabbit told him resolutely.

"We'll see about that." But he'd drop it for now. Getting the musician to open up wasn't on the agenda for the day anyway. "This is called coercion."

"You do know the definition of that word, right?"

"Touché, little bunny."

"You're saying I don't have a choice," Rabbit said.

"Of course you have a choice. I've already set the trap and caught you in my snare, but there's little fun to be had watching you struggle—unless it's because you're choking on my dick."

Rabbit sputtered at that, but Baikal kept going as if the interruption hadn't occurred.

"Choose, little bunny. Be free or be mine."

"If I tell you to go ahead and do it," Rabbit replied, "release the video and destroy her career, will you really back off?"

Baikal considered lying but couldn't hold back the devilish grin.

Rabbit's brow furrowed. "Why not? You can't be that interested in me. You could have your pick of people on and off campus."

"I want you."

"Why—"

"This is tedious," he stopped him. "Make your choice so we can get on with it before I choose

for you.”

“Haven’t you already?” Rabbit sighed and closed his eyes, defeated. “I sleep with you and you destroy the video.”

“Yes.” Baikal was so close he could practically taste it.

“All right.” When he opened his eyes again tears were welling, but his expression remained firm and determined, stubborn to the last, even while surrendering. “I’ll do it. I agree.”

The darkness inside of Baikal yawned and stretched.

Time to finally get this show started.

Chapter 7:

“Strip,” the order was barked, leaving no room for argument as Baikal released him and stepped away.

Rabbit needed to press his palms against the wood of the door just to remain on his feet, the tension and the suspense of the overly charged moment almost doing him in. He used to do well under pressure, but that ended last year, and now...Now he was a quaking mess, and it was nearly impossible for him to hide.

Baikal had to have noticed, but he didn't seem to care, the asshole.

“What?” Rabbit struggled to maintain some semblance of dignity in this nightmare situation but failed miserably at it. “I need a moment.”

“You’ve wasted all the time I’m willing to give already,” he clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “It hasn’t even been a minute since you gave yourself to me and you’re already disobeying?”

“Just like that? That’s it?”

“You wanted to add more terms?” Baikal chuckled at him mockingly. “Should have thought of that sooner.”

“Still.” He wasn’t ready. He’d come here with the mindset to get through a *date* and even that had been a lot for him. Now he was being told to get naked in front of a man he’d only ever had two conversations with?

Rabbit had never been naked in front of *anyone* before.

“I don’t like to be lied to,” Baikal’s voice dropped an octave and the room seemed to darken. “If you thought you could agree just to get rid of me, then run off and hide somewhere, you’re sorely mistaken. Now, take off your clothes, Rabbit, or tonight won’t end pretty.”

Rabbit’s hand reached for his pocket, but Baikal had never returned the candy bar when he’d fed Rabbit a piece earlier and it was missing. His heart was thumping so wildly he thought it might burst out of his chest, the sensation only getting worse when his gaze absently wandered over Baikal’s shoulder and back on the screen still playing porn.

The muscular man had the smaller one on his side on the bed and was thrusting into him so hard the smaller one had to brace himself on the headboard with a palm to keep from slamming his head repeatedly against the wood. They looked into it, but the sounds were a mix of pleasure and pain and every now and again the smaller one winced at a particularly brutal ramming of cock deep inside of him.

His hole was so stretched Rabbit thought it might tear and he was both fascinated and completely freaked out by that. The man in the video was massive in both length and girth. There was no way Baikal was anywhere near that size, right? This was a professionally filmed video—of course they’d hire actors with massive dicks because that made more money. Dicks that size weren’t common and the likelihood of Baikal being that large...

Rabbit couldn’t risk it. Just the thought of being penetrated by something like that sent shivers down his spine and before he knew it he’d turned and slapped his multi-slate to the control panel.

The door clicked open and he shoved it, taking a step out into the hall, fully intending to make a run for it after all. He’d never gone back on his word before, but he was far too inexperienced to handle someone like Void. If this was the type of porn he was into, surely he’d want to handle Rabbit

in a similar fashion and—

A large hand wrapped around the nape of his neck and hauled him back into the room before he'd gotten more than two steps out of it. The door slammed shut and he was tossed away from it, stumbling and hitting the ground with a heavy thump that sent shockwaves throughout his bones.

Rabbit quickly checked his right wrist, having landed on it, worry that he'd been injured momentarily causing him to forget what he'd been so afraid of only a few seconds ago. Fortunately, the sting dissipated quickly, and he glanced up to tell Baikal off for jeopardizing his ability to play.

But the words got caught in his throat.

Void was glaring down his nose at him, his shoulders squared, hip cocked. Gone was any of the playfulness from earlier, as though a dark shadow had been cast—both literally and figuratively, because the entire wall at his back was now shrouded in a thick dark fog impossible to glimpse through.

Rabbit's mouth hung open. "What did you do?"

"Caught you," Baikal's voice was as deep and chilling as the darkness he'd created. "Trapped you." His movements were calculated as he stalked forward, advancing even when Rabbit scrambled backward. "And now, little bunny, I'm going to take you."

He bumped into the back of the couch with nowhere left to go, and the second that happened Baikal pounced. Rabbit made a startled sound as he was dragged up off the floor by the front of his shirt and yanked around to the other side of the loveseat. When he was shoved down onto it, he scrambled to get up, only to be pushed back. This time he froze when Baikal wrapped that hand around his throat and squeezed.

It wasn't enough to actually suffocate him, but the threat was there, and Rabbit went still as a statue, wide eyes locked onto Void.

"Remember, you had your chance," Baikal practically growled. "You agreed and you don't get to go back on that decision. I was trying to be thoughtful since this will be our first time, but you spat on my generosity and now I'm no longer in the mood to cater to your delicate sensibilities."

Only one other person had ever raised hands at him, and Rabbit braced himself for the nightmarish flashbacks he sometimes got...but they didn't come. Instead, his breathing labored and he felt flush, the sounds of the porn still playing on the screen trickling through that sense of fear. He didn't look again, worried it would send him spiraling a second time, but he listened to the sounds they were making, and something in him stirred to life despite the situation.

There was a very dominating Brumal Prince standing in front of him, his hand around Rabbit's neck, staring at him like he was about to swallow him whole. Not to even mention the man was also a Shout, rare even on Baikal's origin planet.

And apparently his power was the ability to manipulate shadow.

Fantastic.

Not.

Now Rabbit had to contend with the possessive touches and hide the fact he was afraid of the dark. At least the regular lights had been left alone and it was just the door being blocked.

All thought of hiding or doing anything, however, fled his mind the second Baikal made his next move.

One second they were glaring at one another, and the next Void was sealing his mouth over Rabbit's, forcing his tongue past his lips and capturing his gasp. He made out with him aggressively, clearly after his own pleasure, fingers tightening and loosening their hold on Rabbit's throat as his teeth nipped roughly at his bottom lip.

Heat seemed to expand throughout Rabbit's entire body, tossing him off a ship into the middle of a vast and warm sea to flounder and struggle on his own. His hands gripped at Baikal's elbow, trying to pull his arm away to no avail.

If this was kissing, Rabbit was glad he'd never experienced it before. He couldn't breathe, couldn't focus. Every time he opened his mouth wider in an attempt to suck in much-needed oxygen, all he got was a deeper stroke of that demanding tongue and a hard push of that mouth against his own. He felt like he was being torn open and eaten from the inside out and nothing had even happened yet aside from one damn kiss.

By the time Baikal finally released him he was lightheaded, swaying slightly on the couch when that hand left his neck.

Rabbit was so discombobulated he didn't immediately process the reason he'd been let go was so that Baikal could remove him of his clothing.

He wasn't delicate about it either. Baikal grabbed onto the collar of Rabbit's shirt and tore the pieces in two, sending buttons flinging about uncaringly. Once he had it open, he easily manipulated Rabbit free of it, dropping the expensive silk to the ground with little care for its worth before going for the fly on his jeans.

Seeing that had Rabbit snapping out of it and he scrambled to the side, almost making it off the loveseat before he was dragged back down, this time forced onto his back. His wrists were shoved up over his head and suddenly they were being tied together.

Rabbit sucked in a breath when he realized Baikal had used his own necktie to do it.

"Move those hands," Baikal warned, "and I'll make you regret it. Understood?"

He knew he should argue and put up a fight but...Instead, he swallowed and nodded his head. The kiss had been punishing, certainly not anything he'd dreamed up whenever he'd thought about what his first kiss might be like. But it'd done something to him, and now curiosity warred with the other emotions within him.

Rabbit was torn between wanting to find out what Baikal planned to do next, and knowing he should escape at all costs before it was too late.

He was no stranger to abuse, but no one had ever abused him like this, in a way that had his blood pumping lower and his heart racing as anticipation built. Then again, he'd also never been confronted by someone as sinfully sexy as Baikal Void. Someone who demanded notice and obedience just by breathing.

These weren't thoughts he should be having, especially not when Void reached down and pulled off his pants and his boxer briefs in one swift movement, leaving Rabbit naked and exposed in more ways than one.

Baikal sat back on his heels and drank Rabbit in, the hunger in his teal gaze turning ferocious the longer he stared. When those eyes landed at the apex of Rabbit's thighs he smirked, clearly pleased despite his earlier display of anger. "Look at you, rising to the occasion like a good little bunny should."

Rabbit wasn't at full mast, but he was getting there. A wave of embarrassment washed over him and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block it out, but Void didn't like that.

The hand that wrapped around his dick was as hot as burning coal, and Rabbit yelped and tried to push away from the touch. His struggles earned him a squeeze that had him wincing and stilling all over again, his compliance rewarded with a fast pump of that fist.

Another first, since up until now, the only touch he'd known down there had been his own. He was a lot gentler when he did it, too, usually touching himself leisurely in the shower after a long day

of practice. Never like this, with a vice-like grip and a speed that had the leather cushion beneath his ass creaking.

Baikal worked him until he was leaking and his dick was so hard he thought it'd break off in the other man's hold.

"I never would have guessed you'd turn into such a horny mess after a single kiss," Baikal said, the smug self-satisfaction in his tone causing Rabbit's lust-addled brain to clear some.

What the actual hell was he doing?

Rabbit tried to sit up, pressing his bound wrists against Baikal's chest, but only ended up lying flat on his back all over again.

Void tutted at him and removed his hand. "You're really bad at learning lessons, huh? Maybe that's really why you have to spend so much time practicing."

"Shut up," Rabbit snapped, not liking his music being brought into this. "The only reason I'm even here is because of that stupid instrument."

Baikal chuckled as he snapped open the button on his jeans and slid the zipper down. "You have no idea. Why'd you even start playing if you dislike it so much?"

He didn't dislike it...not really. It was everything else that accompanied it that he didn't like. He opened his mouth to say as much when Baikal sprung himself free from the confines of his underwear, stopping all ability to speak short.

There was absolutely no way...

Rabbit barely resisted the urge to glance back at the porn video on screen, certain that he was right in thinking Baikal was actually *bigger* than even that muscular man. Which shouldn't be possible. Sure, the guy was as tall as a damn tree, but being tall didn't necessarily lead to hung. He was shaking his head before he even knew what he was doing.

"Absolutely not." His legs were at either side of Baikal and he tried to close them, even knowing it was impossible when the other man refused to budge. "You're not putting that anywhere near me."

As if in response, a single opaque drop of precome dripped from Baikal's slit. It rolled down the thick rosy head of his cock and plopped onto the leather cushion between his spread knees. Not that Baikal seemed to notice—or care—that he was making a mess. He held his dick in one hand and tipped his chin at Rabbit, the corner of his mouth lifted.

"I'll be putting it inside of you, actually," he corrected, giving himself an easy, almost lazy stroke from tip to balls. His hand, which was slightly bigger than Rabbit's, only just managed to wrap around the entire base of it.

"I changed my mind." Rabbit sat up and scooted away, moving as quickly as his tied wrists allowed, eyes still locked on that glistening cock. His own had started to soften, the very real fear of being torn in half by that thing attached to the Brumal Prince too great.

Maybe if he'd been experienced before it wouldn't be that big of a deal, but as it were, he couldn't imagine taking something of that size as his *first*. There was just no way. It wasn't possible.

"You aren't allowed to change your mind, Rabbit," Baikal said.

"I don't want to do this."

"You already made your choice."

"That wasn't a choice!" He cried out when his right ankle was snatched and his leg was forced up into the air. At the same time, Baikal used that hold on him to drag him back down the length of the sofa, until his ass bumped right up against his cock.

Rabbit froze, feeling the thick length of it burning against the sensitive flesh of his inner thighs.

The head bumped up against his balls, nowhere near his entrance, and yet he was already shaking from the proximity alone.

“What’s wrong?” Baikal paused, seeming to notice finally that Rabbit wasn’t as turned on as he’d been only a moment ago. “I don’t mind fucking you against your will—watching you fight yourself is sexy—but I’m not interested in screwing someone who isn’t attracted to me, and you, little bunny, are very attracted to me. So, what’s going on?”

He clenched his jaw and shook his head, trying to reign himself in.

“Tell me,” Baikal commanded, still holding his leg aloft, that heavy cock resting over Rabbit, the skin-to-skin contact and the threat of his sheer size impossible to ignore. “You’re acting like—”

Rabbit glanced at him, noting the frown had deepened on Baikal’s face.

“You’ve done this before,” he asked tentatively, “right?”

He debated whether or not to lie to protect his pride, because how many twenty-two-year-olds in this day and age were still virgins, but in the end, being honest was his best option. “You’re the only one who’s ever even seen me naked.”

Baikal went so still, Rabbit couldn’t even tell if he was breathing.

Maybe this would be enough for the Brumal Prince to lose interest. Rabbit didn’t know why he felt a sliver of disappointment at that possibility, because it’s what he should want. Nothing about this day was going the way he’d intended, and now he’d been humiliated and laid bare—literally—in front of Baikal Void, of all people.

Hell, the man’s dick was still touching him and—

Had it just…pulsed?

A groan ripped through the air, loud enough it cut straight through the surround sound system still playing the seemingly never-ending porn video. Baikal’s hand tightened on Rabbit’s ankle after he emitted the sound, and he rocked his hips some, rubbing himself over Rabbit.

“Good Light,” he said, “that’s so fucking hot, little bunny. Do you know how much fun we’re going to have, you and I?”

“Wait.” Rabbit tried to pull his leg free but was jerked back into place. Too afraid moving would cause that cock to slip lower, he stilled for the millionth time that night. “Please.”

“Don’t be afraid,” Baikal told him softly, even going so far as to plant a chaste kiss on the side of Rabbit’s leg. “I promise to be gentle, so long as you stop resisting and obey. Can you do that for me, little bunny?”

“Please.” Rabbit didn’t even recognize the sound of his own voice, it was so strained.

“Let’s start with this.” Baikal pulled the candy bar from his back pocket, resting Rabbit’s leg over his shoulder so he could use both hands and snap off a piece. Then he leaned forward. “Open.”

When he’d moved, Baikal’s cock had moved too, sliding downward, and Rabbit did as he was told just so he could get the other man to straighten once more and hopefully readjust himself.

The mix of mint and chocolate on his tongue didn’t work the way it usually did whenever he panicked. The taste was there, but it was as if it’d been muted, Rabbit’s attention too riveted on those teal eyes that watched him.

“There,” Baikal hummed in appreciation. “Now this.”

His hand returned to Rabbit’s dick, but this time he was easier on him, taking things slow and steady as he pumped him back to life.

Rabbit didn’t think it was possible, but in less than a minute he was rock hard all over again, the lust returning full force to the point he even lifted his hips a little to chase after the delicious friction that hand provided. He moaned when Baikal ran his thumb over his slit, swirling his juices

around his rosy head.

For a moment, he was able to get lost in it, the danger forgotten until he felt fingers prodding at his entrance. His eyes snapped open, but Baikal's heated gaze kept him frozen in place, unable to even attempt to get away.

He'd promised if he stayed put he'd be gentle, hadn't he? Rabbit was just going to have to believe him. There was no other option but to, considering that black fog hid the exit and Baikal's grip on his dick kept him pinned in place.

Baikal shushed him, one of his fingers circling his tight hole. It felt sticky and warm. "I'm lubing you up with your own come," he explained, possibly guessing where Rabbit's mind had gone. "In a second I'll penetrate you—it's just a finger, little bunny. You can take it."

He gulped, gaze dropping to where Baikal's cock rested.

"You'll be able to take that, too," he reassured him. "After I've opened you up for me. Don't think about that right now though. Just focus on how I make you feel."

"Can't you just let me go?"

"Why would I do that?" he asked calmly, still drawing those lazy circles. "You're hard and dripping for me," he jutted his chin out toward Rabbit's dick, "and I can see in your eyes you want it."

"I don't." Did he? He did. But that didn't make him any less afraid.

"Keep lying," Baikal smiled. "Seriously. I enjoy it. I'll enjoy watching you accept it even more."

"I—" The rebuttal died on his tongue when Baikal finally breached that tight ring of muscle.

He twisted his finger, corkscrewing into him, stopping only once he had his pointer finger all the way inside. Then he paused and took in Rabbit's expression. "How does it feel?"

"Weird." Rabbit pursed his lips. There'd been a slight sting at first, followed by pressure, but now... "Foreign."

"You'll get used to it," he said confidently. "Pretty soon, I'll have this hole clenching and your dick going hard at the mere sight of me. You're going to spend every waking moment wishing you were sitting on my cock, little bunny. If you're good for me, maybe some days I'll let you."

"Bullshit."

Baikal curled that finger, pressing against a spot in Rabbit he hadn't been aware of and his head dropped back against the cushion.

He sucked in a deep breath. "It's just because no one's ever done this to me before. It's got nothing to do with—"

"If you try to finish that sentence," Baikal growled, "I will shove myself into you before you can. All the way, in one go. You'll tear, but that just makes it easier for me to fuck you. It'll hurt us both if you're dry, but if you're slicked with blood? That's enough lube for me to get off just fine."

"That's horrible." Rabbit tried, and failed, to guess if he really meant it or if he was just trying to scare him.

"*I* am the one making you feel this way," Baikal said just before he pulled out and then shoved two fingers into him at once.

Rabbit let out a strangled sound at the pain and bit down on his lower lip. Tears prickled at the corner of his eyes, but despite all that, he didn't try to move away. Not with the uncertainty of that threat looming over his head like a guillotine.

"This has nothing to do with the fact it's your first and everything to do with the fact that it's me." Baikal fucked him with his fingers, spearing them into Rabbit's body, curling them and scissoring him at random so he never knew what sensations to expect next.

Rivulets of precome escaped from his slit and ran down the length of him as Rabbit's dick bobbed from the harsh motions caused by Baikal's ministrations. It wasn't long before the lewd sounds of it filled the air and he realized the porn had actually come to an end at some point.

Baikal started stroking Rabbit's dick again, in time with the thrusts of his fingers, picking up the tempo whenever a sound escaped from Rabbit.

He moaned and shook, his whole body coiling as the pleasure heated in his lower stomach, building and building. Since he'd had an orgasm before he knew what was coming, but the measly ones he'd managed to wring from himself in the past paled in the face of what he felt when he finally came in Baikal's fist.

Spurts of come shot out, smattering against his stomach as he jerked and whined. All through it, Baikal continued, one hand jackhammering into his hole, the other practically strangling his dick until he got every last drop out of him.

Before Rabbit could recover, he found himself flipped onto his stomach, strong hands yanking him back by his parted thighs. That thick cock landed between his ass cheeks and he almost panicked, even with the amazing orgasm still sending shock waves through him.

Baikal settled himself over his back, one arm bracing himself at Rabbit's hip, the other landing up by Rabbit's head. He hushed him when he made a noise, his lips close to his ear so that with every exhale his heated breath fanned across Rabbit's sweaty face. He shifted, settling his cock more firmly between Rabbit's cheeks, but didn't go near his hole.

"Relax," he coaxed even as he started moving his hips. The hand on his waist moved to grab a fistful of his ass and he slapped at it playfully, his movements shallow as he humped against Rabbit's body. "Focus on the feel of me on top of you. Of my cock shoved between these plump cheeks of yours."

There was literally nothing else he could focus on, but he didn't say that, too nervous that if he let his guard down he'd miss when Baikal finally pressed the tip of himself to his hole.

But it didn't happen.

Baikal squeezed Rabbit's ass around himself and fucked against his flesh, careful never to pull back enough there was even a chance for Rabbit to lock up out of fear he was going to put it inside.

Rabbit's front rubbed against the leather, the friction against his nipples causing his dick to twitch. He blinked, certain there was no way he was going to get hard again, but then he felt it swell beneath him and he groaned.

"Already?" Baikal asked. "Impressive, little bunny. I was going to get off like this, but if you insist..." He turned him back around just as easily as he'd flipped him in the first place, resettling overtop him.

"What are you doing?" Rabbit frowned, mouth popping open in a gasp when he felt that thick cock pressed against his own.

Baikal held them together as he thrust, the silky smooth skin of his cock stroking against Rabbit's. It was a different feeling from when he'd simply used his hand, hotter. The bulging vein on Baikal's member rubbed at him, the ribbed texture supplying a delicious kind of friction. Before long they were both panting, and then Baikal latched onto the side of his neck and sucked.

Rabbit came apart a second time, white light blinding him as he cried out.

A moment later, Baikal finally found his release, mouth freeing him so he could let out a moan as his come coated Rabbit's skin, mixing with his own mess. He stroked himself until they were both sensitive and soft, and only then did he finally pull away, kneeling up over Rabbit like a wicked,

demonic presence.

And that's when it truly hit him. Rabbit had just had sex with the Brumal Prince.

Or, well...

Baikal tucked himself away and before he understood what he was doing, Rabbit blurted, "Is that it?"

Void paused with one foot on the ground, having been in the process of getting off the loveseat. He'd done up his zipper already, and for the most part, aside from the slightly disheveled hair and the still rapid rise and fall of his chest, he looked the same as when he'd walked in.

Whereas Rabbit...

He scrambled up, searching for his discarded clothing, but before he could find his shirt, Baikal grabbed his bound wrists and undid the tie.

He slid the silk into his front pocket, pretending not to notice when Rabbit sent him a questioning look—which he knew Void had seen.

"Here." Baikal took off his leather jacket and handed it over to him, sighing when Rabbit merely stared at it. "I destroyed your shirt, remember? I can't have you walking around half-naked."

"Why not?" Even as he asked, he took the offered jacket, since he wasn't a big fan of that idea either.

"Because I don't like to share. Speaking of," he took Rabbit's chin and forced his head up to meet his eyes, "If I catch you with anyone else I'll make them disappear and then you'll be punished. Is that clear?"

"That wasn't part of the agreement," Rabbit reminded. "I do this and then you delete the video as you promised."

"This?" Baikal snorted. "We agreed on intercourse—don't try and act like you didn't understand simply because that wasn't specifically said. I haven't fucked you yet, which means your part of the bargain hasn't been completed. But while we're on it, let's make something thing clear. There's one reason and one reason only I didn't force you to take my cock tonight. I didn't stop for you, little bunny. I stopped for me." Despite the harshness of his words, he leaned in and planted a kiss between Rabbit's brow. "I'm going to have so much fun with that virgin hole of yours, just you wait."

He released him and bent to pick his glasses off the ground—Rabbit hadn't even noticed when he'd discarded them—then sauntered toward the door. With a wave of his hand, the black fog dissipated.

"Don't worry about cleaning up," he called over his shoulder, not bothering to spare Rabbit a glance as he lifted his multi-slate to the control panel and unlocked the door. "I paid for that service already as well. Just make sure you've got yourself put together before you step outside."

And then he was doing just that, vanishing from view a second before the door shut at his back, sealing Rabbit in the space alone.

He was mad about feeling like he'd been used and discarded, but as for the being left on his own part...Rabbit was more than used to it.

With tears threatening to spill, he got up and went to find his pants.

He'd been tricked. Of course he had. He'd been foolish for believing this was going to go smoothly, that someone like Void would play fair.

He paused with one leg in his slacks, a thought hitting him.

Baikal had controlled the video with the glasses. Rabbit had recognized them for what they were, Insight 3.0, a device created and produced by Void Optics. They were worth a small fortune

and came with several nifty features, only a few of which Rabbit was privy to.

Clearly, they connected to multi-slates and Baikal had paired them.

Meaning, if Rabbit could get his hands on those glasses, he'd be able to access the video file and delete it. Since Baikal had tricked him, there was no telling how long the Brumal Prince intended to draw things out. If he didn't do something, there was a very real chance Rabbit could end up tied to him for weeks, if not months.

Having a plan, even one as shaky as that one, helped to ease some of the frustration in his chest and Rabbit finished dressing, promising himself that the next time he encountered Void, he'd be better prepared.

Chapter 8:

To play the beiska one had to be highly in tune with their own emotions, constantly allowing themselves to be brought to the height of feeling. When he'd been younger, he'd been put through grueling lessons built around teaching him how to tap into his emotions and hold onto them, let them build within himself until he could conjure the memory of it with ease and push that sensation into his music.

Because of this, Rabbit was used to experiencing a vast range of negative emotions in his short life, but there were two, in particular, he hated more than the rest.

Guilt.

And self-pity.

In the past year, he'd gotten good at burying both, shoving them so far down that now the only times they threatened to burst from that locked cage inside himself was when he was about to step onto a stage.

The panic attacks were awful, and he missed the times when he'd been younger and hadn't understood why anyone would have stage fright in the first place. But even still, both of those things were better than the raw, undiluted feeling that everything bad that had ever happened to him was his own damn fault.

Which was why it pissed him off so much when he felt that first stirring of self-pity in his gut as he stood in front of his bathroom sink, staring in the mirror at the massive hickey Void had left on his neck.

Had he given in too easily? He knew his worth and being the sex toy of someone, even if that someone happened to be an actual prince, was beneath him. He was Rabbit Trace, famed by age fourteen, the most anticipated rising musician in not just their galaxy, but in several.

The musician who got sick to his stomach whenever he thought about playing in front of an audience.

He'd kept that secret hidden, afraid that if he let on his mother would somehow find out and return to try and fix him, but apparently he hadn't been doing as good of a job as he'd assumed. Not if Void had figured it out, and in such a short timeframe too.

No matter what the other man said, Baikal must have taken an interest in him when they bumped into one another in the cafeteria. As far as Rabbit could recall, that was the one and only encounter they'd ever had in their three years at Vital. Whether it was because Void had been bored at the time, or he really did find Rabbit as attractive as he claimed, it was clear that the decision to trap him like this had been made on a whim.

How nice for him, that he could just decide something for himself with such ease. As the heir to the Brumal, Rabbit would have expected Baikal's life to come with more strings and red tape than his own, and yet it was the opposite. Sullivan Void must not keep a tight rein on his son.

Should Rabbit have chosen the alternative after all and ended his mother's career? There was a slight chance she'd be able to weasel her way out of it, but it was unlikely, especially if a man like Baikal was pushing for her ruination.

If she had nothing left, it was true she'd have to return home, and also true that she'd most likely take out her misfortune on Rabbit. The thought of having her overbearing presence constantly hovering over him was enough to make him queasy, but that wasn't the reason he'd finally given in to

Baikal's demands.

No, he'd been afraid of what might happen if the case was looked into further by the police. If they discovered why his mother had beat that man—had broken his hand in four places, even—and what had come next...

Rabbit shuddered and closed the lid on that thought, nowhere near steady enough to handle it at the moment. His insane encounter with the Brumal Prince last night was still haunting him and had been on his entire drive home.

And when he'd stumbled inside his house.

And crawled into bed.

And lay there staring up at the ceiling until the sun had beamed through his window signaling the start of the day.

The hickey wasn't the only mar to his usually put-together person. There were also dark bags under his eyes from the complete lack of sleep, and his brow was still pinched like it'd no doubt been since the moment Baikal had entered the viewing room instead of Arlet.

Rabbit winced thinking of that landmine waiting to explode. If she hadn't been the one to contact him that meant she'd decided not to try again after their terrible first date. He was going to have to figure out a way to inform his mother things weren't going to work out and she wasn't going to be able to call the great Bin Zimir family after all.

She wasn't going to take it well, but she was already set to perform in the galaxy over so there was no chance she'd bother coming back home to scold him in person.

Baikal's final warning chose that moment to echo in his head and Rabbit paused.

He'd agreed to be at the other man's mercy, and Void had made it clear he wasn't allowed to be with anyone else so...Maybe it was for the best that Arlet was no longer interested.

It was a small one, but it was a silver lining nonetheless, and in his current state of being, Rabbit would take any bit of positivity he could get. He'd avoided getting close to people and had only agreed to let Arlet in because his mother had allowed it. Baikal...Well. He was Brumal. Even if his mother did discover the two of them were interacting, she couldn't do anything to Void.

Not like she had to Oli.

Rabbit slammed his hands on the granite countertop and forced himself to stay focused on the present. His gaze wandered up and down his bare chest, but aside from the hickey, Baikal had been surprisingly careful with him.

He'd spent the entire rest of the night and most of the morning trying to convince himself he'd felt nothing but disgust during the encounter. That he'd hated every look, every touch, every second he'd been forced to spend in the Brumal Prince's presence. That his dick had merely reacted the way that it had due to a lack of stimulation and pent-up sexual frustration he hadn't been aware of prior.

The fact he could see visual proof that all of that was a lie staring back at him in the mirror had him clenching his fists.

At the mere recollection of the orgasms Baikal had forced from him, Rabbit's dick had begun to harden. He could see it right there in front of him so there was no use left in denying it, especially when it would ultimately do him no good.

So fine, he'd liked it. On some level.

It'd been scary and confusing, but he'd been intrigued from the very moment Baikal had made his intentions known. Rabbit had eyes, he saw what everyone else did when he looked at the Brumal Prince. He'd already known the man was devilishly handsome, but now he also understood he was wickedly charming on top of that. A dangerous combination.

His nakedness in front of Void had been embarrassing at first, but he'd never had a complex about his body—just his playing—and he'd quickly forgotten all about feeling shameful the second Baikal had placed those fingers to his hole and shown him why everyone always went so crazy over sex.

He would have chosen a gentler partner for his first time, but he had to admit that Baikal was at least skilled in that department.

Since he was already trapped, wouldn't it be better if he made the best of his situation? Besides, no matter what Void had said at the end there, the fact of the matter was, as soon as he'd discovered Rabbit was inexperienced, he'd backed off. Aside from a little sting and a lot of initial discomfort, he hadn't harmed him in any way.

Rabbit narrowed his eyes at himself in the mirror.

Was that really something he should be grateful for? Shouldn't it be a given that Void not go around hurting people for the hell of it?

With a sigh, he stepped out of the bathroom and continued getting ready for school. He'd considered skipping and practicing from home, but Professor Ludo had sent a message that morning about needing to see him, so he had to at least make an appearance. There was also the group project he'd been roped into doing for his Intergalactic Warfare class. They had a meeting in the East Quad at two.

Though most of his time was spent on music, Rabbit had worked extra hard to ensure he never dropped below the average in any of his other classes. Since there was no telling what he may or may not need in the future—if he was ever strong enough to escape the predestined one that had been assigned to him—and he didn't want to risk shooting himself in the foot now by not keeping an open mind.

On his way out the door, he paused before grabbing the beiska bag, his instrument already safely tucked inside, Baikal's never-ending questions repeating themselves in his mind.

How long had it been since he'd actually enjoyed playing?

Did he miss it?

Did he want that feeling back?

Light, could he even really recall what that feeling felt like in the first place? Whenever he thought about being on stage, his mind went right back to that person and how they—

His mouth firmed into a line and he tossed the strap of the bag over his shoulder. There was too much to do today already.

Wallowing in his misfortunes wasn't on the agenda.

* * *

Part of Vail University had been constructed over a sprawling mangrove field, the entire East Quad a series of wooden bridges that overlapped and led every which way. Lightning oaks, large trees with high canopies that had been alive longer than several generations' worth of Rabbit's family, also occupied the space. There were five in total, their neon yellow leaves the same shade all year round. They held a phosphorescent property that caused them to glow as soon as the sun began to set, their lights used to help navigate the pathways in the darkness.

Just one of the few reasons Rabbit preferred it here to other parts of campus.

It wasn't dark now, however, in the middle of the afternoon where Rabbit sat at one of the many gazebo study stations. There were twelve that lined this particular path which formed a semi-

circle, and he and his group had chosen one near the center. Each wooden structure was spaced ten feet away from the next, providing ample room for privacy so long as people kept their voices at a moderate level and respected everyone else.

“You’re still doing this?” Sila appeared at the end of the table and took the vacant bench seat across from Rabbit, who’d been distracted typing something into his holo-pad.

The meeting with his group had ended roughly fifteen minutes ago and the rest had left to grab lunch somewhere. Rabbit had declined the invitation, and since his reputation for being a loner was well known, none of the three group members had bothered sticking around to try and convince him.

Which was fine. It’s what he wanted anyway. To be left alone. He’d already learned the hard lesson of what would happen if he didn’t stay hypervigilant on his studies—or, more accurately, his practice—and it was a lesson he had no desire to experience again.

Sila sprawled out, taking up most of the bench with his broad shoulders. He had this ability to take up space, both literally and figuratively, wherever he went. Like it was impossible for the world and anyone in it to not take notice of him. Another sharp contrast to the timid kid who’d stuck to Rabbit like glue all last year.

“I’m bored,” Sila said, making it clear he hadn’t expected a response to his initial question. “Let’s get out of here and find something fun to do.”

Rabbit dropped his attention back to his holo-pad. He’d been in the middle of compiling notes from the meeting and he wanted it done before he forgot any of the smaller details. “I have practice after this.”

“Again?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t you find it draining?”

Yes. “No.”

Sila rolled his eyes. “You’ve got to get out more, Rabbit. Live a little. Oh.” He propped his elbows on the table. “How’d last night go? You had your redo date, right?”

He’d skipped out on going to the cafeteria for this exact reason. Maybe that made him a coward, but he wasn’t ready to even try to explain the events of last night, even to his one and only friend.

Fortunately for him, something caught Sila’s attention at that very moment, and his gaze followed someone as they walked across one of the vertical connecting paths. He even swiveled in his seat to maintain eye contact when the guy slid into a gazebo three down.

“Hold that thought,” he said, tapping his knuckles against the wooden surface before rising to his feet. He left his bag and headed straight for where the new arrival was sitting. Rabbit watched as he took the empty seat there and grinned at whoever the other guy was.

He was in the process of trying to figure out if he’d ever seen the guy before when suddenly someone latched onto the thin black scarf he’d placed over his neck while he’d been getting ready that morning. The material was torn free and he let out a sound of surprise, turning and reaching for it automatically.

Only to come up short the second his eyes met with teal-blue ones.

“Little bunny,” Baikal drawled, his displeasure apparent in his low tone. “Care to explain this?” He held up the scarf now bunched in his left hand and waited.

He’d forgone the leather jacket today, but those dark-framed glasses were perched on his nose, and his all-black uniform had the first three buttons undone, showing off a swath of tanned skin.

Before he knew what he was doing, Rabbit’s gaze was trailing over that exposed flesh,

dipping lower to follow the line of buttons all the way down to—

“Hey,” Baikal said, and Rabbit jumped, “my eyes are up here. But,” he leaned in so he could speak directly against the curve of his ear, “I like knowing you’re already this hungry for my dick after the small sampling I gave you last night.”

Rabbit scowled and went to swivel back around, but Baikal latched onto his neck and forced him to remain in place, gaze turning steely all over again.

“You still haven’t given me an explanation. Why the scarf?”

A couple of female students walked by on a separate path, saw them, and giggled amongst themselves.

Rabbit tried to pull away but that only caused the grip on him to tighten.

“Still haven’t learned your lesson?” Baikal clicked his tongue. “You’re no match for my strength. Why bother? It’ll be so much easier for you if you just learn to answer and do as you’re told the first time.”

He glared.

“None of that,” Baikal chided. “This is the second time you’ve made like you’re going to go back on our arrangement and I’m already sick of it. Adjust your attitude.”

“Sure thing, your majesty.” The words popped out before he could help it, but once they had and it was too late to take it back, Rabbit forced his expression to remain stony. “And the scarf was to cover up the mess you made of my neck.”

“I’ll let that first comment slide.” Baikal released him and then made to slide into the booth at his side, forcing him to move to make room. “As for this,” he tossed it onto the empty bench across from them, “if I mark you in an obviously visible place, it’s meant to be seen. You won’t cover them up again.”

“That’s not what—”

“You agreed to be mine,” he cut him off. “What? Did you think I meant only in the bedroom?”

“Didn’t you?” Rabbit had sort of thought that was the case, yeah. They fuck then they go their separate ways. But even if he hadn’t, making him walk around campus with a giant hickey on his neck? “I’m not okay with this.” He pointed to the mark, but Baikal merely shrugged.

“You’ll adjust,” he said, before he had a thought and the corner of his mouth turned up mischievously. “The same way your ass adjusted to my—”

Rabbit slammed a palm over his mouth, sending a dirty look to the male student who’d been in the process of passing by their table and who’d been paying them more attention than necessary.

Instead of getting upset, Baikal ended up laughing, the sound muffled by Rabbit’s hand. He waited until the student had passed and was fully out of earshot before he grabbed onto Rabbit’s wrist and moved him off. He kept hold of him, however, dropping their hands to his upper thigh.

When Rabbit tried to pull away, he tightened, hard enough this time there was a burst of pain that had Rabbit wincing.

“Don’t test me, little bunny,” he warned. “Some pushback is fun, but I won’t like it if you step too far out of line. I expect to be obeyed.”

“I’m not one of your Brumal you can just order around.”

“Exactly,” he surprised him by agreeing, before he added, “I don’t fuck any of them.”

“You haven’t fucked me either,” he snapped. Squeezing his eyes shut and letting out a slow breath when he realized what he’d done.

“Patience,” Baikal told him, chuckling at his discomfort. “I’ll be stuffing you full of my cock soon enough.”

“Can you please stop saying stuff like that?”

“No.”

“So, what,” he huffed, “I’m supposed to just be grateful you didn’t force me to do more last night? Even if that means trapping me in your company longer? You do realize you’re disgusting, right?”

“Pretty sure I warned you,” Baikal said. “That’s going to cost you later.”

“I didn’t agree to be your slave,” Rabbit pointed out, even knowing it was a losing battle.

“You agreed to be whatever I wanted you to be,” he corrected. “Fortunately for you, I’m not in the market for a slave, or a maid, or a minion for that matter.”

“Then what—”

“I just want you, Rabbit.” Baikal held his gaze. “You’re not aware of this yet, but you’ve been mine for a while already now. Whether you accepted last night or not, I wasn’t leaving that room until I tasted you on my tongue.”

Rabbit felt frozen in place as Baikal leaned in closer, his mouth drawing ever near. His heart was racing and it wasn’t entirely pleasurable. In fact, it wasn’t fear or mortification that was driving him, but expectation.

They’d shared one wild, messy kiss last night, and even though at the time he’d felt overwhelmed by it all, now the thought of getting to experience that again had anticipation racing through him.

But just before Baikal was about to do it, a commotion caught his attention and he pulled away to see what was going on.

Rabbit tried to bank down the disappointment and glanced over as well, frowning when he saw Kelevra had arrived and was currently holding Sila up by the front of his gray button-up.

The Imperial Prince attended the Academy on the other side of town, and as far as Rabbit knew, never made an appearance on their campus. There was also no obvious reason he could think of for him to be threatening Sila.

Although, to Sila’s credit, he didn’t appear disgruntled by being accosted. Anyone else in his position would no doubt be groveling and begging to be released, but Sila merely stared back at Kelevra with an empty, chilling expression Rabbit had never seen on his face before.

Still, that was his one and only friend and he was in trouble.

“Don’t.” Baikal stopped him when he went to rise. “Don’t get involved. Stay away from Kelevra. He’s volatile.”

“Pot calling the kettle black.”

Baikal captured his gaze and the seriousness in his eyes had Rabbit stilling. “Trust me, little bunny, I may want to own you, but that doesn’t mean I’ll get off on killing you. I’ll push you past your comfort zone and make you do things you’ll wrongly think you won’t be into, but I’ll never threaten your life.”

“He wouldn’t...” Rabbit’s worry for his friend only grew and he was about to shove Baikal away and go help despite the warning when suddenly another person was running to stop Kelevra themselves.

“Who the hell is that?” Baikal asked as they watched an exact duplicate of Sila boldly grab onto Kelevra’s arm and yank him off.

He shoved him a few feet and put himself between the two, Sila’s cold look turning smug over his doppelganger’s shoulder.

“That’s Rin,” Rabbit explained, and though he strained to listen, they were too far away to be

able to hear any of the harshly spoken words being said between the three now. “He’s Sila’s younger brother. He attends the Academy.”

“It doesn’t appear as though Kelevra was aware of this,” Baikal drawled.

It didn’t really make sense for him not to have, since Rabbit couldn’t come up with any other reason for Kelevra Diar to have come here. He was drawing a ton of attention, practically everyone who’d been walking any of the paths within a fifty-foot radius now stopped to watch.

And then send glances in Baikal’s direction.

Even though the two were friends, it was rare to see them in the same place outside of a formal social gathering or a fancy place like Club Vigor. They may not be interacting with one another, but clearly having them within the same view was enough to pique people’s interest.

Not that Rabbit didn’t get it, he did. The duo were nicknamed the Devils of Vitality, and from appearances alone, they lived up to it.

Kelevra wasn’t wearing the uniform for the Academy but was instead dressed in a crimson suit. He had on a black corset vest, a tie made up of shards of what appeared to be ruby tucked into the front, winking in the midafternoon sunlight. His curly hair, which had appeared dark when Rabbit had seen him at the restaurant earlier in the week, was more chestnut in the light, with hints of honey highlights.

He looked exactly like what Rabbit pictured the devil would—if the devil was a billionaire who was in line to own an entire planet.

“I’m a Brumal Prince,” Baikal’s voice cut through Rabbit’s thoughts and he tore his gaze away. “What?” His jaw was tense and he lifted a brow. “You prefer Imperial?”

“No,” Rabbit blurted, survival instinct kicking in before he could think his response over and tell the guy he didn’t like either of them.

“That’s good,” he said. “Because we’re in my kingdom, and here you take whatever I serve you.” He poked at the hickey, hard enough it had Rabbit glowering, and then rose to his feet. “I have to deal with this. He isn’t meant to be in my territory without first announcing himself.”

“You make it sound like you’re a legitimate king or something,” Rabbit stated.

“I may not hold an Imperial title,” Baikal adjusted the cuffs of his shirt, “but I assure you, I have every bit as much claim to a throne as someone with the Diar name. Possibly even more so, considering my relatives never snatched the crown from someone else.”

Rabbit frowned, but it was clear Baikal had no intentions of explaining that particular dig.

He took Rabbit’s wrist and turned his multi-slate, pressing their screens together and holding them there until they beeped. “I just shared our contacts. I’ll message you directly for our next date. You better come running, little bunny. If you even consider keeping me waiting,” he planted a palm against the table and leaned in, “I’ll take it out on that ripe ass of yours, and I won’t be as gentle as I was last night. Oh,” he snapped his fingers as if in afterthought, “wear my necklace too.”

Rabbit wanted to tell him to go screw himself, but he smartly clamped his mouth shut, glaring at Baikal’s back as he headed toward Kelevra, trying not to think about the very obvious love bite on his neck and how everyone nearby could see it plain as day. He’d purposefully left the silver necklace on his dresser.

Where it would be staying.

Baikal’s threat be damned.

Chapter 9:

The smell of packed dirt and mildew tickled at Baikal's nostrils as he leaned back against the concrete wall, arms crossed over his chest, lost in thought. Around him, his cousin and two other Brumal members who were considered part of his detail hovered around a man zip tied to a chair over a plastic tarp in the center of the room.

Even though it was vastly different, the scene had reminded him of the video of December Trace beating on that still unidentified person, more so how Rabbit had reacted to it. There hadn't been surprise in his eyes when he'd watched it, though the disgust and the pity were clear. And in the end, it was obvious the only reason he'd agreed to make the deal with Baikal had been to keep his mother away.

But why?

As the heir to the Brumal throne, he was no stranger to abuse. His father had beaten him to get him in line when he'd been an arrogant middle schooler, but there'd never been true hatred or animosity between them.

Rabbit was afraid of his mother. Afraid enough he was willing to trade himself to Baikal to protect her career just so she'd stay off planet. What he'd assumed was loneliness brought on by being abandoned in that massive house of his was actually anxiety. He didn't spend his nights wishing for his mom to return. He spent them praying she wouldn't.

In the year he'd been watching him, Baikal had noted his obvious separation from other students. The only person he allowed anywhere near him long enough to even start a conversation was that sophomore with the attitude problem, Sila Varun. He was curious how the guy had managed to break through Rabbit's defenses enough to gain that honor.

He'd assumed Rabbit was merely dedicated to his studies and, as the rumors suggested, standoffish. Now, however, he was forced to reevaluate. Admittedly, it annoyed him that he'd been so wrong about the other guy, to the point he almost pulled his blaster from where it was tucked at his back and started shooting at random just to blow off steam. The only thing preventing him from doing so was the fact that he wasn't Kelevra Diar.

Baikal had self-control.

Even if it was thinning.

There were pieces here that weren't adding up and there was nothing he disliked more than chaos he didn't initiate or ask for. All this time, he should have been paying closer attention. Should have inserted himself into his tiny obsession's life sooner, instead of waiting until he'd overheard the marriage proposal plans.

Rabbit was afraid of his mother and so the second she'd suggested he date Arlet, he'd gone like the dutiful son, most likely to avoid her wrath and that...

That pissed Baikal off.

No one was allowed to force Rabbit into a corner but him. Period. It looked like he was going to have to take action to ensure his will was followed.

"Vitality to Kal." Kazimir waved his hand in front of Baikal's face and grunted. "You're the one who called this meeting, your highness. Care to be present for it?"

At the title, he was reminded of how Rabbit had sneered that at him and he smirked.

"That's more like it," Kaz misunderstood the look and patted him on the shoulder, easing him

away from the wall and closer to the man tied up. “Let’s get on with it, shall we? I’ve got things to do.”

“Such as?” one of their trusted men, Flix, joked. He along with the other member in the room, Berga, had grown up with the cousins, the four of them thick as thieves.

Flix was the taller of the two, but also lankier, with toned limbs and hair the color of spun gold. His family had fled Sanctum back in the day with Baikal’s and had once originated from a powerful line of Shouts, though they’d yet to produce one in over three generations.

Berga’s family originated on Vitality, with his father being the first to join the Brumal. He had two small crystal horns set just below his hairline, his hair a jet-black. They’d come together by chance, but Baikal had kept them around and cultivated their relationships due to one of his father’s very first teachings when he’d been a boy.

Friends aren’t a weakness.

Make friends to make followers.

As the next in line for the throne, Baikal was going to need all the loyal people he could get, and he’d started forming that tight inner circle at a young age in preparation for when he one day took the crown.

“None of your business, asshole,” Kaz said, only for Flix to dramatically roll his eyes.

“Children,” Berga sighed at them and tugged the clunky goggles he’d been wearing up to the top of his head. He was the only one of them in full gear, from a plastic apron to elbow-length gloves, right down to little baggies for his shoes. Ironical, considering he was already set to be named Baikal’s future butcher, the man in charge of interrogations and delivering pain.

Baikal inhaled and rested his attention on the prisoner, some low-level grunt from a new gang that had cropped up over the past two years. They were small fry, nothing special, and not worth his father’s notice, hence why Kal had been saddled with the responsibility of keeping them in line.

Up until this point, they hadn’t done anything aside from petty thefts and the occasional brawl, but three nights ago, one of them had snuck into a Brumal member’s home and set the place on fire. The soldier and his wife had managed to escape, and the flames had eventually been put out with only minor damage done to the home, but the message had already been delivered and couldn’t go unanswered.

“Speaking of,” Flix said, turning to Baikal, “I’ve got a Bio Chem test tomorrow I still need to study for.”

“Has he said anything?” He chuckled his chin toward the guy. He’d spaced out for most of the interrogation, and that added to the screams hadn’t really caught anything their prisoner had divulged.

“Claims it was just a stupid prank gone wrong,” Berga answered, keeping his hands aloft so he didn’t accidentally drip blood on himself. He wore a similar set of glasses that Baikal did and was trailing his gaze over the prisoner’s body. “If I push him much further, I may end up killing him.”

A hacksaw and a thin needle-like dagger were set on the small wheel table to Berga’s right.

Kal typically wouldn’t have taken things this far over a small fire, but there’d been a baby and a sting—a four-legged mammal kept as pets—and he hated animal cruelty more than just about anything.

Except for maybe...

“Flix,” he said, “I need you to look into something for me.”

He’d missed something vital between Rabbit and his mother because he hadn’t bothered checking into it before. There’d been no real mystery—just an absentee parent, nothing to see there—but clearly that wasn’t true. His tiny obsession had stood his ground against Baikal their first couple

encounters, no simple feat. A person like that, who wasn't scared into silence by the Brumal Prince, so terrified of the woman that gave birth to them they'd willingly fuck a guy they didn't like?

Something was amiss.

Baikal scowled at himself as his thoughts ran rampant. He wasn't okay with the idea of Rabbit not liking him, but they were still relative strangers to one another in the musician's mind, and considering their encounter had included Baikal threatening him and later blackmailing him...Sure. Rabbit's hatred was within reason.

Didn't mean he was going to be allowed to keep it.

Baikal was going to have him begging to be his by the end of this. But first, he needed to crack through that solid exterior and wiggle his way past Rabbit's defenses.

"Uh," Flix shared an uncomfortable look with Kazimir, "Kal? Is there an order attached to that or...?"

"Yeah, I need you to—" Wait. If Flix did the legwork that meant he'd discover something about Rabbit before Baikal did. Kal already hated that Sila was looked upon fondly by his tiny obsession whereas his presence was met with resistance and fear. Why on Vitality would he willingly set Flix up to get close to Rabbit's secrets? "Never mind."

"What?" Flix blinked at him, obviously perplexed.

"I said fuck off."

"Okay," he threw up his hands. "Wow. Chill. I don't even know what you're telling me to stay away from."

"The Prince of Music," Kaz sneered, "no doubt."

Baikal glared in warning, but his cousin merely lifted a shoulder, bored with the topic already. Though he'd attended that same first performance as Kal had, he'd slept through Rabbit's playing and had no clue what about him had enthralled Baikal so heavily.

And Kal had no intention of ever filling him in because he'd murder anyone who tried to lay their hands on what was his, even his cousin.

"Rabbit Trace?" Berga asked, eyes going wide when Baikal growled. "I mean, I have no idea who that is. Definitely have never seen him perform live before."

Flix snorted. "Good one."

"What do you know about him?" Baikal was debating whether or not he could reach the hacksaw before Berga could flee from the room. The door was closed, but it was a cramped space, meaning not much space between him and—

"Are you thinking about cutting my tongue out?" Berga's voice cut into his twisted thoughts.

Kaz grimaced. "Dude, what the hell?"

"I could still work without a tongue," Berga replied as if that was the most logical answer he could give.

"How are you going to run the interrogation part, genius?" Flix quirked a blond brow.

"You'd have to help me out I suppose."

"Answer the damn question," Baikal interrupted them sharply.

"Oh." Berga tipped his head and considered it. "Nothing more than the average person. My mother is a big December Trace fan, so her music was constantly streaming on the holo-player in the living room day in and out. I probably saw her face more than I did my own mom's."

It was tempting to tell him what his mother's idol got up to in her spare time, but since he'd promised he'd keep the secret, Baikal didn't bring it up. He wouldn't betray Rabbit like that, not him, and not before he'd gotten everything he wanted from his tiny obsession first.

Besides, it wasn't like he could really judge when he took into account where the four of them were currently standing.

The Bunker was an underground location used by the Brumal, a location even the Imperial family didn't know the whereabouts of. There were three levels and the lowest, the one they were on, was designed as a labyrinth of sorts. Soldiers who'd wandered down here without proper orders or instructions had gotten lost in the past, some not found until they were near death thanks to dehydration.

When he'd been nine, he'd snuck in without his father knowing to explore on his own. He'd been a cocky little shit even at that age, confident he wouldn't get lost like those losers he'd heard stories about. And he hadn't.

All he'd had to do was follow the screams.

"What do you know about her relationship with her son?" With everything else going on in his life the past year, Baikal's obsession with the musician had been pretty narrowed into focus on the present. He hadn't been lying when he'd mentioned buying a magazine with Rabbit's face on it the other day, but the interview questions had all been about his future, with little mention of his past. "I assumed they weren't close because she's never around."

"December Trace is pretty private about her home life," Berga said. "But from what I recall, anytime her son was brought up, she'd talk about how talented he is and is going to be. Sounded a lot like she'd written his future from start to finish for him already."

"Sounds kind of familiar," Kazimir grunted, sending Kal a knowing look when his glare turned disapproving. "What? The two of you have something in common, that's all."

Flix's brow furrowed. "No way, you have a thing for the prodigy?"

Kaz rolled his eyes. "Where have you been?"

"I've been careful," Baikal argued, only to have his cousin tsk.

"Not careful enough. Sending him flowers? Attending all of his performances? Did you really think no one was going to notice?"

"I mean," Flix leaned toward Berga and lowered his voice, just not low enough the words wouldn't travel, "he wasn't entirely wrong since no one other than Kaz did. Right? Did you have any idea?"

Berga shook his head in the negative.

Baikal had stopped listening to them again. Perhaps Rabbit's mother was overbearing, despite their distance. There had to be more to it—there'd been too much fear in Rabbit's eyes for it to be as simple as that—but he'd get to the bottom of it. Now that it'd been brought to his attention, he'd chip away at all those secrets one by one until he had his little bunny vulnerable and splayed out before him.

Kazimir's multi-slate dinged and he checked the message scowling.

"What is it?" Flix asked.

"There's been another break-in," Kazimir swore.

"We should—"

Baikal whipped out his blaster, aimed, and shot the prisoner they'd been interrogating between the eyes. At everyone's silent stare, he shrugged. "He had his chance to be useful." He turned to Kazimir. "Where did they hit this time?"

"Keep that thing handy," he indicated the blaster, "You aren't going to like this."

Chapter 10:

Rabbit came out of the bathroom drying his hair and noticed the green light flashing on the side of his multi-slate, which he'd left on the end table in his bedroom. He didn't rush to check the message, heading toward the dresser to pull out a pair of gray sweatpants and a T-shirt first. He was exhausted and his left shoulder was aching a little, probably due to the fact he'd lost track of time and had spent over six hours in his practice room replaying the same four notes over and over again.

It'd been years since he'd made a breakthrough, and it was starting to feel like the only reason he was still looked favorably upon in the music scene was because there was no one else currently on planet that was at his level.

But being the best in the area didn't mean he was *the* best. He couldn't talk to his professors about it—they'd snitch to his mom—and Sila wouldn't understand. Hell, if he were being honest, Rabbit didn't fully understand why it mattered so much to him when he was convinced he'd give up the beiska in a second if given the choice.

Choice.

He ran a hand down his face. There'd never been a choice for him where this was concerned, not once. He'd known the proper way to hold the beiska before he'd even learned to walk. His first word had been "color" and up until he'd been eight when the novelty had worn off and he'd grown up enough to realize there were no other options available to him, he'd beamed at his mom and told anyone who would listen how he "wanted to be just like her one day".

Just like her, huh.

Absent.

Self-centered.

A criminal.

He shook his head, not wanting to go there, trying to forget all about the video he'd seen at the Seaside Cinema, along with everything else he'd experienced there. Absently, his hand wandered up to the side of his neck, pressing lightly against the bruise. The hickey had faded some, but it was still glaringly obvious whenever anyone was standing within a ten-foot radius of him. Fortunately, he'd been done with most of his classes by the time Baikal had found him on the quad, with only one left to endure before he'd been able to slip home to the privacy of his studio.

Typically when he was already on campus he stayed and used theirs, but there was no way he was going to do that with that mark on his neck for the whole world to see. Not to mention, so long as he remained on school grounds there was no telling when or if Baikal would get the jump on him again, and seeing him the once had already maxed out his quota of intense meetings for the month.

Rabbit was used to silently coasting through life on campus, noticed but never really bothered. It wasn't so much that he liked it that way—maybe once he'd been outgoing and interested in making friends—but he'd definitely gotten used to it. All the whispers and odd glances he'd gotten after word had spread he'd been seen with Baikal, with a hickey no less, had made him uncomfortable.

It was similar to the feeling he got on his way to whatever auditorium he was about to perform at. His skin prickled and his mouth seemed to dry, his throat feeling thick and tight. That was the beginning, the easy part as far as he was concerned. The second he'd recognized those signs his panic had only gotten worse and he'd booked it off campus as fast as he could, before the heart palpitations and the sweating could kick in.

He never used to be like this, had always been cool and composed—for real though, not just on the outside because he had to fake it.

His multi-slate lit up again, alerting him to yet another message and he sighed and headed toward it to finally check the device. Since he only ever heard from his mom, and occasionally from Sila, he wasn't anticipating much. Aside from that, there were usually multiple Inspire posts that he was tagged in, but he ignored all of those.

He froze when he saw a chain of missed messages, all from the same person.

Neither of them his mom or his only friend.

Void: You awake, little bunny?

Baikal's contact info was preset to his full name, but Rabbit had changed it as soon as he'd gotten the chance. Void seemed more fitting no matter which way he spun it.

As soon as he managed to get his hands on those glasses, he'd be able to hack in and delete the video footage of his mother on his own. Without that, there'd be nothing left for the Brumal Prince to hold over his head, and their agreement would be null.

Baikal's presence was stifling because whenever he was around it was like he was sucking all the oxygen out of the room. Like there was a massive cavern within him where a soul was meant to be, and in an attempt to fill it, he siphoned other people's energy.

It wasn't just Rabbit who thought that either; that'd long since been the rumor around campus and on the streets. Baikal Void wasn't to be trifled with because of his daddy and his title, sure, but there was also the dark aura that hung over him, casting a murky shadow wherever he stepped. If he'd been ugly, the reaction he got from other students would be the opposite of what it was today. As it were, people were inexplicably drawn to danger and intrigue.

Rabbit wanted to hold himself to a higher standard and yet...

He gulped, fingers scrolling down through the messages, all sent roughly two to five minutes apart. According to the time stamp, the first had been sent just after he'd gone for his shower. The longest pause had been between it and the second before clearly he'd lost patience with waiting and had fired them off.

Void: Did you fall asleep? It seems too early for that.

Void: Are you practicing?

Void: Or are you ignoring me?

Void: You better not be ignoring me, little bunny. You won't like the consequences.

Void: Reply.

Void: All right, Rabbit. Have it your way.

He must have reread that final message several times, something tight gripping his chest before he tore his gaze off of it and over to the digital clock on the opposite side of his bed. That last message had been sent roughly fifteen minutes ago.

Should he respond now?

His fingers hesitated when he went to open the chat prompt.

Why should he bother? Let the asshole stew for all he cared. It was far past time the shoe was on the other foot. Up until now, it'd always been Baikal calling the shots. No more. Rabbit didn't want to talk to him so he wouldn't. End of story.

Carelessly, he tossed the device back onto the end table and got ready for bed. His room was located on the upper level, all the way at the end, tucked into the corner. When they'd moved here when he was in middle school, his mom had chosen it for him because it had windows overlooking two sides of the massive home. Back then, she'd still been in her "we need to stimulate your senses as

much as possible” phase.

He’d been told to look at anything and everything he could to try and elicit an emotional response he could feed back into the crystal of the beiska. She’d even hired landscapers to tear out the wildflowers that had naturally bloomed on the south side and replace them with glow-hearts, a mechanical flower that changed colors and patterns based on the temperature it was placed in.

Rabbit hated them, but he dared not tell her that.

Rubbing at his eyes, he climbed beneath the snow-white covers and settled in, willing his tense muscles to relax. Void’s message came to mind one more time, but he shook his head, refusing to let it bother him. He couldn’t afford to lose another night to that man. Sleep deprivation would affect his playing. And if his playing was affected...

His mother would arrive and find something else to place the blame on for his lack of progress.

Just like the last time.

Nope. He wouldn’t allow himself to go there either. Hell, he’d be better off with Baikal taking up permanent residence in his head over *that* getting the chance to worm its way in. At least he’d gotten something positive out of his experience with Void.

Thinking about how the other man had brought him to orgasm had Rabbit groaning, partially out of frustration for letting it come to mind in the first place, partially due to the fact his dick instantly stirred.

Rabbit’s king-size bed came equipped with a massage lounge chair feature attached to the right and his gaze momentarily trailed over to it. A stack of music theory books he’d read through probably a dozen times sat on the small work surface just above the chair, one of the fifteen hover-orb lights he had keeping the place bathed in a nice warm glow hung directly over the stack as if taunting him.

He shouldn’t be thinking about Void’s teal gaze in the dim light of the movie theater, or how his touch had felt, searing and dominant.

How he’d sort of maybe liked it.

Not in the moment—he’d been too caught off guard, confused, and freaked out at the time, but in all the moments since...

Rabbit’s hand trailed under the blanket, skating down his flat stomach to press over his dick beneath the sweatpants. At just the slight pressure he moaned, eyes lifting to the large skylight that took up most of the width of his room. He had darkened mode turned off, so he could peer up at the vast night sky and catch the twinkle of one of the million stars there. Even though he wasn’t a fan of darkness in general, looking up at night was different. Instead of causing him to panic, it tended to calm him.

Something Baikal Void would never be able to do, no matter how many times he made him come.

Made him.

Those were the keywords.

Rabbit hadn’t wanted it but he’d gone through with it anyway. Or...Actually...Baikal hadn’t, had he?

It’d been so obvious that he’d been prepared to fully fuck Rabbit that night, even if Rabbit had turned him down, and yet the second he’d discovered his virginity he’d held back.

I didn’t stop for you, little bunny.

Right. No, of course not. Void hadn’t done it for him.

He yanked his hand away, scowling at himself. Stubbornly, he rolled onto his side willing the erection to abate and his head to clear itself of all wild thoughts of teal eyes and phantom caresses.

* * *

Rabbit!

At some point, he must have successfully fallen asleep, because the next thing Rabbit knew, he was coming to with a startle. He was still lying on his side but he was frozen, his body tense, the fuzzy memory of some dream popping like bubbles so that there was only a formless residue left over he couldn't quite touch or place. He'd been dreaming about something horrifying but...what? Because of that, it took him a little longer than it should have for him to realize the most harrowing thing of all.

All of the lights were off.

Terror loomed over him and his breathing became shallow pants he desperately tried to steady if only to keep from making too much noise. His fear of the dark wasn't as fresh as his stage fright, but that too had heightened since the event of a year ago. Before, it'd been upsetting but nothing too encumbering. Now, however, his chest felt like it was being crushed beneath a heavy weight.

Even with the advancements in technology, power outages were a thing and it wasn't like this was his first. But the sky above him was clear, the stars still staring down at his immobile form, so bad weather being the cause was out. The logical thing to do would be to get up and check to see if the neighbors had lost power as well, yet Rabbit struggled to get his limbs to obey.

So what if they hadn't? It just meant he'd blown a fuse or something of the like. It was no big deal. This was no big deal.

He could handle a little darkness.

Rabbit ground his teeth and gathered his courage, easing up at an excruciatingly slow pace. But he did it. It took him just as long to climb from the bed, his bare feet touching the chilly hardwood floor, and snatched his multi-slate off the table. The flashlight setting came on instantly at his command and the vice around his heart eased ever so slightly. Because of the skylight, he was able to make out enough to move around without bumping into anything, moving around the bed to brush the thick curtains aside.

Since it was well past midnight, the house next to his didn't have any of their indoor lights on, but the back patio porch was brightly lit. He frowned and then went to the other window set on the adjoining wall to check the neighbors on the opposite side.

Everything appeared to be in working order for them as well.

With the flashlight in hand, Rabbit was a bit more confident as he exited his bedroom. The top floor was set up as a loft area that encircled the entire floor beneath it, and he peered over the metal railing as he traveled toward the wide staircase down the hall, passing the closed library door and the door to his mother's study.

The steps creaked beneath him as he made his way down, careful to shine the light directly on them so he didn't risk tripping and falling. It was a long drop, and he'd no doubt risk breaking something if he was unfortunate enough to slip.

He just had to make it to the mainframe computer located in the atrium, exactly where the steps led. There was an emergency control switch that would reactivate Mint, his A.I. Housekeeper. He was equipped with a backup store of energy, but it had to be manually turned on by his user. Once Mint was online again, Rabbit could order him to locate the problem with the power and fix it.

Then the lights would be back on and everything would return to being normal.

Honestly, he was a bit proud of himself as he finally made it to the landing and turned to the right, where a large control panel camouflaged as an ornate mirror hung above a writing desk. It'd taken him well over six months to do it, but he was now at a place where walking surrounded by darkness was doable so long as he had a single flashlight to help guide his way.

Before, even that wouldn't have been enough.

Pressing beneath the mirror, he felt for the hidden switch, waiting when he pushed it for the familiar hum of the machine as it booted to life.

Only, it didn't come.

He pursed his lips. That couldn't be right. The button had a fingerprint scanner attached, meaning it would have identified him when he'd touched it and activated. He tried again figuring he hadn't rested his finger on it enough, but still nothing.

As he started to fiddle with it, a thought trickled through his head, like a murky recollection slowly reaffirming itself.

Something had woken him up, right? Had it been the weird dream he couldn't remember or something else?

Almost as soon as he recalled that he picked up on a soft sound. His shoulders and spine stiffened, ears straining to make out any other noise even as he tried to silently tell himself he was mistaken.

It'd come from clean across the atrium, somewhere between the entranceways to the dining room and the sitting room, if he wasn't mistaken. The sound itself had been faint, barely audible, which was why he was so hopeful he'd made it up.

Until it came again.

A slight ruffle of clothing.

The sound of a rubber sole lifting off the marble flooring.

Rabbit felt the presence at his back a moment later, the intense sensation of being watched cascading over him like an icy waterfall. The force of it set him off, his flight instincts kicking into overdrive as he bolted to the right, sprinting down one of the two back corridors that led to the main portion of the house.

He sucked in a sharp breath when whoever was there gave immediate chase, no longer bothering to hide as they raced through the massive structure. Whoever it was sounded fast. And big.

Though keeping the flashlight on would make it easier for him to be followed, Rabbit didn't have it in himself to toss his multi-slate away. The fear of whoever was pursuing him warred with his fear of being cast in total darkness. He'd be even more helpless if he allowed the latter to occur, and his grip tightened around the device, beams of light slashing through the living room as he darted around the couch to get to the exit.

His mother had designed the house herself, wanting something open and airy to show off to the reporters that came to do a piece on the place afterward. They'd ooh'd and ahh'd exactly as she'd planned, waxing poetic about how artsy her taste was, guessing she'd chosen to leave most rooms without doors for the acoustics or some other such nonsense.

The lack of privacy in most areas of the house used to bother him a little when he'd been younger, but then his mother had gone on longer and longer trips, first abroad and eventually off planet, and it'd become less of a big deal to him.

Until now, when he was being hunted down by an intruder with nowhere safe to hide.

The only place he could think of was the mudroom, which had both a door separating it from the kitchen it was attached to and one leading straight to the backyard. If he could get there, he could

run outside and either go for help from one of his neighbors or make it to the garage.

He entered the kitchen and felt a gush of air at his back, the ghostly sensation of fingers just nearly having grabbed him causing him to pick up the pace and practically run into the edge of the kitchen table. Rabbit just barely avoided it, feeling an inkling of satisfaction when whoever was behind him wasn't so lucky, a hard whack and a curse cluing him into that fact.

The satisfaction was short-lived, however. Just as he was reaching for the doorknob to the mudroom, strong arms banded around his waist and hauled him away from the promise of safety.

A startled yelp burst from his throat as he was spun around and bent, his front slammed down over the granite island that no one had ever used for cooking a single day since it'd been purchased and fixed into the home. The surface was frigid against his skin as his cheek was smashed into it, a heavy hand holding him prisoner by the nape.

Then something hot and heavy draped itself over him from behind, a familiar voice finally cutting through the terror ringing in Rabbit's ears.

"Looks like I caught myself a naughty bunny," the voice practically purred, the owner's satisfaction apparent in his silky tone.

"V-Void?"

Baikal chuckled dark and low, the sound somehow coming off sultry. "Should have messaged me back, tiny obsession. Now it's come to this, and fair warning, I'm in a *mood*."

Chapter 11:

He spoke that last word directly over the curve of his ear and Rabbit shivered before he could help it.

His mouth had gone dry and his heart was still thumping wildly in his chest. It was almost like his body and his mind couldn't decide on what to feel, whether they should be relieved it was just Baikal and not some random robber, or if the fact it *was* Baikal should make them *more* afraid.

Rabbit had dropped his multi-slate when he'd been grabbed, and it'd slid a few feet away, thankfully right side up. The glow from it helped to cut through some of the darkness, allowing him to cling to a string of dignity, if only just.

"What," he swallowed and tried again, "What kind of mood?"

Baikal was silent for a beat before, "Interesting how you're not asking me what I'm doing here."

"Would you tell me if I did?"

"No," he replied, pressing those wicked lips to the rise of his cheek. The bastard was smirking. "Because I intend on showing you instead."

"Wait—" Rabbit struggled against the other man's ministrations as soon as the hold on his neck vanished, but with Void's firm body still at his back, there was little room for him to move.

That same hand bunched the band of his sweatpants and tugged, yanking the material clean off his body like a child carelessly tearing through their first gift Christmas morning.

Which was an altogether odd thought for Rabbit to have, considering they didn't celebrate Christmas on their planet.

Then a palm whacked him against his right cheek, sending all thoughts of holidays or anything else scattering in the wind. The move was rough but clipped, that hand coming down on him with just enough force for it to sting but not leave any long-lasting marks. Even still, he cried out, pushing against the counter in a poor attempt to remove himself from between it and the steel-like form behind him.

Baikal shoved him into place with a hand at his narrow back and delivered another slap, this time ending it by grabbing onto a fistful of his rear and squeezing, fingers digging in deep enough Rabbit whimpered.

"Since you're a virgin," his words were spoken casually, as though he weren't in the middle of abusing Rabbit's ass, "I guess that means no one's played with you like this before?"

"This isn't playing!" That earned him another blow, harder than the last and he just barely held back the urge to glare over his shoulder at the Brumal Prince. "No," he ground past his clenched teeth instead, knowing exactly what his tormenter was waiting to hear. "No one has...done this to me before."

Suddenly, his touch turned tender, massaging over his burning flesh, rubbing away the sting in small, measured circular motions that quickly had Rabbit squirming.

It felt...good. Soothing, in a sick way. The pain from the hits retreated to make way for achy warmth that began to build inside of him instead. Was it because it almost felt caring now, the way Baikal was handling him? Or—

"It's called spanking," Baikal drawled, cutting through his thoughts. "Typically, I'll be using it as a punishment, but that doesn't mean it's not something we both can't enjoy."

“Like hell,” he spat, sucking in a breath in preparation for Void’s retaliation, another hit, this time to the opposite cheek.

“Want to try that again, Rabbit? Or,” He removed his hold on his back only to circle his front and grab at his dick, “have you not noticed yet how hard you already are for me?”

Rabbit gasped at the first touch of those fingers as they encircled the base of his cock. All of the memories from the night at the theater he’d been so desperately fighting to forget came rushing to the forefront at lightning speed.

“Is there a reason you aren’t wearing any underwear?” Void asked, still holding him down there, though he didn’t move to stroke him or give him anything other than that initial contact. “Were you perhaps waiting for me, little bunny?”

He shook his head frantically, trying to collect his thoughts and resist the desire to rut against Baikal’s hand. Not wearing underwear had been a mistake. He’d been too distracted when he’d gotten out of the shower and simply hadn’t bothered with them. But that explanation required too many words, and right now he wasn’t confident he could deliver them without letting a moan or two escape in the process.

“Is this the silent treatment?” Baikal was being annoying, peppering him with questions as though it didn’t matter to him one way or the other if Rabbit answered any of them. “You choosing to be stubborn on me again? You like resisting even when I’ve got you cornered like this, don’t you?”

“No,” Rabbit bit out, if only to try and assuage whatever twisted form of penalty Void was planning next.

“To which question?”

“All of them.”

He clicked his tongue. “I’m calling bullshit on that one, little bunny. You can’t tell me you’re not being stubborn right now when it’s so obvious that’s what’s going on. I already told you I was in a mood, didn’t I?”

“You never said what kind.” Rabbit was shocked he managed to string together that whole sentence.

Baikal slapped him again, the sound of his palm cracking against his cheek echoing in the large kitchen. Then he released his dick, hand moving to bunch the end of Rabbit’s shirt, trapping the material just above his crease, pushing down some to force his ass to tip up slightly.

“Don’t.” Rabbit didn’t want a repeat of what happened the other night. Didn’t want something else that could haunt him.

He really was just being stubborn though, because at the same time...

“Are you afraid of the dark?” Baikal asked him, ignoring his refusal.

The sound of a lid popping had Rabbit’s brow furrowing before pressure on his back had him shaking his head in response.

“That’s two,” Void’s voice darkened in obvious displeasure that caused a skitter of worry to travel down Rabbit’s spine. “Twice you’ve lied to me tonight. I advise against doing so a third time, you won’t like what I do, and I’m trying hard here to control myself as it is.”

“Why?” Rabbit didn’t understand. Why would he bother? Clearly he didn’t give a shit about how Rabbit felt. A person who cared wouldn’t have broken into his house and chased him through the damn place without announcing it was them.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” Baikal told him, and it was hard to tell if he was doing that thing he liked to do again—ignoring him on purpose—or if he was saying it in answer to the question. “I just wanted you a little frightened for me, that’s all. I wanted to see how you’d react.”

“That sounds exactly like you meant to scare me,” he pointed out. Rabbit tried to keep still, his face still resting on the cool counter. Maybe if he behaved, Void would continue going easy on him.

If *this* was the Brumal Prince’s version of easy, Rabbit didn’t want to find out what he considered hard.

“Going to call me out every time I make a slip of the tongue like that?” Baikal asked, and despite what Rabbit had just thought, he found himself answering back in the affirmative.

“Yes.”

He chuckled, and that was the only warning he gave before something hard prodded at Rabbit’s hole.

“Don’t—” Rabbit jerked against the edge of the table as that solid thing was shoved into him. It didn’t feel anything like Baikal’s fingers, too thick in the center and at the end.

Baikal wiggled it in even deeper, using his fingers to part Rabbit’s ass cheeks so he could firmly fit the t-shaped base of whatever he’d just inserted on the outside of that tight ring of muscle.

Rabbit’s breathing was strained, his hips shaking. There were tears at the corner of his eyes, but the pain was already starting to dissipate, though the discomfort wasn’t. It felt...weird, and when he clenched around it experimentally, he was met with more stings. “Take it out.”

The Brumal Prince had his cheeks spread wide, his gaze trained down on his filled opening appreciatively. Rabbit didn’t have to look to know, he could hear it in the way he spoke, all husky and pleased sounding. “I wasn’t sure it’d fit, but look at you being all good for me.”

“It doesn’t,” he argued. “I want it out.”

“Well, I want it to stay exactly where it is.” Void pressed a finger on it, and Rabbit panted. “This is the width of two of my fingers, I checked. Typically we’d start smaller, but I’m a bit impatient. To be fair, that’s not entirely your fault.”

“Then why?” Rabbit turned to plant his forehead against the counter instead, concentrating on breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. The ache of being stretched was distracting and unpleasant and drudged up the same fear he’d felt when he’d first seen Baikal’s exposed cock.

If whatever was currently in him was only the width of Baikal’s *fingers*...

He shook his head. “Please. I can’t.”

“You’re going to.”

“Please.”

“Tell you what,” Baikal settled himself at his back, and Rabbit felt something else bump against the thing inside of him, “I’ll let you choose, how does that sound? You either get the plug,” he rolled his hips, pressing against the intrusive object, causing Rabbit to emit a strangled sound, “or you take my cock.”

He couldn’t be serious?

“What’s it going to be, little bunny? This,” he flicked at the object—the butt plug—and then tapped something silky against the swell of one cheek, “or this?”

“You can’t put that thing inside of me,” he said.

“That thing is my dick, Rabbit,” he growled. “And I’ll have you worshiping it soon enough.”

He shook his head for the millionth time that night alone.

“I’m going to be your king,” Baikal stated, then corrected, “I *am* your king. And right now, I’m showing you mercy.”

This wasn’t mercy, it was torture.

So...why was Rabbit so hard then?

His dick hung heavy between his legs, dripping onto the kitchen floor. Even acknowledging how messed up this reaction from him was, Rabbit couldn't get it to go back down. In fact, the more he thought about what Baikal must look like right now, standing behind him, his cock pushing against the plug plunged inside of him, the harder he seemed to get.

He didn't understand. Any of this. Didn't understand what sin he'd committed to earn him the devilish attention of the Brumal Prince, or why his body was reacting this way to being accosted in his own damn home.

"Choose," Baikal said. "Either I fuck you with that plug protecting your unprepared hole from my cock or I give it to you bloody and raw like I really want. The choice is yours, little bunny."

The choice wasn't a choice at all. Although...

Wasn't it more of one than he was used to getting?

"Fine," Baikal's fingers settled on the end of the plug, "Then I'll choose for you."

"Okay!" he surrendered.

"Okay what?" Baikal leaned over him, the movement causing his body to fit against Rabbit's, effectively pushing into him. His balls ended up situated directly over the end of the plug, and he pushed it in even deeper as he strained forward.

Rabbit fisted his hands and dug his nails into his palms. "Leave it in."

"Because?"

"I," he blew out a breath, "I want it in."

Baikal smoothed a strand of Rabbit's hair off his forehead as some kind of small reward and smiled at him. "I knew you were just caught off guard back at the theater when you were acting like a slow learner. You pick up quick, don't you, tiny obsession?"

He thrust his hips forward, hard, before Rabbit could reply to that, the plug digging in, forcing his hole to open around its wide girth to accommodate it. He repeated the motion, his cock slipping up and down between the crease of Rabbit's ass and he groaned, balls slapping against the plug.

Rabbit writhed, torn between wanting to get away and wanting to push back against that pressure. The pain was still there, but the burn was starting to turn into something else, something exquisite and foreign that he wanted to explore.

"You seem ready for it." Baikal pulled back, readjusted, and this time when he humped against Rabbit's ass, he was shoving against the plug at full force. His cock whacked against Rabbit's inner thighs this time, bumped against the underside of his balls. They both moaned and Baikal grabbed him by the hips and started pulling him back into each of his thrusts between his thighs, until Rabbit was basically ping-ponging back and forth against him and the edge, his dick receiving a beating every time.

He thought the friction would be too light, the touches too infrequent to make him come, but he'd been wrong. The orgasm took him by surprise, his scream ringing in the air as his back bowed and his hole clenched around the plug. His toes curled and the darkness of the room suddenly filled with bursts of white light.

Rabbit wasn't given the chance to recover, torn away from the table and thrown to the ground roughly. He hit the floor on his slightly red ass and winced, but then Baikal was there, shoving him down until he was lying with the Brumal Prince kneeling between his spread thighs.

Baikal held his gaze and began stroking himself furiously, pumping his fist in quick, almost violent motions. There was a ferocity in his teal eyes that took Rabbit's breath away, capturing him and holding him frozen in place, unable to look away.

With a roar, Baikal came, ropes of come shooting out to ruin the front of Rabbit's t-shirt. It

seemed to last forever, the head of his cock unloading over and over again. He wrung himself dry, collecting the very last drop when it rolled down his tip. Uncaring how heavy he was, Baikal covered Rabbit's body with his own, and brought that glistening drop to Rabbit's mouth.

He smeared it on his full bottom lip, his expression a mixture of possessiveness and mania that would have had Rabbit curling up in fear if he'd had that option.

"Shh," Baikal took notice of that reaction, softening his touch and his voice as he slowly lowered his mouth until their breaths mingled. "Remember what I told you before? At the theater?"

Rabbit frowned. A lot had been said at the theater, and frankly, with all the stimulation he was currently experiencing he couldn't be bothered to even try to guess what he was referring to.

It appeared orgasming had put Baikal in a better mood, however, because instead of forcing him to figure it out on his own, he filled him in.

"I'll be gentle with you," he repeated. "So long as you don't resist. Are you going to resist me, little bunny?"

His brow furrowed even more. "I don't understand."

Was he planning on making them both come a second time? He'd managed to force two out of Rabbit before, so it seemed likely. At the prospect of more attention, his dick was actually starting to lengthen where it was caught between them, and he knew there was no way Baikal didn't feel it against his stomach.

Since he'd already ended up here, dirty and on the floor, why would he bother resisting? Hell, if it meant getting to feel good again, whatever at this point.

Baikal licked the curve of Rabbit's jaw up to his ear and then blew against the delicate lobe. "Leave the plug in."

He blinked. "What?"

"It stays in until I tell you otherwise," he elaborated. "If I find out you've removed it without permission—and trust me, little bunny, I will find out—I end this game once and for all and take you for real. No more gentle. No more sweet."

Since when had he been either of those things in actuality?!

"Void," Rabbit didn't like the nervousness in his tone but it couldn't be helped.

Baikal kissed the tip of his nose and then he was rising to his feet. He tucked his already rock-hard cock away, shifting uncomfortably to adjust himself better, and then gave Rabbit, who was staring up at him with an incredulous look, a hard glare.

"Go clean up," he ordered. "If you need to use the bathroom you can, but then that goes right back where it belongs. If you need help forcing it in because you're afraid of the pain, call me and I'll come help."

Rabbit's mouth dropped open and his cheeks stained crimson.

"When I find you again, that better be sitting pretty tucked inside that sweet ass of yours, or —"

"You aren't serious?"

He sighed. "You really have to stop asking me that, little bunny. It's starting to get on my nerves."

"I can't just—"

"You can, and you will," he stated. Then he gripped himself over his jeans pointedly. "Or do you want us to get to the main event as badly as I do?"

Even hidden inside his pants Baikal's cock looked intimidating.

"That's what I thought," he said when Rabbit didn't reply. "Obey, little bunny. You keep your

promise and I'll keep mine."

"What promise?" Rabbit demanded, unable to mask his frustration or the way it was helping him return to his senses. He was seriously sitting on the floor of his own kitchen covered in another man's come.

And he'd *enjoyed* getting there.

What. The. Fuck.

"You don't resist," Baikal reminded, "and I be gentle."

"You have yet to *actually be* gentle!" As far as he was concerned, Void had broken his part of the bargain first. Why should he be the only one held accountable?

"Oh, Rabbit," the smile that split across Baikal's face then could only be described as monstrous, "let me reassure you, *this is my gentle*. If I'd shown you my true self, you'd be a mess of tears and blood right now. Don't get too comfortable though." His grin widened. "Once you're ready for me, I won't hold back, no matter how badly you cry or beg me to."

Chapter 12:

There must be something seriously wrong with him.

Since this was Rabbit's first sexual encounter with anyone other than his own hand, he had nothing to compare it to, and yet he was pretty sure normal people didn't get turned on by being tossed around and treated like a slave.

No, that wasn't right. A subject.

Baikal Void was treating him like he was one of his damn Brumal subjects and while it prickled at his pride for sure, mostly it just made him wonder how many other people Void did this kind of stuff to.

Rabbit wasn't completely innocent, he understood the concept of domination and that there were people out there who enjoyed that sort of thing. Considering his life with his controlling, overbearing mother, he'd always assumed he wasn't one of them. Not to mention, there was being domineering and then there was sneaking into someone's home in the middle of the night, chasing them, and ruining their favorite t-shirt.

Nothing about what had taken place last night had been consensual, and he'd spent a good few hours lying in bed this morning, searching up all the general rules that dominant sex partners tended to set and follow.

His exploration had taken him down an abyss, the search engine on his multi-slate stuffed with taboo keywords now that he'd die if anyone ever saw. The point was, by the time his alarm had gone off signaling he needed to get ready for school, Rabbit's beliefs had been confirmed.

Void wasn't a dominant in the traditional sense of the word, he was just fucked in the head.

And he'd claimed it could get worse?

Rabbit parked in his usual place in the back of the main music building, gathered his instrument and his shoulder strap bag that held his holo-pad, and started across campus toward where his first class of the day was located. Typically, he was careful to school his features and keep his spine straight as he walked, ignoring the glances and the talk about him as he passed, but this time he was too caught up in his thoughts to even notice other students.

For the life of him, he couldn't pinpoint the trigger. It was like one-second he and Baikal had occupied different universes and then all of a sudden bam! Now the Brumal Prince was staking some sort of sick claim on Rabbit, blackmailing him into being his—whatever the hell that meant—and ordering him to do all sorts of lewd things like—

He came to an abrupt stop as the thick plug lodged in his ass shifted and hit that special spot within that was the most sensitive. His hand gripped the strap of both the bags in his hold as he tried to breathe through the pangs of pleasure, his anger growing.

After having kept the thing in all night already, he felt overly sensitized, the discomfort warring with the electrical currents of arousal that still pinged through him despite everything else. It seemed to come and go in waves, with his body adjusting to it for a period of time before something shifted and restarted the whole process over again.

This morning, it'd taken him some getting used to just to walk regularly, the feel of the T-bar base squished between his cheeks awkward at first. He'd considered removing the thing for the millionth time since Baikal had walked out of his kitchen without so much as a backward glance, but every time he went to reach for it, his hand hesitated.

He'd been forced into it, sure, but even in their short time together Rabbit had come to realize that Baikal never did anything without a plan. His actions may seem random and sudden to an outsider, but he thought things through and plotted in advance.

Just like how he'd tricked Rabbit into showing up at the theater, or how he'd addled Rabbit's mind by casting him in darkness before he'd attacked last night. Both of those times had seemed spur of the moment to Rabbit since he hadn't been privy to Baikal's aim, but for all he knew, Baikal had spent hours plotting things out beforehand.

He'd manipulated Rabbit and cornered him exactly where he'd wanted him twice now, but each time had ended with life-altering orgasms and...

Yeah, there was definitely something wrong with Rabbit. No part of him should be enjoying this, no matter how intensely alluring Baikal was.

Rabbit needed to figure out a way to steal those glasses of his so he could erase the video and be free of this. Then he could return to his steady and predictable everyday life. That's what he wanted. The routines he was used to, the ones that helped keep the cloying fits of panic and anxiety away as best they could.

Last night, the darkness had nearly set him off. It was by luck that he'd been trying so hard as of late to readjust himself to handling it, otherwise he would have made an even bigger fool of himself in front of Void. Still, even now he was slightly out of breath as he continued on his way to class, that plug rubbing at his inner walls in a way that had his heart rate skipping beats and his palms sweating.

Though logically he understood why he was reacting that way, those symptoms were too similar to the attacks he had right before stepping on stage, and because of that, he couldn't help the twist of fear in his gut.

What if he panicked right here and now, in the middle of campus for the entire school to see? It'd make the news and get back to his mother and then...

She'd accuse him of getting distracted and find someone or something else to place the blame on. Rabbit had given her options this time too since he'd allowed himself to get close to Sila and now Baikal...

December Trace wouldn't be foolish enough to go up against the Brumal though, would she? It wouldn't look good for her image, and that was the only thing more important to her than Rabbit's assured future. The rest of the galaxy might not turn their back on her, but the people of Vitality surely would out of pure survival.

The Brumal might not be the openly evil criminal organization from movies, the ones that only lurked in the shadows and hid out in dank basements, but they were cruel and they did nothing to try and hide that fact.

Back when they'd first arrived here, they'd helped a prominent family rise against the current monarch and overthrow them. That family had been the Diar's, who to this day still ruled. They'd never forgotten their debt to the Brumal, and therefore, the truce between them had been renewed with each generation. Baikal and Kelevra were merely the most recent, and it was rumored the two of them weren't just friends because they had to be, but because they got on with one another.

The Void name could be found plastered on multiple buildings and items, as they ran a massive conglomerate that was legally recognized. On the outside, it was easy to assume they'd turned a new leaf, and to much of the galaxy, that was probably believed, but not here.

There was Void United the conglomerate, and then there was the Void Brumal the mafia. One dipped its toes in everything from electronic parts and devices, construction, hovercars, and more,

while the other provided protection against low-level gangs, dealt in arms dealing, and was responsible for the distribution and creation of one of the leading synthetic drugs in Dual galaxy.

The Brumal got away with their criminal organization by ensuring most of their business was conducted with other planets and organizations that had no foothold on Vitality. So long as their subjects weren't affected, the Imperial Diar family couldn't give two shits what the mafia did or how they filled their coiffeurs. And the rest of the planet was no better. They were all more than willing to turn the other cheek, so long as Void United continued to provide them with the latest flashy tech and produce award-winning entertainment programs, that was all that mattered.

What was a little bloodshed in the shadows so long as everything looked prim and proper in the light?

Rabbit knew better than most the damage a situation like that could cause, but he'd never bothered speaking out against the Brumal for the very same reasons no one else ever had. Every now and again an article was released trying to bring attention to some of the more deplorable happenings within the Brumal, but the reporter always mysteriously wrote a retraction shortly after.

Money and power made people deadly. The Imperial Diar family may hold the title of Emperor, but on this planet, Sullivan Void was King.

And now Rabbit was in some twisted kind of standoff against his son.

It was a losing battle no matter which way he turned it, and that alone was enough to irritate Rabbit to no end.

He liked stability. It was the only thing keeping him sane in a life where everything was completely and totally out of his control. Yet Baikal had stormed in and wreaked havoc like he had a right to do so.

Like he had a right to dig his claws into Rabbit's psyche and stir shit around.

What would happen once Baikal got bored? He'd leave just as quickly as he'd come, and Rabbit would be the one left tormented by the memories and the disorientation. When the time came, he'd have to adjust all over again.

Either he lasted until then, until the Brumal Prince was done with him, or he lost his mind. Neither option was appealing.

Rabbit made it to the Southside of campus and entered through the double glass doors that led into the massive building where his class was held twice a week. This section of the school had been constructed at the end of a large bamboo forest, and he could see tall stalks of it blocking out most of the sunlight on the other side as he made his way to the elevator.

The place was packed and he tucked himself into a corner as they rode up, pretending not to notice the way the short girl pressed against his side was staring up at him.

He'd always known he was attractive. His mother never missed an opportunity to tell him, since an entertainer's face was his second most important feature. She'd always gushed about how he'd lure people in with his looks and then knock them out with his abilities.

She might be a controlling nightmare, but on some level, he understood that if he dug past the crazy, at the heart of it all she really did mean well. At least, she meant for him to have a better life than she'd started out with, in any case.

The lecture hall was half full by the time he got there. The room itself had several levels with rows of long tables at each. Two paths, one on either side of the center row, led straight down to the stage where the professor already stood preparing for the start of class.

Rabbit made his way down and slid into his usual spot in the center row. There were six seats there and whoever managed to snag one next to him rotated on a daily basis, but he never paid any of

them any mind. He was here to take notes and leave. Right after this, his observed practice with Professor Ludo always took place, meaning he had no time to waste on other people and never engaged in any sort of conversation with them no matter how hard they tried to initiate one.

Which was why he didn't bother glancing over when a large form landed in the seat directly on his left, keeping his gaze on his tablet screen as he pulled up a blank page and removed his stylus from the attached clip.

He began writing the date at the top of the digital page, and would have ignored the plastic cup slid in front of his part of the table, only his eyes caught on to the hand holding it. Those long fingers with the thick knuckles and the chunky silver and black ring with the V embossed into it.

Rabbit straightened and glanced over, catching his breath when he found Baikal seated next to him, already waiting to be noticed.

The corner of his mouth tipped up and he rested his head on a closed fist, elbow propped up on the table before he motioned his chin to the cup. "Mint chocolate latte."

"What are you doing here?" Rabbit felt his lower muscles clench around the plug as if they had a mind of their own and he shifted uncomfortably in the hard plastic seat.

Baikal grinned at him. "Good, little bunny."

It didn't take a genius to know he was referring to the fact Rabbit had followed his order and kept the toy in.

But this wasn't his kitchen in the middle of the night, it was a crowded room in the bright light of day, and for some reason that helped Rabbit feel emboldened.

"I'm sore, that's all," he lied, but he couldn't catch the smug way his lips curved when Baikal hesitated, clearly unsure whether or not Rabbit was telling the truth.

"I went out of my way to buy you that," he pointed to the coffee a second time, "to be kind. If this is how you're going to meet said kindness, however..."

The threatening note in his voice had Rabbit tensing and he licked his lips to stall as he collected his thoughts. No matter what Baikal was planning, he had to dissuade him for the very same reasons he'd felt confident and cocky a moment prior.

He'd already forced Rabbit not to hide the hickey—which had thankfully faded—what if he—

No. No, he wouldn't out him in front of the entire classroom, would he? Wouldn't expose the fact there was currently a sex toy buried inside of his body. The humiliation alone would be enough to destroy Rabbit, and while he'd gathered Void didn't mind pushing him past his limits, he didn't think the guy planned on completely eviscerating him.

Right?

It hit him yet again how little he knew the other man, and he gulped, brow pinching as he stared at Baikal's unwavering and enigmatic expression.

"Class is about to start," he ended up saying, a poor attempt to defuse the situation.

"So it is," Baikal replied.

"Aren't you going to leave?"

He lifted a dark brow. "Why would I do that? I'm in this class, too."

Rabbit blinked at him. "What?"

"I'd take offense you never noticed, except you hardly notice anyone so I know it's nothing personal." Baikal leaned in, eyes narrowing when Rabbit immediately shot back.

No one else had sat in the empty seat on his other side. In fact, a quick glance showed their entire row was empty aside from the two of them. When he turned and looked over his shoulder, it was painfully obvious the six students located three feet up and four feet away from them, occupying

the row above, were trying really hard to ignore Rabbit and Baikal.

Almost like they'd been told to or something.

Still, it was too obvious that the surrounding students were trying not to look their way. That they were no doubt straining to hear something.

That this would be the hot topic of discussion for the rest of the day all over campus.

Rabbit made to stand, opting to just skip class altogether to avoid being gawked at for the next two hours, but Baikal planted a strong palm on his left thigh and forced him back into place with a heavy thump that ended up forcing the plug in so deep he winced.

"Just sore, huh?" Void taunted, calling his bluff about having removed the toy. He slid the coffee closer to Rabbit. "Here. In a moment, you're going to need it."

"No. I don't want to accept anything from you." Despite his words, he was sure to keep his voice lowered the same way Baikal was.

"Tough luck, little bunny, because you're going to. You're going to take everything I offer and then some, and afterward, you're going to thank me for it. Is that understood?"

Rabbit kept his outward composure even though on the inside alarm bells were clanging. "No."

"What's wrong?" Baikal eased in even closer and this time Rabbit was smart enough not to try and move away. "Mad at me for last night?"

"Yes," he said, not bothering to withhold that. "You broke into my house and scared me half to death, Void. That's not okay."

"It is if I say it is." Baikal shrugged.

"You can't—"

"The deal was you give yourself to me, remember?" His hand squeezed Rabbit's thigh under the table possessively. "I'll do whatever the hell I want with the things I own. If I want to crawl through the balcony and slip beneath the covers with you, I will. And if I tell you to drink," he tapped one long finger against the table in front of the coffee cup, "you'll fucking do it. Especially since that last part is for your benefit, not mine."

"What does that mean?" Rabbit's skin prickled and he glanced at the coffee, noting the flavor finally. Mint chocolate. Like the candy bar currently stuffed into the side pocket of his music bag.

"You won't be needing that," Baikal stated, pulling the bag off the table and dropping it into the empty seat on his other side, out of Rabbit's reach. "You'll take what I provide or you'll get nothing at all."

"Asshole."

He hummed in agreement, but before Rabbit could find that suspicious said, "I'll be playing with yours soon."

He gaped at him and then glanced around a bit frantically. He figured with a statement as bold as that if anyone nearby had managed to hear they wouldn't be able to hide it, but everyone was still looking in every direction but theirs.

The professor chose that moment to call for the start of class.

"Pay attention, little bunny," Baikal said, dragging the cup even closer, "And you might want to take a sip of this now."

Rabbit wanted to keep arguing, but the professor began the lecture, the microphone attached to his shirt projecting his voice to them all loud and clear as he began pulling up information on the large projection board.

With Void still breathing down his neck, Rabbit forced himself to snatch up the drink and take

a deep drag, sending him a silent “you happy” look that the Brumal Prince responded to with a light chuckle. He hated to admit it, but the mint chocolate latte tasted amazing, and since he’d already programmed his body to find that particular combination soothing, some of the tension did ease from his shoulders.

The candy bars had become a coping mechanism for him, something even his own mother hadn’t picked up on, and yet here was Baikal, constantly plying him with the stuff when he thought he needed it.

Like back at the theater when Rabbit had watched the video footage of his mother beating up

—
He sucked down another deep gulp and set the cup aside, urging himself to focus on class. It was hard with everything else around trying to snag his attention, but he was determined. As soon as he made it through this, he could escape to the music building where Void wouldn’t bother to follow and—

Rabbit jolted in his seat, loud enough he bumped his tablet and it clattered against the surface, drawing attention. He’d almost knocked over the coffee as well, but Baikal had grabbed that before it’d tipped.

“There was a nia bug,” Baikal lied to the onlookers. No one really liked nia bugs, nine-legged arachnids that bred during this time of year and crawled all over everything.

He didn’t like them either, but Rabbit barely processed Baikal’s story, too aware of the strange buzzing that was happening inside of him.

The plug was vibrating.

It was subtle at first, the waves startling him, but now that he was aware of what he was feeling, his face heated and his head swiveled toward Baikal.

The Brumal Prince still had that one palm over his thigh, but the other had reached into the pocket of his leather jacket, and it wasn’t hard to guess that’s where he was keeping the controls to the toy.

As soon as everyone had returned their attention to the front of the room, Baikal met Rabbit’s gaze and smirked.

“Don’t,” he whispered harshly, a second before he jumped again, this time a little less noticeable, and ground his teeth together to keep from crying out. The vibrations increased in speed, the toy quaking against his inner walls, the very tip of it pressing on that spot that had his toes curling and him biting the inside of his cheek.

Was this why the bastard had demanded he keep the plug in? So he could use it against him? He opened his mouth to tell him to stop a second time, but that earned him a higher setting.

Rabbit’s dick lengthened in his jeans, pressing uncomfortably against the tight material and he stared down at it in horror. This could not be happening. He could not be hard in the middle of class surrounded by all of these people. His reputation—

“This lecture period is two hours long,” Baikal leaned in and said directly into the curve of his ear. “Relax, Rabbit. If you blow your load too soon, I won’t stop for you. I’m going to keep this,” he turned up the speed another notch, “going until Professor Earl dismisses us.”

Rabbit’s eyes widened and he shook his head pleadingly. Their professor was notorious for dragging class on past the official end of their session.

He’d adjusted to the full sensation the plug had given him, the extended wear having allowed his body to get used to the areas where he was stretched around the toy. The vibrations and the way he was seated on the hard plastic chair were stirring things up in him all over again though, making it

impossible to ignore the way the bulb held him open.

Desperate not to embarrass himself, he tried to focus on literally anything else, like the sound of clicking keys as students took notes with their devices, or the firm voice of the professor as he explained a mathematical equation, or how Void smelled like a burning eucalyptus forest and—

Baikal's hand shifted on his thigh, the ends of his fingers bumping against the bulge in Rabbit's pants.

He squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath, not wanting to allow any more of Void's sexy scent to infiltrate his senses, but all that did was make the light caress of those fingers that much more noticeable, and before long Rabbit was panting.

Fortunately, due to the loudspeaker system projecting their professor's voice, and how he was still in his right mind enough to struggle to be as quiet as possible, he didn't think anyone was able to hear the sharp in and outtakes of his breath. Except, of course, for the man terrorizing him at his side.

The man who was currently scrawling notes on his holo-tablet and nodding his head to something the professor was saying as if his hand wasn't tracing circles on Rabbit's inner thigh, the sharp point of his knuckles massaging against his needy dick.

Rabbit felt like he was being squeezed from all sides, and yet here Baikal was, acting like it was just another boring day. Seeing his reaction—or lack of one—really drove home that he fully intended to make good on his threat.

If Rabbit came—and there was very little chance he was going to be able to last another five minutes, let alone two whole hours—Baikal would force him to sit here, sitting in his own come, with that plug stimulating his ass nonstop. He wouldn't care if it started to hurt or get uncomfortable for Rabbit. He might even pretend not to notice that either.

Good Light. He couldn't do this.

Before he could stop himself, Rabbit grabbed onto Baikal's arm, clutching at his bicep when a particularly strong pang raced through him.

"Give me another," he demanded, almost growling when Baikal tipped his chin and made a face like he had no clue what he was talking about. "Another choice, damn it. Give me another option." One that preferably ended with him getting to come in a less crowded setting with no threat of overstimulation at the end.

"I bought you the drink to help with your nerves," Baikal said.

Rabbit snorted. "I'm not about to have a panic attack."

"No?" He pursed his lips. "Are you sure? I thought being plugged up and horny in front of your peers would call to your stage fright issues."

Something about the way that statement rolled off his tongue had Rabbit growing suspicious. He tilted his head, eyeing Baikal closely, and even though there were no physical tells to help give away what the Brumal Prince was actually thinking, Rabbit was pretty sure he was right in his new assumption.

"You're testing me, aren't you?" And that, right there, was the big overarching plot that he'd been thinking about earlier on his way here. The motive that only Baikal knew.

To his credit, once caught, he didn't try to deny it. "You made it clear you refused to answer any of my questions, so I had to find the answers myself. Why?" Baikal grinned. "Are you changing your tune, little bunny? Suddenly want to open up for me?"

Rabbit swore, still quiet enough not to be overheard. But on the inside, he was raging and throwing a full-on tantrum.

"I asked you nicely why you had stage fright and how bad it was, remember? You wouldn't

say. Looks like it doesn't stem from fear of being caught doing something wrong by a crowd. Interesting." Baikal appeared as though he were taking mental notes now, the lecture completely forgotten as he stared Rabbit down. "If you're not afraid of embarrassing yourself in front of strangers, then what is it? What has you so panicked before a performance that you feel the need to lock yourself away in a room for a half hour prior?"

He'd noticed that?

"Just how long have you been watching me?"

"I told you the cafeteria wasn't our first encounter," Baikal said.

It was though. Rabbit surely would have recalled if they'd bumped into one another on any other occasion. The Brumal Prince wasn't exactly forgettable, after all. But he couldn't argue over that right now, not when there was already a wet spot starting to form at the front of his jeans. If his precome alone was making him this much of a mess, he'd be ruined if he actually came.

"Fine." If that's what it took to get him out of here, whatever. Rabbit may not be so embarrassed that he'd launch into a full-blown panic attack, sure, but that didn't mean he wouldn't still be mortified if he ended up orgasming here—especially since he didn't think there was any way he'd be able to do so and remain quiet in the process.

If he did come, everyone in this room would figure it out easily.

"Fine, what?" Baikal asked, but the corner of his mouth tipped up tellingly.

Rabbit glowered. "I want to punch you so badly right now."

Suddenly his hand moved and he cupped Rabbit's sex, compressing down on his dick.

"Sorry," Rabbit scrambled to apologize. "That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean, little bunny?" He stopped squeezing, but his palm remained where it was, holding him through his jeans.

"That's the choice, right? I degrade myself or I promise to answer your questions and you turn it off?" It was going to take him the whole two hours just to calm himself back down from the edge, but he had a much better hope of successfully doing that than he did at holding out against those vibrations and the way they made him tingle.

Baikal snorted. But he didn't give Rabbit a chance to feel frustrated at his response. He stood suddenly, the scraping metal chair legs against the solid stone floor loud enough to draw the lecture to a halt. Not that he bothered with the professor, even when he was asked if there was anything wrong.

Void took Rabbit by the elbow and yanked him from his chair as well, then he practically dragged him up the stairs and out of the lecture hall.

Chapter 13:

“Void.” Rabbit kept his chin up as he was dragged out of class and down the hall, not wanting any of the other students to see him shaken despite the fact he was being manhandled by the Brumal Prince. “Wait.”

Baikal didn’t listen, pulling him to the nearest bathroom on that floor. He shoved the door open so hard it clattered loudly against the inner wall, and then he forced Rabbit beneath the archway and practically tossed him against the row of sinks. He went through the four stalls quickly, checking to be sure there was no one lurking within any of them before he was back at the entrance, flicking the lock into place.

It wasn’t until he’d turned back to face him that Rabbit realized he probably should have made a break for it while he’d been distracted making sure they were alone. Now the chance for escape was gone.

Baikal grabbed him, wrapping an arm around his waist to haul him against his chest even as he backed him up so the bottom of Rabbit’s ass hit the cool edge of one of the porcelain sinks. When he ground himself against his front they both groaned.

“This isn’t what I meant,” Rabbit said, hands coming up to rest on Baikal’s shoulders. Instead of pushing him away, however, he ended up holding onto him for dear life as that thick cock was rubbed against him a second time.

“I’m the one who comes up with the choices,” Baikal stated, and it was hard to tell if he’d been this turned on back in class and just good at hiding it, or if the moment they’d gotten here he’d been ready to go. “It was either endure in there or let me take care of you here. You picked the latter.”

Even not knowing that’s what he was doing.

“Complaints?” the Brumal Prince practically dared him to give one, but Rabbit was too far gone to care about something as simple as semantics.

“This is hardly the first time you’ve pulled that trick on me,” he said, and the next time Void rocked into him, he shifted his hips to meet him.

“You’re so sexy when you’re flushed like this.” Baikal brushed a few silver-white strands of hair off of his forehead. “When you’re fighting against your own needs. It almost makes me want to stop prepping you just so I can continue to see you squirm and struggle.”

“That’s messed up.”

“You think so? Keep grinding against me the way you’re doing. It’s very convincing.”

“Just because I want you doesn’t mean I have to like your personality.” Rabbit bit down on his tongue as soon as the words left his mouth, glancing up at Baikal cautiously.

As if in response, Void reached into his jacket pocket and thumbed the remote control, the sound of a button clicking the only warning before the plug was turned up to its highest setting.

Rabbit cursed and jolted forward, sealing his body against Baikal’s as if that would somehow help him escape the pulsations. He practically buried his face against the curve of his throat, gasping for air as he clawed at the silky button-down shirt Void was wearing.

“Trying to get me naked, little bunny?” Baikal asked, tossing his arms around him to keep him in place when that had Rabbit attempting to pull away. “No, no. Too late to retreat. You’ve entered enemy territory. Time to pay up.”

“You can’t be serious?” He was going to ask him questions *now*?!

“Why not?” Baikal asked, feigning innocence.

“Because I...” Rabbit swallowed and looked away.

He took his jaw between his thumb and forefinger, forcing Rabbit’s gaze back to his. “Are you afraid of the dark?”

The only reason he hadn’t already come was standing had relieved the pressure of the tip of the plug which had been hitting his prostate before. For a split second, he actually considered holding his ground a second time and refusing to answer, since now that they were out of the classroom there was no longer an audience with which Void could use against him.

But then his inner voice laughed at his naivety.

If he didn’t have another card up his sleeve, Baikal never would have brought them here.

“Yes.” It sounded foolish when he said it out loud. He was a twenty-two-year-old openly admitting that he still needed a nightlight to sleep. If not for the fact Baikal had already broken in and seen that for himself firsthand, Rabbit would be even more embarrassed.

Maybe embarrassed wasn’t the right word. It wasn’t so much that he cared what the other man thought of him—at least not in this regard—but more that he was disappointed in himself. He was disappointed that he’d been unable to overcome such a common childhood fear.

“I have my reasons,” he added.

“I didn’t ask.” Baikal spun him around so they were both facing the large wall of mirrors hanging behind the sink and reached for the zipper of Rabbit’s pants. “But I like you being forthcoming all on your own.” He freed his dick. “Tell me.”

Rabbit moaned and leaned back against the Brumal Prince at the first skin-to-skin contact, his eyes drifting momentarily shut until Baikal gave a warning pump of his fist with a little too much aggression. It drew out a whimper, and when their eyes met in the mirror it was obvious the sound had turned them both on even more.

“My mom,” he hissed when Void started stroking him, “she used to lock me up whenever I upset her.”

“How?”

“Usually it was beiska related. Either I couldn’t get a note or a color or something like that. At our house—our old one, not the one you broke into like a creep—had this tiny walk-in closet attached to the living room. She’d put me in there and block the door so I couldn’t get out until she let me. At the new place at least the practice room is big. It got better once we moved.”

“No light?”

Rabbit shook his head. For a while he’d even believed he’d gotten over the fear, the larger practice room space at least tricking him into thinking he wasn’t suffocating like the smaller one had.

Then the event last year had happened and...well.

Rabbit had discovered he wasn’t as cured as he’d believed.

Amongst other things.

“Focus,” Baikal ordered. Roughly, he shoved Rabbit so he was leaning over the sink with his arms bracing him at either side, then he worked the jeans down to his thighs. When he went for the plug Rabbit made a sound and he chuckled. “Relax, I’m going to give you something better, I promise.”

He froze, spine stiffening, and the change didn’t go unnoticed.

Baikal met his eyes again. “Relax,” he repeated, more soothingly this time, even going so far as to run his palm comfortingly down the curve of Rabbit’s spine. “I don’t mean what you’re thinking. The first time I make you take my cock we sure as hell aren’t going to be in the men’s room. I’m not

going to hurt you.”

“Even if I say no?” Rabbit had no clue what had come over him, but he kept still anyway, watching the range of emotions play across Void’s face, trying, and failing, to pinpoint them.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” Baikal admitted finally. “It seems like you’re pushing me on purpose because you like the fight, but I can’t be certain, because other times it’s clear you’re legitimately angry with me.”

“No one likes being forced.”

He clicked his tongue. “That’s not true and you know it. There’s no shame in liking when I take control of you, little bunny.”

“I don’t.” Rabbit simply thought the other guy was hot. That was it.

...Right?

“That’s fair, too,” he shrugged like it was no big deal. “Even if you don’t, I’ll make sure you like the end results. You, coming alive for me.”

Rabbit frowned, but then Baikal slowly eased the plug out of him and he ended up gripping the edge of the sink with all of his might. It felt just as weird exiting his hole as it had entering it, and for a moment after he felt strange and empty, that muscle clamping down on nothing but air as if confused as to where all the pressure had gone.

Baikal angled his ass up higher with a hand and groaned. “Look how open and welcoming you are. It’s like you’re silently begging for me to fill you up.”

Now that the toy had been removed, Rabbit half expected for him to come down from his heightened state of arousal. Instead, those dirty words growled appreciatively behind him had his dick twitching and his ass rocking back suggestively before he could help himself.

“I knew you were made for me,” Baikal said, and it sounded a lot like he was talking to himself before he added in a firmer voice, “And the stage fright? That a gift from mommy dearest as well?”

Rabbit had almost forgotten they’d been discussing his issues. What did that say about him, that one suggestive comment from Void was enough to have his mind blanking and forgetting all that heavy nonsense he was always carrying around.

“I don’t think this is normal,” he murmured to himself, honestly wondering what could be wrong with him to be this turned on even knowing all the things that a man like Baikal Void was capable of.

“Which part?” Void asked.

Rabbit’s brow furrowed. “Are you forcing me?”

“Am I?” He grinned when that only had Rabbit’s frown deepening. “The definition of forcing someone is to make them do something against their will. You’re attracted to me, but do you want to be mine, little bunny?”

“We had a deal.”

“I’m not asking about that,” he said. “I’m asking what you want.”

Did he want to belong to the heir to the Brumal throne? Going only off of what he knew, which wasn’t much, no. From a young age, everyone was warned against getting involved with the Brumal. Rabbit had been raised on stories of people vanishing in the dead of night only to have their bodies wash ashore weeks later miles from where they’d last been seen.

Baikal had more wealth and connection than anyone else on the entire planet—aside from Kelevra—and once his father died, he’d inherit it all, whereas Rabbit...

By then, Rabbit would be traveling from planet to planet, at his mother’s side, diligently

performing for the masses like the perfect trophy son she'd groomed him to be. And if he was bitter about that? Well, tough. There was no changing his fate. The one and only time he'd tried, he'd lost everything, including some of his memory and his sanity.

"No," he admitted, tensing as he waited to be punished even though he was only answering the question he'd been asked. "I don't want to be your toy, Void. I don't want to be anyone's plaything."

Not Baikal's or his mother's.

"I guess that answers that then." If Void was disappointed, he didn't show it.

Could be he wasn't bummed about Rabbit's response at all. It was hard to tell how much emotion the man had other than curiosity and deviancy.

"Yes, little bunny," he said then. He circled his hand around Rabbit's dick once more, and at the same moment, his other fingers played at his opening, tentatively feeling that ring of muscle before they slipped inside and buried themselves deep into his velvety heat. "I am forcing you."

Rabbit barely had enough time to suck in a breath before suddenly he was being worked from both sides, one hand stroking him while the other jackhammered into his ass. The movements were so fast he couldn't do anything but stand there and take it, trying not to lose feeling in his legs. Using the sink, he held himself up, his entire body quaking as that heat built and built and built until it finally exploded out of him.

He came all over the mirror, globs of it continuing to shoot out of him, staining their reflection as Baikal kept pounding those long fingers of his in and out of Rabbit's hole.

"Please." Rabbit pushed off the sink so he could lean back against Baikal's firm chest, trying to get him to stop, a whimper slipping past his lips when that only ended up driving those digits in deeper. "Please!"

"Say you're mine," Baikal growled.

Had Rabbit thought he wasn't upset by his response earlier? How wrong he'd been. Looking into the mirror now, meeting Void's hostile stare, it was impossible to mistake. As if to further prove that, wisps of black smoke started to drift off his shoulders, curling in the air to float and dance.

Even still, Rabbit found himself giving a single stubborn shake of his head in the negative.

Baikal added a third finger, the stretch larger than what the plug had been, and five times more intense since he was pumping them and curling them to rub against his upper wall with every outward stroke.

"Say it," he ordered again, snarling when Rabbit gave the same answer.

One of their multi-slates went off, and Rabbit only realized it wasn't his when Baikal turned his own wrist and checked the device attached to it. He swore and yanked his fingers free, but before Rabbit could give a sigh of relief that it was over, he spun him and captured his mouth in a kiss so brutal it could only be described as punishing.

Baikal bit and licked at him, shoving his tongue into the cavity of his mouth in fucking motions that mirrored what he'd been doing with his fingers only a moment ago. When Rabbit tried to pull away, he grabbed onto his head with both hands, yanking him back so he could devour him all over again.

As soon as he had Rabbit gasping for air, he dropped his mouth lower, latching on to that tender spot beneath his ear and sucking with all his might.

The sensation had Rabbit bucking against him, his dick instantly hard, as if the life-wrecking orgasm he'd just experienced had never occurred.

Baikal pushed him away as though he'd been burned, possibly even more pissed off than he'd been a second ago. The trails of shadow continued to seep out of him and flick around his person, but

he hardly seemed to notice, all of his attention still locked on Rabbit.

“Soon,” he said darkly, fists clenching at his sides. “Soon you’ll really be mine. Let’s see you deny it then.”

He reached into the sink to collect the plug he’d tossed there and threw it into the nearest trash can. Then, after settling one last lingering look on Rabbit, he turned and stormed out of the bathroom.

Rabbit’s legs gave out from under him the second the door shut behind Void and he crumpled to the pale linoleum flooring.

His ass ached, his dick was still straining, and he’d been left alone to clean up the mess, but that wasn’t even the most infuriating part.

What really got to him was Baikal’s parting words.

And how Rabbit couldn’t decide if he wanted them to be a threat.

Or a promise.

Chapter 14:

The Void estate was more a fortress than anything, built between massive prea stone, all sharp angles, and boxy frames. There were four levels in total, including a basement, and a garage attachment that was large enough to be considered a separate residence all on its own.

Like everything else on this planet, there was a hierarchy to the floors. The main floor was where guests, meals, and business were conducted. The entire level directly above that belonged to Baikal, and no one other than the cleaning crew and those he personally trusted were allowed to step foot anywhere on it.

The top level was his father's, the highest point, traditionally occupied by the Dominus, or king, of the Brumal.

Sooner than he'd like, Baikal was going to be moving up there.

He clenched his fists at his sides, inhaling slowly through his nose in an attempt to school himself before he made his presence known. He was on that top floor now, standing just outside his father's private office. Though he shared an apartment with Kazimir closer to campus, the continued attacks on the Brumal had made everyone uneasy and Kal had been called home.

Knowing he couldn't avoid reality forever, he braced himself for the inevitable and rapped his knuckles against the solid wood. As soon as he heard his father's deep voice call out, he entered, making sure to keep his expression blank when his gaze landed on the proud man who had single-handedly raised him all these years.

Behind closed doors, the illness had made Sullivan Void almost unrecognizable. Whenever he went out, which was rarely now, it took ages for him to cover up the bags under his eyes and the orange, blotchy bruises on his body. He'd lost a lot of weight, most of it muscle, but still couldn't be considered frail yet. The doctors had assured him he'd reach the end before he ever got to that point, a small comfort, considering how important it was for him to maintain his position.

Within the Brumal there were always those vying for attention, and though there hadn't been a grab for the crown in two generations that didn't mean one couldn't come.

Hell, Baikal was pretty sure that's what was at the heart of all these attacks now even, which was why he'd been summoned. They'd need to discuss everything that had happened and how to best proceed. Between school and taking a more active role in both the Brumal and the corporation, Baikal was feeling a bit spread thin, and that sensation was only made worse by the fact he absolutely couldn't let that on to anyone, least of all the man before him.

He bowed his head once he made it to the center of the room, keeping his hand folded at his front. Though they were close, tradition and respect had been ingrained in Baikal's psyche from a young age, so offering that to his Dominus, even if said Dominus was his father, came as second nature to him.

Sullivan Void was the only person on the entire planet, in the entire galaxy even, that he would bow to, however.

Dominus Void's Counselor, Chesh Vera, stood near the window, currently flipping through digital pages on a tablet. He paid Baikal no mind aside from a slight tipping of his chin, forced to show the same kind of respect to the heir.

"The fire?" His father was seated behind his mahogany desk, an IV line in his arm, the bag floating nearby, held aloft by the robot assistant the hospital had assigned to help make things easier.

He'd refused to be hospitalized, even knowing it would make things easier on himself, too worried about what that might mean for Baikal and the company.

Ironically, his position amongst the Brumal wasn't as big of an issue—even with this minor uprising, there was little to no chance of anyone actually being able to steal the throne. Baikal was the only Shout on the planet aside from Sullivan. No one could question his claim.

Void United was the problem. The business world was every bit as cutthroat as the mafia, more so even in some instances, and while their family had close connections with the Diar's that still didn't guarantee anything.

It was the reason Baikal had been given no choice but to study at Vail University, and why he'd needed to double major in Business Administration and Intergalactic Cultural Advancements. Being a Shout meant nothing to the board. Certificates from fancy elite schools did.

"Dealt with." Baikal had gotten the message when he'd been locked in the bathroom with Rabbit, and he wasn't pleased about having to abandon his little bunny in the heat of the moment, but business was business, and it always came first. At least, for now.

As soon as he was able to tie Rabbit to him permanently? That would be a different story.

"This is the fourth one in a month," his father frowned. "Have we been able to discover anything else?"

"We've linked them to the break in's," he said. "Same group responsible. Looks like they're gearing up for a real attack. All of this was just lead-up, their version of testing the waters. They've been monitoring how we react, how quickly our men can arrive on the scene, things like that."

"Your source?"

"With Berga."

"Finally got one of them to sing, huh?" Chesh grunted appreciatively. "Very good."

"That friend of yours will fill the role of butcher perfectly," Sullivan hummed in agreement. "And the attacks? Are they random then, or is there a method to that idiotic form of madness as well?"

This was the part that had had Baikal rushing over instead of dragging his feet like he was wont to do now that his father's health had deteriorated so noticeably. He was no coward but...No one wanted to see their dad, the person they'd looked up to the most and idolized their entire life, wither into nothingness right before their very eye.

"There's a mole," he announced, keeping his gaze on his father, noting out of the corner of his eye that Chesh finally looked up from his tablet.

Chesh was constantly on that thing, bouncing back and forth between work for the company and work for the Brumal. It was honestly a wonder Baikal could recall the color of the man's eyes—muddy brown—for how many times he could count they'd actually been aimed in his direction and not straight down at a screen.

He was younger than most of the others in his father's inner circle, only in his early forties, and would be kept on once Baikal took the throne in the same capacity he was in now. Thank Light, since none of Baikal's satellites—what the close followers who were considered trusted by the next in line for power were known as—had studied law.

"We think the main leak is lower level," he continued. "A soldier at best, but most likely an associate of some kind. I have people looking into it."

"What makes you think a mole is responsible?" Chesh asked.

"The locations hit all appeared random at first, but once you place them on a map there's a noticeable pattern." Baikal walked over to the blank wall to the left and aimed his multi-slate at the project hanging above. Then he opened an image file he'd saved and sent it to the other device,

causing it to appear across the entire expanse of the wall.

It was a map of the city with several pins dropped in different places. They were in different parts, some closer to the same areas than others, and only two of them had been homes.

“Those are all places Kor’s men like to hang out,” his father said, scanning the image.

Kor was a group boss that on more than one occasion had made his dissatisfaction with the way Sullivan ran things known. He believed the Brumal should renegotiate terms with the Imperial family, that they had every right to push their harder substances to the people of Vitality and shouldn’t be expected to put in all the work of packaging and shipping off planet. He was a balding man in his late sixties who had no claim to the throne and no real position of power, a fact that had always irked him.

“Aside from the house fires, no one was ever really put in danger and there weren’t any real casualties,” Baikal said. All that made sense if it was a setup put together by Kor. He would have warned his people or at the very least, ordered those attacking to make it look real but not to push things too far.

“He’s a moron with a big mouth,” Chesh frowned, “but I must emphasize the truthfulness in that first part. He isn’t smart enough to plan a coup d’état. And while I see him needing to test the waters since he isn’t high enough to know our response plans, all of this seems like a massive waste of time for everyone involved.”

“It’s not the attacks themselves that’s the point,” Baikal informed them. “They’ve been trying to frame the Shepherds.”

“The who?”

“A small fry gang that formed a couple of years ago,” Sullivan said. “They’ve been toeing the line since, but haven’t overstepped yet.”

“We thought it was them in the beginning,” Baikal nodded, “but we’re pretty certain it was a setup. Kor wanted us looking in the wrong direction.”

“Meaning he’s planning something that he doesn’t want us to be aware of.” His father started coughing, a deep phlegmy sound in his lungs turning into hacks that had both Baikal and Chesh tensing and alert.

Sullivan had been officially diagnosed with zohs disease a little over a year ago. A death sentence, and a slow and painful one at that. It wasn’t hereditary, and as of now doctors still hadn’t figured out why certain people contracted it seemingly at random. Before, the Dominus had been the epitome of fit, strong enough to lift a grown man over his shoulders and toss him several feet even. At fifty-five, he still had decades he was meant to rule, and now...

The coughing stopped as quickly as it’d started and he swiveled in his chair, leaned toward a metal trash bucket three feet away, and hacked a mixture of saliva and blood into it with a scowl.

“Pass this to Whim, tell him to put eyes on Kor,” he picked up right where they’d left off, referencing his underboss, “and keep with what your guys have been doing. I want irrefutable proof it was him and him alone because Chesh is right, he’s not smart enough to come up with anything even this sloppy by himself.”

“We could just destroy his entire segment,” Baikal suggested. Each segment of the Brumal was made up of five to fifteen people, with a group boss set in charge of them. The group boss took their orders from the underboss and those orders trickled down to the foot soldiers. He’d already taken the liberty of looking into Kor’s segment. “It’s eight guys total. None of them seem clean.”

Chesh let out a low whistle. “Always so blood thirsty, Master Kal.”

Sullivan thought it over before waving his hand in the negative. “We cut off the head too

quickly, we risk leaving bits behind for another to grow in its place. For now, we watch. Let's be certain there's no one else around pulling his strings before we make our move."

"And if I'm able to find this other person, or prove there isn't someone?" Baikal asked.

"Then you're free to do with them as you see fit. This will be your seat soon enough. May as well start getting used to what being in charge is all about." He patted the arm of his chair and then motioned to Chesh, clearly changing the subject. "This is why I called you. You need to sign."

"Right here," Chesh turned the tablet toward him to show a document with two lines at the bottom. One already had Sullivan's signature and an image of his thumbprint next to it, the other was blank.

"What is this?" Baikal didn't have a good feeling about it.

"I'm transferring all of my company shares over to you," his father replied, "effective immediately. There won't be a public announcement until your graduation—or I die, whichever comes first."

He'd get the shares once he'd die anyway so long as they were left in his will, so Baikal didn't really see why this was necessary other than to simply remind them all Sullivan didn't have much more time to live. Which of course Kal already fucking knew. It was practically all he could think about, ever since that day the doctor had sat him down and explained why his father had collapsed in the garden during his morning walk.

For the fifth time.

Baikal had been on the verge of exploding, his power swelling inside of him along with the rage and the uncertainty to the point he'd thought for sure he was going to erupt and force the entire planet into a state of perpetual darkness. He'd been a terror to be around the first couple of months after the diagnosis, and because the health of the Dominus was so important, that information had been kept classified and he hadn't been able to talk about it with anyone.

He'd been considered a devil before, but everyone around him during that time thought he'd gotten worse. Anyone said or did anything that could tick him off in the slightest and he was either putting them in the hospital or driving them half mad by trapping them in a room of black smoke with no way out until he'd calmed down.

Baikal wasn't a good person, had been raised to be lethal and arrogant, and domineering. He expected obedience wherever he went, but up until that point had kept his violent tendencies to a minimum. He'd started hurting people who didn't fully deserve to be hurt, and had started hating himself and his life altogether. On the outside, he'd attended classes and meetings and, aside from those outbursts, acted like everything was fine. But on the inside, he'd been contemplating destroying everything, because if everything was already destroyed, there'd be nothing left for him to lose, and that hadn't sounded all that bad.

Then he'd attended that music performance and had seen Rabbit. Had listened and watched him play.

Had felt the first stirrings of the soul he'd thought for sure he no longer possessed.

Rabbit Trace was the balm that could soothe his inner storm, the one and only thing that could keep him from saying fuck it to the world and going on a mad rampage. It was selfish of Baikal to claim and mark him, but even knowing that wasn't enough to have him change his mind.

Kal wasn't a sociopath like his friend Kelevra, and though he leaned toward psychopathic tendencies, he wasn't one of those either. Sure, he was easily bored, showed little to no remorse for the things he did, and got off on manipulating others, but that was by design more than anything. That's how his father had raised him to be, crafting him to be the perfect killer because it took being able to

murder without batting an eye to keep control of the Brumal *and* a conglomerate.

He could afford to explosively kill too—Kel got away with that all the time—but where his friend liked to get straight to the end, Baikal preferred to play with his food.

So if Rabbit wanted to draw this out and make him wait for it? That was fine by him.

And if his father wanted him to hold off on erasing Kor and his segment from this plane of existence? That was all right too.

Because in the end, no matter what anyone else wanted, Baikal would get his way.

Eventually.

He signed his name over the blank line with the stylus, then held his thumb over so the device could take a picture. And just like that it was done. If he so chose, he could have ousted his father from the CEO chair that very second.

But he never would. Baikal may be a devil, but even the devil knew the importance of loyalty.

With that out of the way, his father dismissed him, but before Baikal had taken more than a few steps toward the door, Chesh called him back.

“Master Kal, if things do escalate, I beseech you to please refrain from using your Shout abilities to tear people apart in public spaces. The last time it was captured on a security camera and the footage was shared. It was a real hassle trying to track down and delete all of the videos. My wife did not appreciate my four-day absence.”

Baikal grinned widely and winked, exiting without another word.

He may enjoy manipulating people, but he’d made it a habit not to make promises if he didn’t fully intend to keep them, and that? Well. He couldn’t say for certain he wouldn’t use shadow-sway on someone with witnesses around. Life was too spontaneous to be able to know how things might end up playing out one day down the line.

As soon as the door sealed shut behind him, however, the grin vanished and he was overcome by a heavy wave of exhaustion and anger. The first, for having to put up a front in the first place and act like everything was peachy despite his father being in the process of dying, and the second because...well. His father was dying.

Baikal dutifully sent a secure message to Whim, waiting until he got a confirmation that the order was going to be followed before pulling up a blank chat screen. Stairs connected the floors, but he preferred taking the private elevators, not in the mood to run into any of the estate staff that may be cleaning or whatever.

The metal doors shut and he leaned against the wall as it lowered him to his floor, fingers hesitating over the keys on his multi-slate.

Baikal: My dad will be dead soon.

He stared down at the message for a long time, so long he didn’t realize when the doors opened, and they’d already started to close again since no one had gotten off. Stepping out, he went straight down the long hall to his bedroom.

All eight of the rooms on this level of the building were his to do with as he pleased, and over the years some of their purposes had altered or changed, but his room had remained the same, the one space he allowed no one else to enter under pain of death, including his satellites. Yet still, even once he was inside his safe zone, he didn’t hit send.

To him, Rabbit was his escape from his demons.

To Rabbit, Baikal *was* the demon.

He deleted the vulnerable message and typed out something else.

Baikal: What are you wearing, little bunny?

As soon as he hit send, he tossed the device onto his bed, a large king-sized mattress that was suspended from the ceiling by thick metal ropes. It'd been bolted into the wall by the headboard, but the ropes allowed him to adjust the height whenever he saw fit, which was an odd feature he'd for some reason taken a liking to at the time of purchase. He'd yet to find use for it, other than lifting it close to the ceiling so he could do his solo combat training there when he was too lazy to walk down the hall to the actual room dedicated to such things.

He'd just stripped out of his shirt and tossed it into the hamper in the far left corner when his multi-slate dinged, causing him to tip his head in mild surprise. Not wanting to get his hopes up it was Rabbit replying, since he'd anticipated his tiny obsession pulling that whole silent act again, he took his time stripping out of his pants next before moving back to the bed completely naked.

The door was locked and there was an alarm system that would track and alert him to movement on the entire floor, so Baikal had gotten into the habit of sleeping in the nude comfortably enough.

Sprawling out over the black and gray comforter, he lifted the device and finally checked the screen, smirking when Rabbit's name—or at least the one he'd assigned him—stared back at him in bold letters.

Little Bunny: Skin.

He snorted, finding that a lot funnier than he should, and typed back a quick response.

Baikal: Should I come over and touch it?

Amazingly, Rabbit didn't seem like he was going to bother playing hard to get tonight, messaging back just as fast.

Little Bunny: You mean peel it off? Sounds like the kind of sick thing you'd be into.

He wasn't entirely wrong...

Baikal: I can think of a few other things I'd rather do to make you scream.

Little Bunny: Lucky me.

Perhaps Rabbit was bolder through messaging since they weren't face to face, since typically he managed one or two good one-liners before he bowed out and gave in. Baikal found himself drawn to the feistier side of him, always loved those moments where he gathered enough courage to push back.

Things easily obtained were boring and rarely worth the effort. That was another major reason he was willing to wait and give Rabbit time to adjust to his new reality. Once he did finally have him on his back, those legs spread wide, his hole greedily sucking on his cock...It would make all of this waiting advantageous.

At the thought, his dick twitched.

Baikal: I'll make you forget all about the dangers of being with a Brumal member once you're sobbing my name.

He hit send and then trailed his fingers down his bare chest, tracing lazy shapes over his skin to rack up the anticipation, giving his dick time to lengthen and swell to full size. In no time at all, he was achy and hot, lifting his hips to thrust lightly at the air as he pictured Rabbit in the room with him, kneeling at the end of the bed.

He'd probably get off on watching him solo-play for a bit. His little bunny was timid like that, curious in his inexperience. Rabbit would want a show to prepare him for what was to come, and though Baikal had never been one to cater to his lovers in the past, he found himself rather liking the idea of teasing his tiny obsession that way.

Little Bunny: You aren't dangerous because you're Brumal, Void.

Baikal quirked a brow, but before he could ask him to elaborate, another message came in.

Little Bunny: You're dangerous because you're you.

That was a loaded comment that could have multiple meanings, some of them better than others. But he wasn't in the mood to pick apart and process the other man's words at the moment, still too horny to bother. So instead of trying, he opened the camera app and aimed low, opting to send a loaded comment back in response.

Baikal: You mean because of this.

The dick pic and the accompanying message got marked as Read immediately, but this time there was no speedy reply. Rabbit, it seemed, was choosing to go back to the silent treatment.

Baikal grinned and grabbed himself, working his cock in hard, fast pumps as he pictured his tiny obsession blushing. Getting off on the fact that now, there was no doubt Rabbit was thinking about him, too.

Chapter 15:

Rabbit inhaled through his nose, held, and exhaled counting to seven. The initial stirrings of the panic attack were already upon him and he could feel his muscles tensing and his stomach twisting into knots. That voice, the one that always flickered through his mind just before he completely and totally lost it, echoed again, relentless in its pursuit to get him to remember.

He didn't want to remember.

He wanted to forget.

Completely.

Entirely.

Forever.

More than that, he just wanted this to end, didn't want to be afraid of doing the one thing he'd always loved. His mother may have been the reason he played the beiska, but up until a year ago, the stage had been the one place Rabbit could wholly escape from her. Up there, he was the one in control. He was the one getting the applause and being recognized, not as December Trace's son, but as himself.

Those moments had always been so few and far between and he'd clung to them like treasures...Until she'd taken that from him too.

The video Baikal had forced him to watch at the theater flashed before his eyes, accompanied by that phantom voice and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out everything about that night before it could take root.

Rabbit!

He winced and reached out blindly, feeling around on the table for the candy bar he'd pulled out of his bag and left there earlier in preparation. When all he was met with was the smooth surface of the dressing room table, his eyes popped open and he frowned. The bar wasn't there, but he could have sworn...

"Looking for something?" Baikal's smoky voice cut across the room and Rabbit spun around to find him leaning up against the closed door. At his look of confusion, the Brumal Prince shrugged. "I picked the lock. It wasn't difficult. You'd think with all the money my family pours into this place the university could afford to upgrade their systems."

"What...What are you doing here?" He pressed a palm over his heart, vision winking in and out momentarily as the panic attack continued to claw away at him. Void's presence, while distracting and a surprise, apparently wasn't enough to convince his subconscious to give up.

Instead of answering, Baikal tipped his head, inspecting Rabbit as though seeing him for the first time. There may or may not have been concern written on his face, but it was gone faster than Rabbit could process if it was really there or if he'd simply been seeing things.

"This is a bad one," Baikal said quietly, and it was obvious he was speaking to himself.

Rabbit replied anyway, if only in another poor attempt to distract himself. "It's always like this before a performance."

"Since when?"

He glanced away, tensing when Void advanced on him.

Baikal moved slowly, easing from the door over to where Rabbit stood. He captured his chin and forced his head up, gaze hard and intense. "Tell me. You know how I don't like to be ignored."

Was that a weighted comment? Was he referring to last night, when he'd sent that photo of his erect cock and Rabbit hadn't replied?

"Why are you here, Void?" It couldn't be to mess with him, right? He wouldn't do that to him right before he was set to go on stage... There were limits to the other guy's narcissism, wasn't there?

Baikal crowded him back against the table, resting a palm on the edge at either side to successfully cage him in. "Answer. The. Question."

"Over a year." He glanced away, unable to hold that intimidating gaze.

He nodded as if he'd already guessed as much and had just wanted confirmation. "No one knows?"

"My mother," he said. "At least, she knew about the first couple. She brought me to the doctor."

"And?"

"He told me it was a side effect of the accident."

Baikal stiffened, and if possible, the air around him seemed to crackle and pop with tension. "What accident?"

It wasn't public knowledge, so it wasn't surprising that he wasn't aware of it. Hell, if he had been, he would have known better than to show Rabbit that video. Or, he would have at least known how to use it to his utmost advantage. Agreeing to have intercourse with him in exchange for having any proof that night had ever happened destroyed?

More than worth it to Rabbit.

Baikal probably could have bargained for a lot more, not that he planned on telling him that part. He hadn't asked in any case, and withholding was different from refusing to reply.

It wasn't even really an accident, not when it could have been avoided and had been brought on by what his mother had done earlier that night. If only she hadn't beaten him outside the auditorium... If she hadn't broken his hand and therefore stunted his budding career...

If—

The heart palpitations worsened, to the point he was almost brought down to his knees, his forehead dropping against Baikal's broad chest instead. He sucked in air, forgetting all about counting his breaths and the other tools for defusing a panic attack that he'd been taught.

"Why is it getting worse?" Void asked even as Rabbit's hands fisted in his black shirt.

"I can't," he sucked in another useless breath, "think about that night."

"That's the trigger?" He frowned, but Rabbit didn't notice, too busy hiding his face. "It happened before you were set to perform, this accident, didn't it."

"Please." Rabbit shook his head. He couldn't think about it. There were less than fifteen minutes left before he needed to be out there standing in front of an audience of at least eighty people and he couldn't do it like this. "Please."

"All right." Baikal's arms came around him soothingly and he stroked a hand down the curve of his spine. "We'll discuss it later. You don't have to think about it."

"I can't *stop* thinking about it," he argued, but Void simply shushed him and kept up with the tender caresses, the warmth of his body enveloping Rabbit like a cocoon. Even though this thing between them was purely sexual in nature, logically he knew nothing could harm him so long as Baikal was there.

No one stood a chance against one of the Devils of Vitality, not even a ghost from the past.

"Help me," the plea came out with a gasp, tears prickling the corners of his eyes. He'd be embarrassed being seen like that if the attack wasn't all-consuming. Why should he care what he

looked like in front of Void when it felt like his entire chest cavity was being carved out with a dull spoon?

Baikal's hands stopped their movements but he didn't release him. "What do you need, little bunny?"

"My candy bar."

"You're all out I'm afraid."

That wasn't true. Rabbit had put one on the table, he was sure of it. But there was no use in arguing and honestly, at this point, it'd gotten so bad, he wasn't even convinced eating the whole damn thing would help settle him.

"Something else then," he said, forcing the words past clenched teeth.

"Such as?"

"I don't know!" He felt like he was dying for real now. "Something to help me forget. Just," his hands fisted in his shirt even tighter, clinging to him desperately, "help me forget. Please."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

Baikal pulled away, ignoring when Rabbit made a sound of protest. There was triumph sparkling in his teal eyes. "Remember, little bunny." He grinned and it was so fierce Rabbit actually gasped all over again. "This was your choice."

He was about to ask what the hell that was supposed to mean, but then Baikal was upon him, his tongue driving deep into Rabbit's mouth. His fingers threaded through Rabbit's hair, gripping the ends to forcefully yank him into a different position, his lips and his teeth and his tongue feasting on Rabbit all the while until he was dizzy for an entirely different reason other than panic.

Rabbit moaned, the sound thready and raw, a sound only Baikal had ever been able to draw out of him. It felt like maybe that meant something more than it should, but he shoved that thought aside, not wanting to allow anything else to break through this.

Something hard poked into his stomach and instinctually, Rabbit ground himself against it, relishing the hiss Baikal made when he did. Before he knew it, his hand had snaked between them, reaching down to cup Void through his jeans.

He was rock hard already and all they'd done was kiss.

Hadn't that happened once before, but with their roles reversed?

"Something amusing, little bunny?" Baikal tore his mouth away to ask darkly, and that was when Rabbit realized he'd smiled.

He started to shake his head and lean in, wanting more of that brutal kiss to help chase off his ghosts, but Baikal planted a hand on his shoulder and shoved him down to his knees instead, making him suddenly eye-level with that bulge Rabbit had been so proud of creating a second ago.

"Unfortunately there's no chocolate," Baikal's tone changed, turning seductive and menacing wrapped together. The one he used whenever he was forcing Rabbit to do something he didn't initially like. He undid his fly and released his cock, the thick head already flushed and weeping.

Rabbit had to lean back to avoid being slapped in the face with it, glaring up at Baikal even as the other man continued to speak.

"I did however pick something up for you." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a medium-sized bottle, popping the top off to squirt a generous amount of clear lube onto his hand.

The smell of mint hit Rabbit a second later and his eyes went wide. "You can't be serious."

"Remember what I told you before?" Baikal slathered the lube onto his cock, using his entire hand to do it, so he was left with a glistening member and a mess on his palm. "I never joke about my

dick. It's only fair, little bunny. The other day you got off while I had to leave unsatisfied. It's my turn."

Rabbit had never given anyone head before, but his hesitancy didn't just stem from not knowing what to do. What if someone came to the door and heard?

Baikal grabbed him by the nape and pulled him forward, his intentions clear, but Rabbit slammed his palms onto Baikal's muscular thighs and pushed back, straining to keep distance between himself and that veiny cock.

"Stop resisting."

"I have to perform in ten minutes!" Rabbit reminded.

Baikal clicked his tongue. "You have to perform right now, actually. This goes in your mouth," he jerked his hip, the tip bumping up against Rabbit's lips, "or this," he held up his palm, making sure he saw the lube still coating his hand and wiggled his fingers, "goes all over your clothing."

"You wouldn't." Rabbit was in uniform, the wispy white shirt made of a fine material that definitely wouldn't hold up if there was junk smeared on it. And he didn't have a replacement, no spare he could even borrow from someone else. The university rules were strict, and since this recital was taking place on campus grounds, he couldn't just wear anything up on that stage.

"Is that a challenge?" Baikal snorted. "I would. In fact, maybe I should. I went out of my way to buy your favorite flavor specifically to help you through your attack, but if I ruin your fancy outfit and you can't perform anyway, that means I'll be free to take you however I see fit."

"You planned this from the beginning," Rabbit accused. He'd made it seem like this was his choice, but it never had been. Not really.

"Tick tock, little bunny," he said, using that lubed hand to hold himself by the base and angle himself better for Rabbit. "Get sucking, or this escalates past a blow job and ends with me fucking a different hole of yours."

Rabbit hesitated again. If they had sex now, wouldn't that mean he'd be free from this deal? Maybe he should—

Baikal chuckled, somehow able to pick up on his train of thought. "If I take your ass right now, you best believe you won't be able to walk for days, let alone stand on a stage without falling. You really want everyone here to know you've been fucked by me?" He pretended to consider. "I don't hate the idea. They're already aware who you belong to."

"The hickey," Rabbit realized, not sure how he'd been too stupid to before, "and dragging me out in the middle of class... You did those things on purpose."

"I was staking my claim," he confessed.

"Is that what you're doing right now too?"

"No," his grip on his neck tightened, "this is about helping you overcome your inner demons. From now on, little bunny, if you need something to lick and suck, I've got you covered. I want to erase the negative emotions that bubble up within you whenever you're forced back to that memory. Instead, I want you to recall the taste of my cock on your tongue. The feel of it," he ran the tip over Rabbit's sealed lips, painting them with a mixture of lube and precome, "The way you choke and gasp with it buried to the back of your throat."

At the lewd suggestion, Rabbit inhaled sharply, and Baikal seized the opportunity to hook his thumb into the corner of his mouth and force him to open for him.

He pushed that velvety head past his lips, settling over Rabbit's tongue, and paused. "If you don't move, I will." He caressed a strand of silverish-white hair over his forehead, but the intimate gesture belied the barely veiled threat his words brought.

If Rabbit left Baikal in control, this would be messy and rough and wholly unpleasant for him. Which meant either he complied or he regretted not doing so.

"I know you've never done this before," Baikal said. "That's fine. I get off on being your first. Just do your best, and if your best ends up not being good enough..."

He'd take over from there.

Rabbit instinctually swallowed, but with the cock still in his mouth, all that ended up doing was clamping his lips and pressing his tongue around it. A burst of salty mint flavors exploded on his taste buds, nothing like his candy bar, and yet...Not entirely unpleasant either. With his lips still sealed on him, he took another tentative lick, sliding from the bottom of that mushroom-shaped head to lap at his slit.

Baikal groaned, the fingers holding the base of his skull splaying as he rocked forward ever so slightly. His cock slid in even deeper, and Rabbit readjusted his tongue, swirling it around more of that thick shaft, watching Void's face closely to gauge his reaction as he continued to explore.

He traced the pulsing vein with the flat of his tongue and then sucked, drawing him in more. Rabbit had always preferred the mixture of chocolate with mint instead of just the latter on its own, but he was starting to rethink that. There was something about the salty, sweet and cool taste of Baikal's precome mixed with the lube. Hollowing out his cheeks, he sucked him in deep, wanting more of that particular flavor, choking a bit when Void's cock hit the back of his throat.

A rumble made its way up Baikal's throat, the only warning before he suddenly gripped the sides of Rabbit's face. With one hard thrust, he drove it in, hands tightening when that had Rabbit spluttering and his gag reflex almost going off.

His lips were already starting to hurt from the strain of keeping them so wide, the girth of that member slamming in and out only eased by the lube and saliva that dripped from Rabbit's mouth with every pump of those hips. At some point, he'd started to cry, fat tears rolling down his ruddy cheeks, his fingernails digging into the material of Void's jeans over his thighs.

Every time Void pulled back it was with a pause that lasted barely a full second, only long enough to tease Rabbit into believing he'd be able to take in a full breath before that cock was ramming back in and cutting off all flow of oxygen.

Rabbit didn't even think of asking him to stop though, too hyper-focused on the taste and the struggle to breathe enough to prevent himself from passing out. It was all he could think about, his only option to hold on for the ride and wait until Baikal was finished using his mouth as his own personal fuck toy.

It happened suddenly, one final deep thrust and then Void was growling and more of that salty taste coated Rabbit's tongue in hot waves. He swallowed them down, sucking and licking the other man through his orgasm, completely riveted by the blissed-out expression on his face.

A knock on the door had them both jumping, the sound followed by a voice from the other side of the wood, Rabbit's notice he was expected on stage in five minutes.

Baikal pulled out of him, but before Rabbit could say or do anything, he hauled him up onto his feet and shoved his stomach up against the table.

In the reflection of the mirror, Rabbit could see him fiddle with something a second before the snapping of the cap to the lube came. He frowned, his eyes then going wide when his pants were tugged down to his knees, and then he felt the solid press of something at his entrance.

With a quick pump, Baikal speared two of his fingers into his hole, stretching the unprepared muscle.

"What are you doing?" Rabbit demanded, frantic now. He tried to straighten but Void slammed

him back down so he was left leaning over the table with his ass in the air between them.

He removed his fingers but didn't leave him empty for long.

Rabbit cried out as a plug larger than the first was forced into him, the sharp stabbing pain enough to have his already watering eyes leaking even more. Tears ran like rivers down his cheeks as he clawed at the surface in an attempt to get away from that invading object settling inside of him.

Baikal adjusted the t-shaped base, sure it was snug and secure, and then he hummed in approval and gave a single light slap to Rabbit's right cheek. "I planned on going easier on you, but we ran out of time. How're you feeling?"

"Awful!" Blindly he reached back, intent on pulling it out, only to have his wrist captured and pinned to his lower back.

Baikal growled in warning, waiting until Rabbit found his gaze in the mirror's reflection. "Be good, or I'll make you go out there looking like this, little bunny. One glance at you and even the most naïve of people would easily be able to tell you've had a cock stuffed between your lips."

Rabbit shuddered, not liking that image at all, but also still uncomfortable from the stretch and the burn of the plug. It felt like it was a lot bigger than the first one, the flared base forcing him open to the point of pain. Now that he'd had some experience, he was aware that any discomfort would subside within a few minutes but...

"I have to be on stage," he said, voice shaky and weak. "Void. Please."

"Are you begging to have the toy removed," Baikal slipped his hand lower, running the tips of his fingers over Rabbit's swollen shaft, "Or begging for me to take care of this before you go out there?"

Frantically, he shook his head. The knock on the door had come at least two minutes ago. He needed to clean up his face. He couldn't—

"Please," he tried again. "Don't make me go out there like this."

Baikal tipped his head, clearly thinking it over before it must have clicked for him. "Ah. You're afraid of standing up on stage while hard for me."

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Do you really think I'd allow anyone else to see you like this, little bunny?" Baikal crooned. "I already took care of that for you. There's no need to fear being seen. So long as you keep this," he gave one solid pump to Rabbit's dick then released him altogether, "in check, no one will know."

Void stepped back, but Rabbit remained where he was, panting and out of sorts. With a click of his tongue, Baikal tugged up his pants and spun him around, snapping them and redoing the zipper. Then he fixed the collar of his white shirt and tugged at the lacy material so it was flowy around his center. Untucked it did a good job of shielding his front. Pulling a couple of tissues from the box, he got to work on Rabbit's face, cleaning him up with a level of skill he wouldn't have guessed a Brumal Prince to have.

Once he was finished with that, Baikal gave him a lengthy check, nodding to himself.

"Hold the instrument in front of you until you make it there so none of the staff catch a glimpse when you pass by," Baikal ordered, grabbing the beiska as he spoke. He shoved it into Rabbit's hands then went for the door, opening it before Rabbit could process the speed at which everything was taking place and put a stop to it.

Out in the hall, a fellow student with a headset on had their hand lifted as though they'd been about to knock. When the door opened and they saw Baikal, they gasped, but then quickly recovered and cleared their throat, glancing at Rabbit.

"You're going to be late," the female student said, stepping back and motioning for Rabbit to

hurry up and follow.

He hesitated and she frowned at him, her lips pursing in obvious annoyance.

Baikal turned, blocking her from Rabbit's view, and leaned in to whisper words only he could hear against the curve of his ear. "No more surprises, little bunny. Go out there and play. I won't interfere any further than this."

Some of his composure returning—despite the overly full sensation between his cheeks—Rabbit managed to send him a glare.

"It's too late to take it out now," Baikal chuckled, winking for good measure. Then he stepped to the side and waved an arm. "Get hopping."

The female student, having heard that part since he'd said it loud enough, chortled, paling when that received a dark look from Baikal.

Not wanting to give him any more opportunity to mess with him further, Rabbit did as he was told.

Praying no one noticed if he was walking slightly funnier than usual.

Chapter 16:

“It’s this way,” the female student he didn’t know the name of waved him in a direction Rabbit wasn’t used to going, bowing her head in slight annoyance when he hesitated.

He glanced between her and the stage which was still twenty or so feet ahead. Being stationary didn’t help any with the giant toy currently pressing against his insides, however, and noticing all the other backstage workers had him giving up on needing answers. He followed after the student as she led him to a set of rickety black stairs that trailed up to the second level.

This auditorium was the larger of the two the university offered on its grounds and was typically used for holiday productions and plays. Rabbit had only been to a few, mostly when they were required, but he recognized they were heading toward one of the balconies set high at either side of the stage. They were used mostly by musicians during dance recitals and plays that either required a smaller band or a larger one.

Baikal had said he’d taken care of things for him, had he meant this?

Sure enough, the female student stopped at the entrance to the balcony at the far left and motioned him inside, leaving once he’d stepped beneath the tall archway.

He crossed over the thin burgundy carpet, walking up to the ledge that overlooked the audience who remained hushed even after they’d started to notice him. A moment later, the light readjusted, landing on him, and the cue used to signal it was time for him to begin was given.

The curved ledge of the balcony came up to Rabbit’s middle, surely blocking out all view from below. No one would be able to tell he was hard—though it’d started to go down due to his nerves and embarrassment.

He’d never been turned on while on stage before, and though this wasn’t technically the stage itself, it was still a piece of it. His palpitations returned and his palms felt sweaty as he lifted his instrument and settled it on his shoulder. When he adjusted his stance, the plug rubbed up against that spot inside of him that always sent electricity skittering up his spine and he inhaled sharply. His dick pulsed and his fingers trembled over the strings.

Rabbit couldn’t do this. Couldn’t stand here with hundreds of eyes on him and pretend like he wasn’t about to start dry-humping the wall. Like he wasn’t terrified someone would discover what was going on with his body. He’d be plastered all over the news if they did. Not only would he have to quit, he’d also have to find a cave to crawl into and remain for the rest of his days, unable to show his face to the world.

Chatter started up in the audience, soft and barely audible, and though the lights out there were dark making it hard to see any of their faces, Rabbit could tell they were starting to get antsy.

If he didn’t do this immediately, there’d be rumors no matter what happened in his pants.

Someone coughed off to the left, and though he couldn’t know, his gaze shot that way as if drawn to the sound, landing on Baikal.

The Brumal Prince was standing off the side of the stage in the back, partially obscured by the thick navy curtain. From where he was positioned, no one in the audience would be able to see him, but Rabbit got a perfect view. When Void had his attention, he tipped his head, angling his chin in that challenging way he did, seeming to ask without needing any words whether or not Rabbit was a coward.

If he were in his right mind, that might have been enough, but Rabbit wasn’t in his right mind.

He was shaking and rubbing his thighs together ever so slightly without even realizing he was doing it. Yes, he was turned on and that was half the problem, but the other half was the stage fright he was already used to.

Typically, he could tune it out once he made it on stage, but now, knowing that his ass was stuffed full and there was a slight sheen of sweat on his brow that was no doubt visible in the spotlight...He hadn't checked the mirror before he'd left. Had simply trusted Baikal had cleaned his face up accurately.

Fuck.

Rabbit couldn't do this. He couldn't—

The plug started to buzz and he jolted a little, head whipping back to Baikal in shock.

He'd crossed his arms over his broad chest, and the second Rabbit was looking at him, he slipped something out of his clasped hand, just enough for the plastic to be visible.

A remote.

That bastard.

He'd promised there'd be no more tricks and yet here he was—

The vibrations increased and the threat was clear.

If Rabbit didn't perform, Void would turn that thing up to full force and he *would* come right here, in front of everyone.

He sent Baikal a death stare, glowering when that merely had the other man chuckling, and then he did it. He played.

His fingers strummed at the strings, the melancholy tune lifting out over the audience in shots of pale blues and greens. Acting on muscle memory, Rabbit allowed his hands to do the work while his mind concentrated on keeping the rest of himself in check. The vibrations didn't stop, but they did slow, the pulsations pleasant, causing a slight tingle to sweep through him.

Rabbit kept his eyes locked on Baikal, the contact helping in a way he couldn't quite comprehend. Here he was, in this predicament because of Void, and yet, somehow, seeing him there, watching so closely, helped Rabbit feel like he wasn't on his own.

Baikal's goal had never been to expose him to the audience, he'd simply wanted to prove a point—maybe to them both, maybe just to Rabbit.

Somewhere along the way, Rabbit had started to lean into this fucked up relationship. Had come to crave and long for those wayward touches, the charged glances. The possessive way Baikal captured his chin and demanded all of his attention.

The tune shifted, but Rabbit hardly noticed.

All his life, his mother had tried to control him and get him to comply with her wants and her desires. And he'd done it. He'd caved and contorted to fit her needs. Was that why it'd come so naturally to him to follow Void's orders?

No, with him it was different. Both he and his mother wanted Rabbit to be their version of perfect, but with Void there was at least a little give. With his mother, there was only take. She'd never asked him questions about himself, hadn't noticed whether or not he was happy or unhappy.

Was the fact Baikal asked him things sometimes enough to justify all of this? Logically, no, but did that matter to Rabbit's subconscious? Apparently not. All his brain seemed to care about was the fact that since the Brumal Prince had barged into his life, his attacks had been fewer and farther between. And he got the sense that was done by design.

Baikal was going out of his way to take care of Rabbit in the process of overcoming him.

His mother never had.

So long as he did as he was told, December Trace could give two shifts about her one and only son. He was there to be an extension of her greatness, a bauble—or better yet, a music box, sitting on the shelf gathering dust until someone came around and wanted to hear it play. He'd realized she didn't consider him his own person years ago, at the tender age of eleven, and that had only solidified the night—

Rabbit cut that train of thought down, his fingers plucking at the strings more violently than he meant, the sound sharp but still enticing. He focused on Void, watched as the other man's brow furrowed, clearly sensing something wrong even from across the stage.

No one had ever been this in tune with Rabbit before, and it was both frightening in its unknown and thrilling. On some level, he understood it was a dangerous attraction, that this thing between them, whatever it was, was debauched and maybe a little warped. Baikal Void was a seriously perverted guy who got off on watching Rabbit squirm.

The plug turned up again, the vibrations causing Rabbit's lips to part on a silent gasp, his hands never stilling as they worked his instrument in a similar way Baikal was now working his body.

His hips jutted forward as if on their own accord and he bumped up against the wall, moving so he could rub against it in slow measured flicks of his hips that would go unnoticed by the crowd below. He'd never been into the idea of being aroused in front of others before, and while the risk of discovery still very much worried him, he was less focused on that now and more invested in chasing that rush he got whenever Baikal brought him to orgasm.

Seeming to sense that too, Baikal grinned, his face vicious and wicked and beautiful all at once.

And then he turned the toy up to its highest setting.

Rabbit came with a start, only barely holding in a cry, the sound of his instrument tuning out everything else. Colors burst from it as he continued to play through the emptying of his cock in his pants and the burst of electricity that shocked through him, the song spiraling up and crashing back down again right along with him.

The crowd was already standing and applauding before he finished, and through his haze, he couldn't process why. Until a twisted ribbon of teal, bright and glowing, drifted past his field of view.

Teal, like Void's eyes.

Teal, a color Rabbit had never produced with the beiska before.

After years of painstaking struggle and practices that had lasted until daybreak, Rabbit had finally unlocked a new color.

* * *

“Congratulations!”

Rabbit bowed to one of the student workers backstage, the millionth person to say that to him since he'd stepped down from the balcony level. He'd had to wait for a bit for his pants to dry and be less noticeable, the flowy material of his long shirt thankfully still hiding the stain. Still, he'd need to change immediately, just in case.

At some point, the plug had been shut off, but he didn't have any idea when Baikal had disappeared from his spot next to the stage. As soon as Rabbit had gotten over his initial shock at seeing the new color, he'd turned to find him, but Void had been gone.

“Rabbit, this is amazing!” Professor Ludo appeared, his arms opening wide as though he expected Rabbit to step into his embrace and hug him or something.

He didn’t. Instead, he sidestepped him, gave a curt nod of his head, and kept going. When the professor called out to him he shot back that he was in a rush and that was that. Keeping his composure enough not to simply run was taking all of his energy, and he wasn’t even sure what it was he was trying to make his way toward until he finally threw open his dressing room door and...

Found it empty.

His shoulders sagged and he pursed his lips as he stepped in, glancing around the small square space as though a man of Baikal’s stature could somehow find a way to hide.

Rabbit shut and locked the door then placed his beiska back on its stand and went straight for his multi-slate. It was already filled with messages and tags on Inspire of clips of him, but he scrolled through them twice and not a single one was from Void.

Had he really just...left? Just like that? Without a word? Had he seen the new color? Did he even know that it *was* new? Maybe he had and the fact it was the same shade as his eyes had freaked him out.

Rabbit snorted at himself after that one. If there was anyone here who should be freaked out by this thing it was him, not the pushy and possessive Brumal Prince.

The one who was absent.

His multi-slate pinged and he checked it like his life depended on it, trying to ignore the way disappointment sliced through him the second he read the message. It was from Void, but it was more a brushoff than anything else, and after what Rabbit had just experienced thanks to the other man, it stung a little.

Void: Remove the plug then go straight home.

He went to text back something snarky but paused. Why should he? Why should he give him anything else? With a growl, he attached the device to his wrist and began to gather his things. Rabbit would go home, but only because he had nowhere else to be.

It wasn’t until he was turning for the door that he realized there was another letdown that he’d somehow overlooked.

The table overflowing with gifts was lacking the most important one of all. He practically dropped his instrument case on his way over, moving vases and bouquets out of the way as he searched, hoping that maybe it’d merely been buried by the other things. But no.

Baikal Void wasn’t the only thing missing from this room.

There was no Rose Ephemeral either.

And just like that, all the elation he’d been feeling over unlocking a new color and making a breaking advancement with the beiska turned to dust, drying out his throat and causing the corner of his eyes to prick with tears.

For a moment, a brief and bright moment, Rabbit had actually believed there was someone out there who truly did care for him.

Both the Brumal Prince and his mystery admirer had just proven how foolish of him that had been.

Chapter 17:

The East Quad was unsurprisingly packed around lunchtime, but Rabbit pretended like he wasn't aware of all the attention he was receiving. More than usual, even. It'd been like this for over a week, ever since Baikal had pulled him out of the lecture hall in the middle of class and had been caught with him in his dressing room before the recital. Rumors were spreading like wildfire, some students bold enough to approach and ask him outright if the two of them were dating.

Rabbit always politely excused himself and refused to give a set answer, knowing that no response would make him look good. Either he said yes and risked Void correcting it when he heard, making Rabbit look the fool, or he said no and everyone assumed he was either easy or that he'd been targeted by the Brumal.

Although, things had died down a little the past couple of days, mostly because Baikal hadn't been around.

Or, at least, he hadn't been around Rabbit.

The last he'd seen him had been standing backstage. There'd been nothing since. Aside from that one text, the last message in their chat log was that lewd photo of his erect cock. At first, Rabbit had feared Baikal was pissed at him for not responding to that, or that he'd done something wrong on stage, but then he'd realized it wasn't his style. If he was angry with him, he would have certainly shown his face by now and done something about it.

No doubt something sexually deviant.

He'd come out here to study in peace, not wanting to deal with the chatter of the enclosed cafeteria, but he couldn't stop his gaze from continuously slipping over to his multi-slate or glancing around, and with a sigh of frustration he gave up and decided to just admit it to himself that he was curious.

Where the hell was Void, and why hadn't he contacted him in almost a week? Was he crazy, or had Rabbit gotten used to the attention? Used to the thrill of not knowing what to expect? Now it just seemed like there was...nothing. No threatening or dirty messages, no terrifying midnight appearances in the middle of his bedroom or his kitchen. Baikal hadn't even attended the lecture period they shared.

If this was meant as some sort of fucked punishment, like he was ignoring him on purpose to get a rise out of him, Rabbit decidedly didn't like it. In fact, he hated it. If it weren't for his own personal stubbornness, he would have reached out to Void himself, but as it were, every time he opened their chat feed intending to do just that, he was greeted by that massive dick pick.

And then he chickened out.

Because wasn't this actually what he'd wanted from the beginning? To be left alone? To not have the threat of that giant cock and the man it was attached to looming over his head?

He reached into his bag for the candy bar but stopped before his fingers so much as brushed the wrapper.

Ever since he'd tasted Baikal's cock, the mint chocolate just hadn't been the same. It'd lacked the edge he needed for it to help settle his nerves. Whenever he tried to eat a piece, his mind went right back to the dressing room, with him on his knees, that cock stuffed—

Cursing, he bitterly zipped his bag closed, leaving the bar where it was.

There was still the video to consider, of course, but if Baikal really had simply grown bored

and moved on, wouldn't that also mean he'd forget all about that as well? Rabbit didn't care so much about gathering proof it'd been deleted. He only needed to know it would never be released to the media.

So, despite the small sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach—the one he absolutely refused to acknowledge was disappointment—Rabbit should be elated by this turn of events. He *was* elated.

...Right?

"Did you hear?" A student passing by his table with her friend said, loudly enough it caught Rabbit's attention. "They found the body by the Pier this morning. Ronnie was having breakfast with his parents there and he says he saw it."

The other girl with her gasped. "Do they know who it is?"

Rabbit held his breath, only realizing that was ridiculous a moment too late. If there was a body, he shouldn't be worried about it being Baikal.

It was more likely Baikal was the one who'd done the killing.

"August Bril," the first girl answered. "He was a sports major here."

"He went to our school?!"

"Hey." Sila arrived and knocked on the table, forcing Rabbit to look away from the retreating girls. He frowned down at the completely untouched tray in front of him. "What's up with you? You've barely eaten, and by that I mean, you've eaten even less than the three bites of food you usually take."

Rabbit cleared his throat, but he wasn't quick enough to come up with an excuse.

"Why do you keep looking over your shoulder?" Sila quirked a golden brow, and it was hard to tell by his tone if he was worried or just interested. "Did you get into some kind of trouble? Need help with anything?"

"You do recall I'm the oldest here, right?" He sighed. As the senior, he should be the one checking in with Sila, not the other way around. "I haven't asked how your sophomore year is going."

Sila scrunched up his nose, obviously about to point out they'd been in school for a month already, but then something caught his attention. His expression changed, going from open and friendly to composed and, maybe Rabbit was misreading it, but kind of scary.

Someone stepped up to their table and Sila offered that person a cool smile.

Rabbit half expected it to be Void, but when he turned it was to find Sila's identical twin, Rin.

Rin was in his Academy uniform, indicating he'd probably come straight from class on that side of town. The uniform fit him well, hugging his broad shoulders and molding to the obvious muscles of his chest. Both he and Sila were attractive, but Rabbit was starting to realize the two were like night and day as far as personality went.

"Can I sit with you?" Rin asked Rabbit, who nodded and slid down the bench seat to make room.

This was the first time he was sticking around for longer than a minute here and there and Rabbit certainly wasn't going to tell him no.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" Sila drawled, straightening when that earned him a pointed glare from his brother. "What? It's just Rabbit. He's cool. You know that."

Rabbit frowned, glancing between the two who continued to stare at one another. Why did he get the sense he was being locked out of a private conversation?

"He has to be," Rin finally replied, "since he's friends with a boring dude like you."

"He's actually pretty popular," Rabbit said, running a hand through the short hairs at the base of his skull uncomfortably when that earned him looks from the both of them. "Whatever you two did

over the summer, it helped open him up more.”

“Is that so?” If anything, Rin’s annoyance only grew hearing that.

“I think a personality overhaul is good every now and again,” Sila shared.

“Good for who?” Rin countered.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe everyone.” He shrugged and motioned to Rabbit. “Come on, senior, you tell him. Isn’t the whole point of college coming into your own and exploring who you want to be?”

“Don’t ask him that, he’s been the same person his whole life. That’s what happens when you’re born great at one thing and dedicate yourself to it,” Rin snapped, clearly in the heat of the moment, since both he and Rabbit winced afterward at the same time.

Sila seemed entirely unaffected.

“I apologize,” Rin turned to Rabbit and bowed his head. “That didn’t come out the way I meant it to.”

“It’s fine.” Rabbit tried to give him an easy smile and knew he failed miserably at it. “You’re not wrong, even if it sucks to hear. My life has been pretty monotonous my entire time at this school.” Although, hadn’t he considered it a routine up until recently? One that he’d convinced himself was for his benefit?

The way Rin made it sound, it seemed more stifling than anything.

Rabbit’s multi-slate dinged and he rushed to check it, heart squeezing in the hope that it was a message from Void.

Only to find it was from his mother.

He skimmed over the lengthy message, barely noticing the way his blood started rushing through him a mile a minute and his breathing had started to labor.

“Are you all right?” Rin pressed the back of his hand to Rabbit’s forehead, not seeming to care that the two were hardly even acquaintances with one another, let alone close enough for physical touch to be acceptable. Worry creased his brow. “You’re sweating all of a sudden and you look like you’re about to pass out.”

“Is it Baikal?” Sila asked, and when Rin’s head snapped in his direction, he shrugged nonchalantly.

“Worse,” the confession rolled off Rabbit’s tongue before he could even think of holding it back, “it’s my mother.”

“This about the date?” Sila caught on fast.

“There was a date?” Rin’s eyes ping-ponged back and forth between them. “With *Baikal Void*?!”

“No, with some composers daughter,” Sila waved his hand in the air and seemed unable to come up with the correct name, sending a questioning look to Rabbit.

“Arlet Zamir,” Rabbit dully filled in.

Sila snapped his fingers, pointed at Rin as if he’d been the one to supply that answer, and leaned back in his seat. He stretched his arms across the whole back of the bench, filling the space easily with his large form and electric presence.

This new version of Sila attracted attention wherever he went, and he didn’t even have to do anything to get it. He was just that charming and charismatic, a far cry from the quiet and reserved person he’d been in the past. Maybe he’d gotten some tips from his brother over the summer and that was why.

Though, Rabbit couldn’t really consider Rin electric. More like...still waters run deep. That

was the perfect phrase to describe the put-together younger twin.

“Did the date not go well?” Rin asked.

“Baikal interrupted it,” Sila said.

Rabbit frowned at him, almost certain he hadn’t told him that detail. Must be he’d been so stressed as of late he was misremembering things.

“What’s your mom saying?” Sila tipped his chin toward the still-open message.

“She wants me to go on a redo,” he told them. “It’s already arranged and everything.”

“For when?”

“Twenty minutes from now.”

“What the fuck?” Sila barked out an incredulous laugh.

“Yeah,” Rabbit sighed, “it’s super short notice.”

“It’s not that,” Rin corrected. “He’s surprised she’s telling you to skip practice.”

Sila snapped his fingers again in the affirmative then asked, “You going to go?”

“I don’t have a choice.” According to his mother, Arlet was already waiting for him at the restaurant, someplace downtown in a different area of the city from the club. Different location, the same upscale food that Rabbit couldn’t pronounce the names of.

He barely remembered to feed himself on a daily basis, and that was with a school meal plan.

“Sure you do,” Sila said.

“Some of us aren’t as fortunate as to have that luxury,” Rin corrected sternly.

For whatever reason, this particular comment seemed to hit home, and Sila dropped his gaze.

“I have to go.” Rabbit stood and quickly collected his things. “I’ll be late if I don’t leave right now.”

“Of course.” Rin got up and moved out of the way so he was no longer blocking the exit, standing off to the side as Rabbit got out of the booth.

“She’s on another planet,” Sila reminded, waiting until Rabbit was looking back at him to add in a more serious tone than he’d managed this entire conversation, “Sometimes we have to realize we have to choose what’s best for us, even if that’s not something our parents can understand. You don’t need anyone else’s approval but your own, Trace.”

Rabbit smiled sadly. “Thanks, but with a last name like mine I’m afraid that’s just not the case.” His mother was the infamous December Trace and that meant he had a role to play in her story, whether he liked it or not.

No matter what she had to do or who she had to push to the edge in order to ensure her plans ran smoothly.

A pressure started between his eyes and Rabbit rubbed at it. The sensation was almost always followed by a swift sense of dread, and he frankly did not have the time to deal with all that misplaced energy at the moment.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, shoving those thoughts aside as he quickly made his way to the parking lot.

If he drove now, it would take him just twenty minutes to make it to the restaurant. He’d have to show in his uniform, but whatever. There was also the matter of informing Professor Ludo he wouldn’t be making it to his private practice session.

He sent off that email to be done with it as he entered the parking lot, but he didn’t lock the device.

...Should...he tell Void?

If Baikal were still interested and was just busy at the moment, he’d be furious if he

discovered on his own Rabbit had met with Arlet again—and for a date no less. But if he wasn't, and he was in the process of forgetting all about Rabbit...Did he want to draw the Brumal Prince's attention back his way?

A sadistic inner voice within him laughed at that because truthfully, his hesitation had nothing to do with wanting to avoid Baikal and everything to do with not wanting confirmation that Baikal was the one avoiding him.

What if he really was bored with him after all of that?

What if he'd just tossed Rabbit aside like partially used goods?

What if—

The sound of footsteps at his back had him pausing, but just before Rabbit could turn to see who it was something jabbed into the right side of his neck. A sharp pain had him yelping and pulling away, stumbling to escape whoever had just attacked him.

Almost immediately, his vision became cloudy and his legs turned to jelly, making it hard for him to stay up on his feet. He turned, but the person in front of him was already too fuzzy to make out, especially since they had a dark hood drawn up to shield the upper half of their face.

That pounding between his eyes came again, harder this time, and he grimaced and held up a hand in a poor attempt to keep his attacker at bay. He heard someone screaming his name, the voice familiar, but realized it was taking place in his head.

Rabbit!

A memory of a dark night and a strike of lightning in the distance blindsided him and he finally dropped to his knees, landing with a painful smack against the concrete. In the memory, that voice kept calling out his name but he didn't want to follow it, didn't want to remember what happened next.

Someone grabbed onto his arm and yanked him up roughly and he let out another cry.

"Rabbit!" this time the voice wasn't in his head, and both he and his attacker looked over to watch as Rin ran toward them.

He was larger than the attacker by at least a foot, plus he'd been training at the Academy for over a year now, so the high kick he delivered to the hooded guy wasn't surprising. It did have the adverse effect of causing the attacker to drop Rabbit, who hit the ground again, this time with his skull rebounding off the hard surface.

"Shit, Rabbit!" Rin reached for him, momentarily distracted and the attacker took advantage, taking a swing at the back of Rin's head.

Before he could make contact, however, another person was there, shoving him back with enough strength it sent him sprawling a good ten feet away. Kelevra Diar tugged at the hem of his navy blue and black corset and then sneered at the attacker warningly.

Rabbit only had enough time to process up to that point before his eyes slipped shut on their own.

"Damn it, Kel, I think he was drugged!" Rin yelled, sounding incredibly far away despite the fact Rabbit felt the solid weight of his arms lifting him. "What are you doing? Don't just let—"

Rabbit didn't hear the rest.

That darkness, the vile, horrible black that he was so afraid of, closed in around him, sealing him off from the world.

Chapter 18:

“Rabbit!”

He snuck out the back, glancing over his shoulder toward the door he’d painstakingly shut behind him. “What are you doing here?!” he whisper-yelled once he had the older man in sight, coming up short the second his gaze landed on his face.

His bruised and swollen face.

One of his eyes was entirely sealed shut and his lip was cracked in three places. His cheeks and his jawline were covered in a smattering of harsh, purple, and blue blotches that had Rabbit instantly feeling sick to his stomach, and that was before the man took a step toward him.

Limped toward him.

“She didn’t...” He didn’t want to believe this was something his mother was capable of and yet...He’d seen her pull Oli out of his seat in the back and force him out of the auditorium in the middle of Rabbit’s set. A part of him had known things wouldn’t have been pleasant between them, but this... “Light.”

Oli grabbed his hand and squeezed when Rabbit reached for him, stopping him before he could touch his brutalized face.

Rabbit’s music teacher had always been like sunshine incarnate, bright, and bubbly. He could find a silver lining amid the darkest storms and had the uncanny ability to make Rabbit want to do the same. He’d always admired the dimples on his cheeks and the fine arch of his golden brows, but now everything was caked in dried blood, and the fact that his mother was the reason for it made him want to both throw-up and beg for forgiveness.

“I should have stayed away.” He tried to pull his hand free, but Oli’s grip tightened, keeping him captive as panic swept across the older man’s expression.

“Come with me,” he blurted, casting his eyes toward the dark, looming house. They were standing with only the single porch light there to help illuminate them, only enough to make them visible to one another while standing this close, less than three feet apart. “Let’s leave, Rabbit. We can go and never look back. You can be free.”

“What—” He tried to take Oli’s other hand, gasping when that had him crying out.

Oli Easton, the best musician on this side of the planet aside from December Trace, had three broken fingers.

“No.” Rabbit shook his head and stepped back, yanking himself free from that hold. His mother was a controlling nightmare to him, sure, but music was her God. She would never... “You need to get to a hospital!” He forgot all about the need to be quiet, grabbing onto his elbow to tug him toward the other side of the house.

They only made it a few steps before Oli dug his heels in.

“That’s not important right now,” Oli said, but Rabbit didn’t agree.

“If you don’t get this checked you’ll never play again!”

“I don’t care.”

“How can you say that?” Rabbit had only met Oli because of their shared love for the beiska. There was no way his teacher would willingly give that up, and for what? His ex-student with the overbearing mother? It didn’t make sense.

It wasn’t worth it.

"I'll call you a cab," Rabbit lifted his multi-slate and started doing just that. "They'll bring you directly to the hospital. Take my account info, I have enough to cover—"

"I don't want your money, Rabbit," Oli stated, sounding slightly offended, but mostly just harried.

"Then," even knowing he shouldn't ask it, that he should insist Oli go immediately, Rabbit hesitated, "What do you want, Oli?"

"She's a monster," he told him. "She isn't safe to be around. You need to leave before—"
There was a hard crashing sound and Oli instantly stopped talking. For a moment, Rabbit didn't understand why or what was going on, frowning over at the older man.

Then—

Rabbit shot awake, mind still caught up in the dream, eyes wildly searching his surrounding sightlessly as his hands gripped the heavy material of the black and gray comforter over his lower body. He was panting, sucking in oxygen but forgetting to exhale properly, dizziness sweeping over him in no time at all.

He hardly noticed, that voice echoing in his mind over and over again, calling out to him. Pleading and harrowing.

Rabbit!

He slammed his palms over his ears and started to rock, as though that could somehow help block out the ghost that had been haunting him all this time. He'd tried so hard to keep them buried, to not let them back into the light, but now they were swarming in his head like poison and he was certain they'd drag him under to the bowels of hell.

Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing.

Maybe death would make all of this go away permanently.

She's a monster.

"Stop," Rabbit murmured to himself, but the voices kept repeating and the darkness of that night kept flashing before his eyes even with them closed. "Stop!"

Hands suddenly latched onto him and he cried out, fighting the arms around him that refused to let go. The room he was in came flooding into focus—a black comforter, gray walls, silver embellishments, all dark aspects just like that night. He sobbed and fought harder, gasping for breath when he was pulled in close, his face buried against the curve of someone's neck.

Wood smoke and eucalyptus.

Baikal.

"Breathe, little bunny," he was talking to him, may have been doing so throughout the entire struggle for all Rabbit knew, his voice soothing and velvety. "You're safe. I'm here. Nothing can get to you so long as I'm around. Breathe, Rabbit. I've got you. I've got you."

Safe. It was an odd word, sounding foreign and wrong in many ways and yet...right, at the same time. Baikal was the person who'd made his life a complicated mess this past month. The person who'd twisted his insides and forced him to do deplorable things against his will, and yet...

Only a devil could defeat a monster.

And Baikal Void was the biggest devil Rabbit knew of.

He stopped fighting to get away, his shoulders sagging as he clutched at the material of Void's shirt over his back. He went from desperately trying to escape to silently begging with his body not to be left alone.

Focusing on his breathing, he started to calm, and the steadier he was able to get his heart rate, the more those horrible memories drifted back into the abyss he kept them in. It wasn't until they

returned to hazy recollections with no real discernable details that he recalled where he'd been before waking.

He tried to pull back again but Void held him firm.

"It's okay," he said, words muffled against Baikal's neck. "I'm awake now." He wet his dry throat. "Which means I'm wondering where I am and why."

"Do you remember what happened at school?" Baikal pulled back just enough to meet his gaze. There was real concern in his teal eyes and a hint of anger that was impossible to ignore, though his next statement made it clear it wasn't directed at Rabbit. "Some asshole drugged you and was trying to kidnap you."

"Rin!" Rin had arrived just in time and tried to help him. "What happened? Was he hurt?"

"He's fine," Baikal told him. "Worry about yourself. You've been out for an entire day. How do you feel?"

He blinked in surprise. "That long?"

"I called you out of class and told your music advisor not to expect you," Baikal continued. "I also replied to your mother after she blew up your multi-slate with over twenty messages."

"You what?" That fear he was only just starting to shake returned full force.

"We'll circle back to the fact you were apparently on your way to a date with that girl, half the messages were about that. After, Professor Ludo must have spoken to her about you being sick so she wouldn't stop calling. Eventually, I picked up and just told her I was a friend of yours and you were too ill to talk to her at the moment."

Right. The date. He'd been in the process of trying to decide whether or not he should inform Void. Considering this was the second time things had gone awry, he doubted Arlet would be interested in giving them a third try. At least that was one problem dealt with.

Rabbit hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings, but he hadn't thought of her once since this thing with Void had begun, which had to mean he wasn't interested. And while before he'd been more than willing to involve himself anyway just to avoid punishment from his mother, now—

"Wait." He frowned, his mind catching up with the rest of Baikal's statement. "You told her what?"

He'd told his mother they were friends and he was taking care of him.

His mother knew Rabbit had someone in his life...

Rabbit shoved him away without really processing what he was doing, scrambling back until he hit the headboard with a hard whack.

Baikal's initial anger dwindled the longer he stared, but Rabbit barely noticed, too busy trying to think up an excuse he could give his mother that she would believe. What if—He frantically shook his head. No, no he had to remember who this was he was dealing with. Who they'd both be dealing with.

He'd considered the repercussions before, hadn't he? Had already concluded that December Trace wouldn't be stupid enough to try and go after the Brumal Prince. Not to mention all Baikal would have to do if she did was play that video for her and she'd shut up really quickly. Hell, the guy she'd hired to beat the shit out of Oli that night was now one of the members according to Void so—

"What's going on?" Baikal cut into his tumbling thoughts. "Why are you so afraid?"

Rabbit couldn't tell him. Telling him would mean bringing up Oli and he refused. The memories had faded once more, but if he started talking about it there was little doubt in his mind his brain would try and force him to remember like it always did whenever he was presented with a similar set of circumstances—like performing on stage—and he didn't want that.

So he did the first thing he could think of.

He changed the subject.

“Why did someone come after me?” He made a big show of narrowing his eyes. “It’s because of you, isn’t it?”

Baikal’s mouth thinned into a line but he didn’t bother denying it.

“You kept going out of your way to make sure people on campus saw us together and now look what happened. My life is in danger because of you, Void. What sane person wouldn’t be frightened right now?”

“I won’t let anyone hurt you,” he clipped out, only to have Rabbit snort.

“You weren’t there. I was hurt and you weren’t there. If Rin and Kelevra—”

“Don’t,” he growled. “Don’t bring the Imperial into this.”

“He helped save me.”

“And then he handed you off to me the second I arrived without batting an eye. He’s no knight in shining armor, Rabbit.”

He tilted his head, the reaction a bit over the top even by Baikal’s standards. Unless... “Are you...Are seriously jealous? Over the fact Kelevra kept me from being kidnapped instead of you? That’s such bullshit and you know it. What, would you have rather I be taken just so you could ride in on your midnight horse—or whatever the fuck the devil rides—to get credit for saving the day?”

Baikal glowered. “I was there. I arrived a minute too late, but I was there.”

Rabbit let out a shaky breath because this was pointless. “I wasn’t mad that you weren’t. I’m mad that this happened at all. I’m mad that it could have been prevented if only you’d—”

“Leave you alone?” He quirked a dark brow. “Not going to happen, little bunny. Not on your life or mine. Get used to it.”

Now that his mother was aware they were...whatever they were, there was no way she was going to sit still and allow it to continue. She might not risk standing toe to toe against the Brumal, but she’d find a way to get what she wanted, she always did. He’d been able to keep Sila a secret because the music professor had never seen them together, and they never hung out anywhere but at lunch or around the East Quad. But Void had willingly handed over information about the two of them, which meant it was entirely out of Rabbit’s hands.

If he tried to lie, she wouldn’t believe him, would most likely send Professor Ludo to dig deeper and maybe even follow him around campus, then he would discover Sila and Rabbit would end up losing him, too.

“You like what I do to you,” Baikal said then, clearly not liking that Rabbit had gone silent on him. “You like being around me.”

Did he? There was some truth to that, he supposed, but that didn’t mean Rabbit could give in to those messed up feelings, ones he didn’t even understand. There was no reason for him to feel safe in Void’s company or anticipate his next touch, and yet Rabbit constantly found himself daydreaming about the other man when he was alone. This week had marked the longest they’d gone without seeing one another since the start of this, and he’d been a distracted wreck.

That was why someone had managed to get the jump on him in the parking lot.

Because of Void and the way he made him feel. The way he twisted him into so many knots, Rabbit could no longer discern up from down or right from wrong.

“It doesn’t matter what I like.” Rabbit sighed.

“It matters to me,” Baikal corrected.

Rabbit grunted. “Don’t lie to fit your narrative. We both know you’ve never given a damn

about what I want or like or anything of the sort.”

He was quiet for a long moment before, “Do you truly believe that?”

“Should we list all the ways you’ve messed with me since that day in the cafeteria?” Rabbit suggested, only partially sarcastic. When Baikal didn’t react, he held up a hand and began ticking off fingers. “You drove off my date, you manipulated me into meeting you instead of her, blackmailed me with a video of my mother, forced yourself on me—”

“Careful,” Baikal drawled, “if we’re talking about changing facts to fit our narrative, I’m sure the excitement entering your voice contradicts the point you’re attempting to make here.”

“I’m not.” Still, he paused and took a moment to assess himself just in case.

His heart was thumping, but not nearly as bad as it’d been when he’d woken up, and sure he was starting to feel some heat pooling in that lower region, but nothing overly extreme. Yet.

“You’re getting turned on just thinking about all those things I did to you,” Baikal corrected.

“I don’t *want* to be,” he snapped. “*That’s* the point!”

“You’re treading a thin line, Rabbit.”

“What? So I’m just not supposed to have feelings?”

“Of course you are.”

“Because one of us has to?” He partially regretted it the second he said it, but he kept his stubborn composure anyway, glaring across the bed at Baikal as if daring him to continue down this road.

Honestly, he was aware that the Brumal Prince had feelings. It was that most of them were selfish and self-serving.

“What about the dead guy?” He recalled overhearing those girls talking about that. “The student? He went to our school.”

“Are you asking if he died because he was linked to me or are you asking if I murdered him, Rabbit?”

“I’m not sure.” He’d really only brought it up to keep the conversation from leading back to himself and his misplaced feelings. “Either? Both?”

“My enemies would only bother coming after those I care about,” Baikal clipped. “And currently that number sits at two. You’re the only one at that university that matters to me.”

“Why?”

“I saw you and I just knew.” Void lifted a single shoulder as if that explained everything.

“Knew *what*?” Rabbit didn’t get it. Maybe he never would.

He sighed and got to his feet. “I knew you’d be mine,” he said, and then his gaze hardened. “And so you are. That’s non-negotiable. It’s a fact. You belong to me, little bunny. My tiny little obsession. Nothing and no one is going to take you from me.”

Rabbit’s hands tightened in the material of the comforter all over again. The absoluteness in Void’s eyes was alarming. That wasn’t what they’d discussed, and it didn’t sound like he was being dramatic or extreme just for the heck of it.

But he had to be, right? Because this whole thing had started with Void wanting to fuck him, plain and simple. Once he got that, got what he wanted, they’d go their separate ways.

And then, only then, would they both be truly safe.

From the monster he called mother.

“If I want to go?” Rabbit asked, his voice shaking slightly despite his bravado. “If I want to walk away and I want this to end?”

Baikal stared him down silently for such a long time, he was starting to squirm, but then he

gave a slight shake of his head, the move almost imperceptible. “No one stops me from getting what I want, Rabbit. Not even you.”

He opened his mouth but the warning look he received had him closing it almost immediately.

“Enough,” Baikal started for the door, “I’m going to get you something to eat. I somehow doubt you’ve been taking care of yourself in my absence this past week. You look pale and weaker than usual.”

“That’s because some psycho drugged me,” he countered.

“Oh?” He turned at the door and quirked a brow. “So you’re saying you had a full stomach when that happened?”

Rabbit glanced away with a scowl.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Where were you?” he blurted. He didn’t want to, but the curiosity was getting to him and he had to know.

“Did you miss me that much?”

“No.”

Baikal grunted. “Perhaps I should call you little liar instead.”

“Weren’t you leaving?” Rabbit snapped.

“Yes, unfortunately, you can’t survive on just chocolate and come. As much as I wish otherwise.” He winked. “Wait for me. Don’t wander.”

“Whatever.”

“I mean it.”

“So do I. I don’t even know where I am.”

“I thought that was obvious,” Baikal said, pausing to keep him in suspense on purpose. The bastard. “You’re in my home, little bunny. I’ve got you well and truly trapped.”

Rabbit gave a full-body shudder at those words, but Baikal had already turned and exited, shutting the door tightly behind him. His surroundings were suddenly a lot more interesting than they’d been a moment ago, and it wasn’t long before he found himself tossing the covers off and slipping his feet onto the cold floor.

The walls were painted a light, almost white-gray, and there were a couple of framed glossy posters of hovercycles. There was a bookshelf filled with knickknacks and a glass case with an old-fashioned blaster gun, taken apart with its pieces displayed. The whole room felt sterile and cold, yet surprisingly belonged to a man in his early twenties. It was almost as if Baikal had forgotten he wasn’t a sixty-year-old man with the weight of the world on his shoulders and he deserved to enjoy things.

Rabbit shook his head at himself for having such a foolish thought. How would he know that just by looking at the guy’s room? He was an idiot for making assumptions. He didn’t know Void, and Void didn’t know him. Period.

He made his way over to the shelf by the bathroom door which had been left ajar, fiddling with a glass orb with a flat bottom, vaguely wondering what it did. When he couldn’t figure it out, he placed it back down and turned, opting to just go back to bed and wait, when something inside the bathroom caught his attention.

The Insight 3.0 glasses that Void typically wore were set on the sink countertop, the black frames standing out against the silver marble.

This was his chance.

All he had to do was sign in to Baikal’s multi-slate with the glasses and delete the footage. If

he did that, their deal would be pointless since the Brumal Prince would no longer have anything to hold against him. He'd claimed he wouldn't allow Rabbit to leave, sure, but so far his actions had gone against all of the threatening things he'd said—mostly.

Rabbit could do this. He'd erase the video and then insist on going home once Void returned. If he had to eat whatever food he brought with him first, so be it. Then he'd go and he'd tell Void things were over once he was back in the safety of his own home with the locks firmly in place and the Brumal Prince on the other side of the doors.

A part of him ached at the concept of this thing between them ending, but Rabbit forced that feeling away. This was for the best. Now that his mother was aware of them, it wasn't just for him either. Separating ties with Rabbit would also be the better choice for Void. Rabbit didn't know much about his situation, but had heard what everyone else on campus already knew.

Baikal was gearing up to take over both the conglomerate and the Brumal from his father one day. Whatever that entailed, it must keep him terribly busy.

His mother wouldn't actively start a fight against the mafia, but there were dozens of companies under the Void name. He wouldn't put it past her to make her way down the list of smaller ones, and with her influence, she'd probably succeed in destroying a couple before Baikal's father ever got wind of what was going on from his seat at the top.

Void was an asshole, but Rabbit didn't want to mess with his family's business.

No, this couldn't continue. It didn't matter that he'd gotten used to those heated touches or that he kind of wanted to cry a little as he slowly made his way into the bathroom and reached for the glasses. He had to do this, and once it was done, things could go back to normal. It might take some time for him to adjust back to the mundane existence he'd been living this past year, but that was nothing compared to the suffering his mother was capable of inflicting if he didn't choose this path.

He slipped the glasses onto his face and pressed the hidden button on the top of them. He'd never actually used a pair before, but he'd played around with one at the store when the first models had dropped. They'd been all the rage, allowing people to connect to interactive games and even watch videos with no one knowing.

Still, it took him longer than he'd hoped to find where Baikal kept his videos stored. When he tried to select them, however, the file refused to load. Instead, there was a beep and a red X appeared over the lens. A second later, four blank boxes flashed across the screen, requesting a passcode.

Rabbit swore. Of course it was password protected. Why hadn't he considered that?

"Two seconds," a deep, dangerous voice cut through the stillness of the bathroom and Rabbit whirled toward it, bare feet almost slipping on the smooth tile in the process. Baikal stood in the doorway. "That's the amount of time I'll give you to explain."

"I—" His mind was a blank. He couldn't think up a single believable excuse, not with that angry look locked on him.

"Time's up."

Rabbit found his voice just in time to scream as he was grabbed around the throat and tossed from the bathroom.

Chapter 19:

Baikal had tried being kind, had taken things agonizingly slow despite the very real and incredibly aggressive urge within him to brand and conquer.

Rabbit Trace was *his*. Perhaps he shouldn't have bothered with courtesy. If he'd done things right from the start, taken the way he'd been taught, they wouldn't be here now, with his tiny obsession trembling on his hands and knees on the floor of his bedroom.

Appearing every bit the small and frightened animal he'd been named after.

Rabbits weren't common on their planet but were flown in and often kept as pets, and on more than one occasion he'd speculated over why December had chosen that name out of all the possibilities for her one and only child. He'd planned on asking, eventually, but the topic had never come up and it sure as hell wasn't going to be the focal point of tonight.

Not after what his little bunny had just been caught trying to do.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what his plan had been. He'd hoped to delete the video himself and tell Kal to screw off. Only, he'd vastly underestimated the lengths in which Baikal would go to achieve his own goals. If he had to descend into the actual pits of hell to get what he wanted? So be it.

He'd yanked Rabbit from the bathroom and tossed him to the ground uncaringly, his anger getting the best of him as he fought against it. He wanted to make the other man his, but that didn't mean he wanted to do any permanent harm.

To his credit, Rabbit didn't move, sitting on the floor, staring up at him with wide, frightened eyes. His breathing was uneven, but it didn't appear as though he was about to experience a panic attack, so that was something. If he did, Baikal might have stopped, but as it were...

Slowly, he lifted his hands to the hem of the black t-shirt he was wearing and tugged it over his head. He tossed it to the other side of the room, gaze holding Rabbit's hostage as he did. Then he started on his jeans, undoing the button and easing the zipper down to expose his charcoal-colored boxer briefs. He was rock hard beneath them, his cock straining up toward the waistband, itching to get free.

He threw his pants as well, tipping his head when Rabbit flinched.

"Scared already?" Baikal asked, his voice deep with a steel-like edge. "Should have thought of that before you tried to go behind my back and take what was mine."

Rabbit shook his head. "There's been a misunderstanding."

"The only misunderstanding is me thinking I could coax you into coming to me. But thanks," he grinned, knowing full well how vicious and bloodthirsty that particular expression made him look, "for showing me that the Brumal way was the right way after all."

"Void." Rabbit slid back a foot when Baikal stepped forward.

"I should have taken you that night at the theater," he said. "Should have taught you who your king was and made you bow before me. If you'd learned then, I wouldn't have to make you learn that lesson now."

"Wait!" Rabbit held up a hand.

"I'm done waiting." Baikal grabbed onto his wrist and heaved him up, grabbing fistfuls of Rabbit's thin dress shirt in the process. With ease, he tore the material off of him, exposing swaths of pale, creamy skin his tongue was already dying to taste. Ignoring his little bunny's protests, he shoved

him down on the bed and grabbed at his pants next, growling when Rabbit tried to stop him and landed a solid kick to his left shin.

All that did was spur him on and in no time he'd removed his pants as well, flipping Rabbit over onto his stomach before stripping him of his boxer briefs.

Naked, Rabbit tried to crawl away, yelping when Baikal wrapped his fingers around his ankle and hauled him back to the edge of the bed. He was settled over it, his front pressed into the mattress, his bottom half left hanging over, the position causing his ass to lift invitingly in the air and give Baikal an eyeful.

Even though he wanted to proceed anyway, Kal forced himself to check, pinning him down with a palm at his lower back as he bent to glance between Rabbit's milky thighs.

A pleased rumble traveled up his throat at what he saw.

His tiny obsession was hard for him.

"Protest all you want, little bunny. It looks like I'm not the only one who gets off on your resistance."

"Shut up!" Rabbit tried to kick back at him a second time, only Baikal was prepared.

He avoided the poorly delivered attack and then retaliated, his palm coming down hard on Rabbit's ass cheek. Unlike all the other times they'd done this, he didn't bother holding back even a bit, and as soon as he pulled it away, an angry red imprint of his entire hand was left over that unblemished skin.

It was tempting to hit him again, to mark the other cheek. To cover him in love bites so that every inch of Rabbit Trace was so obviously owned by him no one would think twice ever again about trying to harm him. Not even Rabbit himself.

"You said you wouldn't force me," Rabbit said then, his voice so filled with doubt that it was enough to have Baikal hesitating.

"I recall also telling you I wouldn't be taking no for an answer," he reminded as soon as he'd figured the other man was referencing their talk in the theater. "I've been patient with you, delicate, and how did you repay me?"

Rabbit made a sound of pure disbelief and moved to glare at Kal over his shoulder. "You really should invest in a dictionary, *your majesty*. Just because you didn't outright rape me already, doesn't mean what you've been doing is any better."

"You were hard every time," he said.

"But I didn't consent!" Rabbit glared. "And I'm not giving it now. I don't want this, Void. I don't want you."

Something in him snapped and he roared, peeling Rabbit off the bed only to slam him back down onto it, this time on his back. He went down with him, trapping his body beneath his, settling one hand around his neck. When he ground his erection down against Rabbit's, his tiny obsession hissed, his pleasure impossible to hide with Baikal's face hovering just above his.

"Everyone on campus already knows we're together," Kal growled, gyrating his hips again. "Who's going to believe you if you try and tell them I forced you? Who do you think the world will side with, Rabbit?"

"So that's it?" A tear escaped his right eye and rolled down his cheek. "That's your big speech? You're going to convince me by pointing out that I'm merely famous while you're a king? I'm just a pretty face and the only thing I'm good for is performing when and where you command it of me, that's it, right?"

Something inside of Kal shifted, and he didn't like it. It felt...wrong.

“Stop,” he ordered.

Rabbit sniffled and managed a humorless chuckle. “Why? We should lay it all out on the table, shouldn’t we? I’m just a warm body for you to use.”

“I am not your mother.” It hit him all at once what this was about, why Rabbit’s words were corkscrewing through him and piercing his resolve. He still didn’t know what she’d done to make Rabbit so afraid of her, but it was obvious from his panic attacks and the stage fright that whatever she had inflicted, it’d been traumatic.

“You want to use me, same as her,” Rabbit accused.

“Wrong.” He needed to get him to forget about December for now. This was neither the time nor the place for his mommy issues to be rearing its ugly head. “And trying to irk me won’t save you. This is happening, little bunny. Tonight.”

“Fine!” he yelled, and they both froze as soon as the word left his mouth. Rabbit stared at him, clearly stunned, before he seemed to recover and went back to pressing against Baikal’s chest in a poor attempt to move him. “Get off!”

“That was consent,” Kal pointed out, only to have Rabbit vehemently deny it.

“It wasn’t! And even if it sounded like it, I take it back!”

“Should I tie you down?” Baikal asked himself thoughtfully, but that had Rabbit freezing all over again. “Or will that frighten you more?”

“Please,” he whispered, all the fight draining out of him at once, reducing him to that trembling mess he’d been at the start when Baikal had first thrown him to the ground.

Baikal must have been going too easy on him after all because it was obvious it was just now occurring to his tiny obsession that he meant it. A good man would have backed off and considered his fear, but Baikal was a Devil of Vitality, not a man at all, and good had never been a part of his vocabulary.

“I’m going to bury my cock so deep inside your body you’ll still feel me in the morning,” he promised darkly, reaching out to trace his thumb over Rabbit’s full bottom lip when it quivered. “It’ll hurt at first, since we’re skipping over the final plug I chose for you—which you only have yourself to blame for, by the way—but you’ll take it. Every inch. You’ll open up for me and welcome me home like the good little bunny you are. After tonight, you’re going to wonder how you ever survived without me.

“Use you?” He tsked. “I don’t want to use you, Rabbit, I want to *play* you. I want you singing for me the same way your beiska sings for you. I want to put on a show, one that’s meant for only the two of us. And when I pump you full of my come and claim you as my own, I want you screaming my name. My *name*, little bunny,” he tightened his grip around his neck to help get his point across, “None of this Void bullshit you’ve been using to draw a proverbial line in the sand between us.”

Rabbit glanced away, proving that he’d naively thought Kal hadn’t noticed.

“Eyes on me,” he demanded, and when Rabbit complied, that spark of resistance was back dancing in his silver gaze. “There you are. Fight me if you want, pretend you’re not getting off on this if it helps you feel better about yourself. I don’t want you hollow. I’m not interested in fucking a zombie.”

“You’re really going to do this,” he said, a bit incredulously. “You’re really going to—”

“Fuck you,” Baikal filled in. “Yes.”

“I hate you.”

“That’ll change.” Because Kal wanted his love, and he intended to have that too. “But don’t worry. I’ll give as good as I get.”

“You’re sick!”

“Why? Due to the fact I’m obsessed with you?”

Rabbit frowned. “You could have literally anyone you want.”

“We’ve been through this.”

“You can’t possibly want me.”

“Why not?”

“You just can’t.”

“That’s very convincing,” Baikal drawled. “Please tell me you’re doing better in your Debates class with Professor Strikes than I’m now assuming? You are aware you need to pass that one to graduate, right?”

“Void.” He glared. “This isn’t funny.”

“I’m not trying to be funny.”

“Then—”

“Should I get the handcuffs or not, little bunny?” he cut him off, gentling his tone some when that had Rabbit tensing all over again. “This is the last courtesy I’ll give you, and then we begin. Choose. Do you want me to give you an excuse? Tie you up so you can tell yourself no part of you wanted this?”

“I don’t want this!”

Baikal tilted his head. “Is that your answer?”

They stared at each other a moment and then Rabbit blew out a breath.

“No chains,” he said, voice quiet and almost inaudible. “I’m… I’m afraid of being tied up.”

Baikal frowned. “Someone tied you up in the past? Against your will?”

Rabbit gave him a steely look that silently called him a hypocrite.

Since there wasn’t any denying that, Kal didn’t bother. “Was it your mother?”

Was that part of the reason Rabbit was so scared of her? Had she restrained him?

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he unsurprisingly stated. “I just want to go home and pretend like today never happened.”

“Sorry, little bunny,” Baikal threaded his fingers through the silky strands of Rabbit’s hair as he spoke. “That’s no longer an option for you.”

He didn’t bring up that they hadn’t caught the guy who’d tried to kidnap him, and therefore going home would be dangerous for him. Kal didn’t think Rabbit was ready to hear it, and besides, he’d let this drag on long enough.

“No chains,” Baikal repeated, but then he shifted overtop Rabbit, moving to trail one of his hands down his side. He kept the other around his throat in warning, pressing his fingers against his pulse point when Rabbit tried one final attempt at escape.

He recognized the moment his tiny obsession finally gave up, and like a true predator, he didn’t leave any time for him to change his mind. Baikal slipped a palm beneath Rabbit’s left ass cheek and cupped him, moving to lift his leg around his hip to give him a better angle. Then he ground down against him, rubbing their cocks together with enough force to have stars winking in front of his eyes.

He was still wearing his boxer briefs, but he worked Rabbit a few more times before he risked reaching down to pull them out of the way. He didn’t take the time to remove them fully, because that would require him to climb off Rabbit and there was no chance he was letting his tiny obsession up from this bed before he’d been properly fucked by him once and for all.

Gathering as much of his own precome as he could, he slicked up three of his fingers and then

brought them to Rabbit's tight hole. The musician jerked beneath him at the first press against that ring of muscle, but Baikal's finger glided in with no resistance. The second entered with the same ease.

"Rabbit," Baikal tried not to smirk but failed, "tell me the truth. Have you been playing with yourself since the last time we saw one another?"

"No," he answered. Too quickly. Much too quickly.

"You have." He full-on grinned then, pleased by that notion. "You have no idea how sexy that is, thinking about you touching yourself back here. Were you thinking about me when you did it?"

He swore to himself he wouldn't get angry if the answer was no.

At least....not *that* angry. There was only so much he was capable of, after all.

"This won't hurt as badly as I initially warned," he ended up saying when Rabbit refused to answer. Probably for the best.

"Disappointed?" Rabbit griped.

"Hurting you was never a goal of mine," he told him honestly. The third finger met with resistance finally, but he twisted it in and curled it along with the others, stroking at Rabbit's inner walls until he had the other man squirming and mewling beneath him.

Rabbit's dick bobbed between them as he pulled his legs up around Baikal's body, and Kal watched it for a bit as he opened his tiny obsession up.

But he'd been right before. There was only so much he was capable of, and he'd reached his limit.

He removed his hand and grabbed Rabbit's dick, swirling his thumb in the sticky dollop of precome at his rosy tip, sure to keep his touches distracting enough that his little bunny wouldn't understand what he was really after until it was too late.

He'd left the bottle of lube in his desk drawer on the other side of the room. Rabbit's come was just going to have to suffice.

Once he was sure he had enough to make a difference, he coated his cock in the stuff and then slicked up Rabbit's entrance again for good measure. When he lined up with that hole, Rabbit tensed all over again, causing Baikal to pause and glance up at him.

"Please," Rabbit clutched at the comforter and shook his head. "Don't."

Baikal hushed him.

Knowing what that meant, Rabbit squeezed his eyes shut.

He eased in slowly despite his earlier words about not caring if this was consensual or not. Rabbit's opposition wasn't enough to make him back off, but that was because Baikal was confident he could smash right through it in due time. It was so obvious that Rabbit was simply afraid due to his inexperience, but that he wanted this just as badly as Kal did.

His cock slipped inside, those hot walls clenching around him, and he groaned at the silky feel.

"It hurts," Rabbit said, grabbing at Baikal's wrist where it rested next to his hip and digging in his nails as if for revenge. "It feels like you're tearing me apart."

Baikal checked to be sure, pulling his cock out the three inches he'd managed to insert it before shaking his head. "No blood. You're fine."

Rabbit gaped at him.

"Now that we both know you can take it..." He let his words trail off, just long enough to have Rabbit's eyes widening all over again. Then with a grin, he thrust forward, pumping his cock into that tight cavern, straight down to the root. His balls slapped against Rabbit's ass and he thought he might explode from the sensation of being fully seated alone.

Rabbit obviously didn't feel the same. He was crying and now both hands were struggling to shove Baikal's shoulders and push him away.

Baikal let him, remaining still despite the all-consuming urge to move, waiting for his little bunny's body to adjust to the intrusion. "Breathe through it," he instructed calmly. "You got this."

"I fucking do not!" Rabbit ground his teeth. "I also fucking hate you!"

"You hate my cock," he corrected, "but that'll change in a minute. Trust me."

"Like hell."

Baikal chuckled knowingly. "Little bunny, you're going to be begging for this cock in no time. Remember this moment when you do, I might deny you just for the fun of it then."

"Bastard."

"Devil, actually."

Rabbit growled but otherwise remained quiet, clearly opting to take Baikal's advice and focus on inhaling and exhaling.

He watched closely as Rabbit's breathing went from frantic gasps to pants, and then he gave a tentative roll of his hips.

A long, drawn-out moan slipped past Rabbit's lips. His eyes popped open and he slammed his palms over his mouth as though that would somehow mask the sound that had already been made.

Baikal smirked and resituated himself so that he was holding himself up on his forearms at either side of Rabbit's head. Then he used his knees to force Rabbit's legs to spread wide for him. With no other warning but that, he gave into his nature and fucked him properly, the way he'd always dreamed of doing.

His cock pounded into Rabbit over and over again, pummeling his insides with rapid strikes. On each inward thrust he buried himself as deep as he could go. Pulling out was just a means to get back in and he didn't hold back.

Rabbit screamed beneath him, eventually wrapping his arms around Baikal's neck for purchase as his body was forced into the mattress. His dick was caught between them, being rubbed against the trail of wiry black hairs that led down from Baikal's navel to his swollen cock. It should have provided more than enough friction to get him off, which was good, because after waiting for so long, Baikal didn't think he was going to be able to last that long.

Rabbit was digging those nails into his shoulders and gasping by his ear. His thighs squeezed around Baikal's waist, and the rest of him...so hot and tight. Being inside of him was better than he'd even imagined.

Baikal had waited over a year for this and it'd been worth every single second.

"Come for me," he ordered, bending down to deliver a possessive kiss, biting hard on Rabbit's bottom lip at the end.

Maybe it was the inkling of pain, or Rabbit simply liked being dominated, Baikal would have to figure out which later. Either way, one of those things shoved his tiny obsession over the edge, and in the next instant, he was crying out, his trapped dick spurting between them.

Rabbit twitched, his eyes rolling back and his mouth parting on a silent scream. That combined with the tear tracks had Baikal losing it next.

He came, driving his cock into Rabbit's hole one final time and keeping himself there, squeezed within that warm, velvety heat. He emptied into him, balls tightening and quivering as he spent his release, his vision blindingly white for a full minute as he rode the waves of pleasure.

Better than ever before.

When he came to himself, he realized with a start that he was in the process of peppering

Rabbit's face with light kisses, just the barest press of his lips here and there. Giving into the urge to be gentle, he pet his hair next, moving the sweaty strands off his forehead, and then captured his mouth and stroked his tongue against Rabbit's.

A satisfied sound rumbled up his chest when his tiny obsession reciprocated, those arms around Baikal's neck pulling him close to deepen the exchange.

After a while, he pulled back, staring down at Rabbit's blissed-out expression. It was almost as though the other man had completely forgotten how he'd been pretending to not want this.

It wasn't the only thing that had fled his little bunny's mind.

"You forgot something," Baikal said, and his tone must have clued Rabbit in on the danger for his eyes cleared some and he frowned. "I'm pretty sure I ordered you to scream my name when you came." He sighed dramatically. "Oh well. Let's try again, shall we?"

"What—" Rabbit's sentence ended with a gasp as Baikal kneeled and flipped him onto his stomach.

Baikal hadn't been able to last that long for round one since he'd waited for this for so long, and the excitement had gotten the best of him. But that was okay. They had the rest of the night for him to make up for it.

He bit at his shoulder as he leaned over his body and then promised against the curve of his ear, "We'll do this as many times as we need to for you to get it right, little bunny, don't you worry."

"Wait!"

Baikal didn't.

A Brumal Prince only knew how to take.

Chapter 20:

It hurt to move.

Rabbit groaned and struggled into an upright position, arms shaking with strain. He was achy all over, but no place hurt more than his throbbing ass. There was sweat on his brow by the time he'd managed to sit up, back against the headboard to help brace him as he focused on inhaling and exhaling through the pain.

"If it's that bad," Baikal's dismissive tone cut through Rabbit's concentration, and he opened his eyes in time to see the Brumal Prince enter from the bathroom, "you should just stay lying down for the rest of the day."

He was dressed in his uniform already, doing up the buttons on his shirt but stopping at the middle so the entire upper half shifted to expose his fit chest when he bent to retrieve his shoes from the floor. There wasn't a single sign that he was in any sort of discomfort or agony, not like Rabbit currently was.

A flash of anger swept through Rabbit.

Baikal was going to be able to dust himself off and go about his life like nothing had changed, meanwhile, he'd...

Last night had been both a nightmare and a fantasy come to life. Rabbit couldn't lie to himself and say he hadn't enjoyed it. Even being dominated the way he had been. But that had been then, in the throes of it, and now it was morning and in the bright streaming light of day he was ninety percent sure he wanted to throw up.

And the pain in his ass was just part of the reason for it.

"I have class," he bit out, though he didn't attempt to move from the bed just yet. It'd taken him that long just to sit. There was no way he was going to be able to manage to stand, and he'd be damned if he tried to in front of the Brumal Prince.

"Don't go." Baikal shrugged like that made all the sense in the world and straightened after putting on his shoes. He finally turned and looked at Rabbit, really looked at him, his gaze intense and alight with something Rabbit couldn't recognize.

It threatened to send a shiver skittering down his spine, and in retaliation, he straightened, still scowling. "Some of us have responsibilities."

"Your only responsibility from now on is to me," Baikal said, giving him a suggestive once over.

"No." Rabbit was sure he was being messed with, but he made it clear anyway. "I'm not doing that again. Ever." At the thought alone, he shifted, wincing.

"I don't want to have to force you."

"Good."

"But I will," Baikal warned.

They stared at each other for a lengthy, tense moment, and Rabbit was the one to finally break the silence, unable to withstand it any longer. "You can't be serious."

"When are you going to stop saying that?"

"We had an agreement," Rabbit reminded, a bit more frantic than he would have liked. "You said you weren't like my mother? Prove it. So far, all you've done is cause me pain the same way she always has. The same—" He frowned when Baikal twirled on his heels and headed toward the desk

on the other side of the room, his nerves getting the best of him. "What are you doing?"

"It's not another sex toy," Baikal reassured, somehow knowing exactly where Rabbit's fears had taken him.

"You mean torture device," he corrected, but his brow furrowed more when the Brumal Prince turned back and slowly made his way over to the edge of the bed.

Baikal had a small white tube in his hand, and he perched on the corner of the bed and adjusted his legs wide before patting his right thigh. When Rabbit merely continued to sit there and stare, he heaved a sigh of annoyance. "Come."

"Absolutely not."

He held up the tube. "This is sun cream. If you're so insistent on going to school, this will have you back on your feet in less than an hour. Unless," he tipped his head, "you enjoy feeling the results of having my cock inside of you."

"I don't like pain," Rabbit corrected. "I'm not a weirdo."

"Nothing weird about it," Baikal corrected. "It's just different. It's okay if that's not your style though, little bunny. It isn't mine either. I don't get off on inflicting pain."

"Could have fooled me last night."

"That's not what it was about and you know it," he said. "Last night was about teaching you who you belong to, but it's starting to sound like you need another lesson. Now, come," he patted his thigh a second time, "before I lose my patience and drag you over instead. Causing pain might not get me hard, but subduing you does. If you don't choose quickly, I might decide to go another round before applying the sun cream."

Rabbit sucked in a breath. "You can't."

"Want to bet?"

"No, I mean I really don't think my body can handle anymore."

"We can always find out."

"Void."

Baikal sneered. "Careful, Rabbit, or I'll start to wonder if you're doing it on purpose."

They'd had sex another three times last night before he'd finally remembered to call out Baikal's name during climax. It'd finally ended after that, with Rabbit a sobbing, wrecked bundle of frazzled, overly sensitive nerves. He'd passed out at some point, covered in tears, sweat, and come, but Baikal must have cleaned him up because there were no remnants of dried spunk anywhere on his person now.

Rabbit hadn't noticed before, but as soon as he became aware of it, it was hard not to.

Baikal had taken the time to clean him... Rabbit's gaze moved to the sun cream, but he refused to allow his thoughts to take him further. Void was a member of a dangerous mafia, of course he'd have potent medicine lying around in his bedroom. He probably got hurt all the time. Just because he'd run a wet washcloth over Rabbit in his sleep didn't mean he'd gone out of his way to buy medicine.

"It's new," Baikal said, and though Rabbit didn't think he'd figured out the train of his thoughts, it still had him gulping slightly.

Especially when the other meaning behind that fully registered.

If he'd purchased that ahead of time, that meant he'd always intended for the two of them to end up right here, in this room.

"How long?" he asked, voice shaking slightly. Hadn't Void told him once before that this hadn't started with the event in the cafeteria? At the time, Rabbit hadn't paid that comment any mind,

certain it'd been said to mess with him and nothing more, but now... "How long have you been planning this?"

"That depends on what you mean by *this*," Baikal told him. "If you're asking how long I've wanted in that tight ass of yours—"

"How long have you been watching me?" He didn't want the overly sexual comments, the ones he recognized Void used to try and throw him off the scent whenever he asked a question he didn't want to answer. All this time, he'd skillfully played Rabbit to his own secret tune, just like he'd claimed he wanted to do last night, and Rabbit had been none-the-wiser.

Or, no, that wasn't accurate.

He'd known, on some level, what was really going on. Of course he had. And he'd fought against it, to some extent, but...Rabbit, who'd never experienced passion before, had been idiotically curious, a cocky part of him certain he could handle whatever the Brumal Prince threw his way.

Oh, how wrong he'd been.

Rabbit couldn't handle any of this. Not the way his body ached and not the strange prick of yearning taking root at the center of his chest. Part of him wanted to submit and obey, wanted to give in to whatever Baikal had planned next for them, just to see what that plan entailed.

Had he said he wasn't a weirdo?

What a bold-faced lie that had been.

"A year," Baikal admitted, and the sound of blood rushing through Rabbit's ears almost drowned out the rest of his words. "I've been biding my time for a little over a year now."

"Why?" That wasn't the thing he should be asking, and yet that's what came out when he found his voice.

"Why was I watching you, or why did I wait?" He chuckled. "Timing is everything and my life...It's not uncomplicated."

"How so?"

Baikal deflected. "We aren't talking about that right now. In fact, we've wasted enough energy talking as it is. You said you aren't a fan of pain? Well then hurry up, little bunny. Come here so I can fix it for you."

Rabbit didn't like pain, and the promise of relief was tempting. Still...He hesitated.

"Did your mother frequently leave you to suffer on your own?" Baikal didn't seem pleased with that prospect.

"You're always interrogating me about my life," Rabbit accused, only to have the other man snort.

"It's called showing an interest and trying to get to know you," he said. "It's no wonder you don't have any friends, little bunny, seriously."

Rabbit opened his mouth to retaliate but Baikal's gaze hardened before he could get a word out.

"Enough. Choose. Either come here willingly or I come and get you. And, Rabbit? If we have to do it my way, you're going to end up stuffed full of cock again before—"

He flinched as he shifted onto his hands and knees, but he didn't want to give Void the chance to finish his threat, so clenched his teeth through the waves of pain as he crawled the few feet to the end of the bed where the Brumal Prince sat waiting.

Baikal whistled low, appreciatively, as he moved, eyeing him with a spark of heat in his gaze that almost had Rabbit turning back. "You're so sexy, little bunny. Are you sure you don't want to go again?"

He glared just as he made it to him and Baikal laughed.

“All right, all right.” Baikal leaned back and motioned down at his lap. “Almost there.”

The position was far too intimate, but seeing he didn’t actually have a choice in the matter, Rabbit inhaled and forced himself to drape his body over the other man’s thighs, grimacing when Baikal reached down and helped adjust him so his ass was upturned slightly.

He turned his head, resting his cheek against the comforter, and watched as best he could from that angle as Baikal snapped open the tube and squeezed out a generous dollop of the contents onto two of his fingers.

At the first press of those digits at his entrance, Rabbit jolted and tried to immediately climb off, only to have Void’s arm come down on his back hard, pinning him.

“Stay still,” he clicked his tongue in disapproval and brought those fingers back again, carefully rubbing around the abused rim a few times first to ease Rabbit into it.

“This is your fault,” Rabbit growled, squeezing his eyes shut and chomping down on a bit of the comforter when one of those fingers breached his hole and slid in. It was tender and raw, the pain from just that small intrusion enough to bring tears to the corner of his eyes.

“I didn’t realize I was being this rough last night,” Baikal confessed.

“Would that have made a difference?”

He at least had the decency to pretend to consider before stating bluntly, “No.”

“Tyrant,” Rabbit murmured.

In response, Baikal worked in a second finger next to the first. “That’s king to you.”

Despite the burn of two fingers stroking against his walls, Rabbit grunted. “I recognize one Emperor, and it isn’t you, Void.”

“I don’t want to be your emperor,” he said. “I want to be your Dominus.”

Everyone on planet knew what that stood for.

“I’m not part of the Brumal,” Rabbit reminded.

“You’re mine,” he asserted. “Whether you want to be associated or involved with the Brumal, I’ll leave that decision to you. When it comes to me, however, you don’t get to decide.”

“What happened to choice?” Rabbit drawled sarcastically. “You’ve been doing such a good job at posing things so it looks like you’re giving me one when in reality you are not. What? Ran out of ideas so just not going to bother this time?”

The arm pinning him moved, and then Baikal’s free hand was kneading his right ass cheek tenderly, even as those fingers continued to smooth cream onto his battered inner walls. “I’m glad you knew what I was doing. You have to be attentive to be mine. It’s the only way to keep yourself safe whenever I’m not around—which, to be clear, little bunny, won’t be often. I plan on sticking close to you from here on out. Remember that if any bright ideas pop up in that sensual little head of yours.”

Those fingers touched at a particularly sore spot, and as soon as the warmth of the cream began to spread there, Rabbit couldn’t help but let out a small moan and go lax. Sun cream wasn’t cheap, and not everyone could afford it, which was a shame because it was seriously a miracle drug if it could have him going from feeling like he was dying from the inside out to suddenly feeling snug and comfortable resting in his tormentors lap the way he was.

His mother hadn’t physically abused him much. There’d been the harsh whacks to the back of his left shoulder when he’d been younger and she’d been dead set on teaching him to play the beiska right-handed, instead of left. He’d been injured a time or two when she’d dragged him across the room and he’d fought against her before being tossed into the dark closet. Then there were the minor injuries he’d gotten on his own over the years, obviously, the same way everyone did, but no one

aside from the school nurse had ever taken the time to apply ointment.

No one had ever been this gentle with him before either, caressing his skin almost lovingly—

Rabbit's eyes popped open when he realized he'd been lightly rocking his hips against Baikal's thigh, his dick aching and full all of a sudden.

"Were you listening to me?" Baikal asked in a silky voice. "Or were you too busy getting aroused by my touch?"

"Shut up." Rabbit's cheeks flamed in embarrassment.

"Not until you confirm you understand."

He frowned. "Understand what?"

Baikal sighed in exasperation. "Who you belong to, Rabbit Trace. The time for games has come to an end. I let you have your fun, your resistance, but you've lost and from here on out we do things my way."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He meant for it to come out accusatory, but instead, he sounded weak and afraid all over again. When he pressed his palms to the mattress and tried to lift himself, however, Baikal held him down a second time and drove those two fingers in as deep as they would go.

His dick, which had been softening at the burst of fear he'd felt, hardened anew.

"You promised you'd delete the video if I had sex with you," he reminded, the desperation impossible to ignore. The only problem was he couldn't tell if he was desperate for Void to agree, or for something else.

Something he shouldn't want.

"That was your misunderstanding," Baikal said. "I merely chose not to correct you. Try to remember the actual deal, little bunny. I never told you I would be satisfied with one fuck."

"It wasn't once!" He hissed when Void grabbed a fistful of his ass in warning after his outburst, those perfectly manicured nails digging into tender flesh.

"I didn't barter for one night with you," Baikal reiterated, and the darkness wafting off of him, filling the air with a cloying tension, was hard to miss. He was getting annoyed for real, and the only person who'd suffer from him being in a poor mood was Rabbit.

Even knowing that, however, he couldn't bring himself to back down.

"This isn't fair," Rabbit argued. "I gave you what you want. I did it!"

"Did what?" He leaned over him, bringing his mouth closer to his ear. "Spread those milky thighs and let me come inside this tight hole?" He wiggled his fingers, causing Rabbit to gasp. "*I* forced your legs apart," he reminded. "*I* drove my cock into your body despite your pleas for me not to, and when you begged me to stop, *I* emptied my load deep inside of you," he shoved those fingers in, pushing them as far as they would go, "again, and again, and again."

Rabbit inhaled sharply and realized he was sobbing, his face buried against the comforter as he barely resisted the urge to hump against Baikal's thigh. Despite the possessive and messed up words, he was hot all over and those fingers which he'd rejected before now weren't nearly enough to satisfy the hunger he felt in his lower region.

That's all it'd taken. A mild finger fucking and a little dirty talk and now he was turning to putty in the Brumal Prince's hands.

Pathetic.

"I don't want this," he said, hiccupping through the statement, which he wasn't entirely certain hadn't been meant more for himself than the man wrapped around him, pulling his strings like he really was a fine-tuned instrument and Baikal knew all the right places to pluck.

“Yet you dare claim you gave me what I want?” Baikal spanked him lightly once.

“If I did?” Rabbit asked, tipping his face enough to stare at the other man over his shoulder. He knew Void could feel the hot length of him pressing against his thigh. He was aware Rabbit was hard, so there was no point in trying to deny that fact. “If I did what you wanted and begged you for it right now?” He took a deep breath, trying and failing to steady his racing heart. “What would happen after?”

“Are you asking or calling my bluff?” Baikal quirked a dark brow.

“I don’t want to misunderstand again.” He couldn’t afford to was more like. Void and the things he made him feel were going to be the death of him with the way things were going.

The guy had all but admitted he’d forced himself on him last night, and yet here Rabbit was, in such a heightened state of arousal it was a wonder he hadn’t come all over Void’s lap from the tiny bit of friction the rough texture of his jean-clad thigh provided.

“All right, little bunny, let me spell it out for you.” Baikal lifted him up and then shoved him onto his back on the bed. He forced himself between his thighs and captured his jaw, tipping his head back against the mattress to force his gaze to lock onto his own. “That night at the theater, the deal was you become mine and I delete the video. I never once stated I’d be satisfied with fucking you one time. That was your mistake.”

“So I what?” Rabbit somehow managed to glare defiantly up at him despite the compromised position, or the way his dick bumped up against Void’s lower abs. “I’m just supposed to wait for you to get sick of me and not want me anymore? Is that it? I’m yours and you keep the video, and when I’m no longer yours *that’s* when you’ll finally delete it?”

“Tiny obsession,” he ran his hand through his hair, “I don’t know why you’re finding this so hard to grasp.”

“Maybe because you’re a depraved—”

“Devil?” He grinned. “True, but that still shouldn’t make this so hard to understand. You’re mine, Rabbit. Not for now. For forever. Because I am never going to get bored of you, little bunny, therefore I’m never letting you go. Blackmailing you with that video was simply a means to an end, now I have you, and I’ll be keeping you.”

“That’s…” Rabbit was at a loss for words. “No.”

“You have two choices,” Baikal said. “One, you keep fighting me. Eventually, you’ll either tire out or I’ll wear you down.” His hand slipped from Rabbit’s jaw, and he began trailing it downward, dancing his fingers across Rabbit’s chest and over his abdomen, heading lower as he spoke.

Drawing attention to the fact that while he was fully clothed, Rabbit was completely naked and on display.

“Two,” he held Rabbit’s gaze with his own, the wicked promise glimmering in those teal eyes, “you acquiesce, and I take care of you for the rest of your life. The way you were meant to be taken care of. Just,” he wrapped those skilled fingers around Rabbit’s dick and gave a slow, torturous pump of his fist, “like,” and then another, “this.”

Before Rabbit knew what was happening, Baikal dropped down between his thighs, his tongue licking the underside of Rabbit’s dick before he wrapped his lips around the head and swallowed him whole.

He cried out, one hand tangling in Baikal’s inky hair, the other clawing at the comforter as his hips lifted and he fucked into that warm heat. In the back of his mind, a part of Rabbit was screaming this was wrong and he should stop, but his body wouldn’t listen, the foreign sensations too incredible

for him to fight against.

Baikal rolled his tongue around him and sucked him deep, humming when he hit the back of his throat. It sent vibrations pinging down Rabbit's cock and a strangled sound emitted from his throat.

Then those fingers pressed at his entrance, gliding inside with the help of the sun cream still soaking his inner walls. The Brumal Prince only had to give him two solid pumps of that hand, set at the same pace as his mouth, and that was all it took for Rabbit to tumble over the edge.

The world momentarily vanished as Rabbit's back bowed off the bed, his cock buried deep in Baikal's mouth as he came.

Void swallowed every last drop, and then he licked Rabbit clean for good measure. Once he was satisfied he was done, he rose to his feet, a smug expression painted all over his devilishly handsome face.

"Give in to me like you just did, Rabbit," he said. "Make both our lives all the better for it."

"Wait." Rabbit sat up when Baikal made as though to leave.

"I can skip out on class," Void told him, "but there are Brumal matters that need my attention I, unfortunately, can't get out of. Stay here and rest. The sun cream should have started working, but you'll need more time before you attempt to move around."

"I'm not a pet," Rabbit stated, "and you can't just keep me here."

"Then I'll stay with you."

He frowned, that response unexpected. "What?"

"You heard me." Baikal walked back over and patted his head. "The man who tried to kidnap you is still out there, which means it's not safe for you on your own at night. You don't want to stay here? Fine. I'll be moved into your place by the time you're back from practice. Don't keep me waiting, little bunny."

Rabbit wanted to argue, but he wasn't quick enough to come up with anything sound to combat that and by the time he realized, Baikal was already shutting the door behind him.

Chapter 21:

Rabbit could only produce the new color when he thought about Baikal.

After days and days of trying, he'd accepted that fact, even though he didn't like it any more than he enjoyed listening to those things Void had told him earlier.

After the Brumal Prince had left, he'd stubbornly climbed out of bed and gone to take a shower. The warm water had helped ease the tension in his shoulders and other limbs, and by the time he'd finished, he'd felt a lot more alive. His clothing had been folded and set aside on the desk, as though Baikal had always known there was no way Rabbit was going to stay put all day twiddling his thumbs, and on his way out of the massive mansion Void called home, not a single person had tried to stop him.

He'd caught a hoverbike cab just off of the estate grounds, on the busy street a block down, and hadn't looked back.

Mostly because he'd been too afraid to.

That'd been over six hours ago and Rabbit still didn't feel completely at ease, even standing in the private practice room designated to him by the university. He'd considered calling it a day after his first class and going home, but fear that Baikal would have finished with his business early and be there waiting had kept him from going.

Last night had been...

And then this morning...

He flicked the wrong string and cursed as a mustard shade of yellow bounced off the beiska. It was proving difficult to concentrate and it was entirely Baikal Void's fault. All morning Rabbit had been screening calls from his mother and listening to Professor Ludo praise him for the new color. His ass was still a bit sore and all he wanted to do was curl into the fetal position and assess his messed up feelings.

He couldn't be falling for Void, and yet...Even knowing it was all manipulation on the Brumal Prince's part, Rabbit couldn't resist. Logically, he knew he shouldn't give in, should empty his bank account by buying a ticket on the first shuttle off planet and run. And not just from Void.

Rabbit could escape from it all, from his mother and the prince.

From the haunting memories and the ghost that wouldn't stop calling his name whenever he let his guard down.

From himself.

It was that last one especially that he needed saving from. Only a fool would play straight into Baikal's hands like he was doing.

Rabbit never would have been able to guess he'd be one of those people, the ones who turned into a completely different person after sex. The kind that suddenly lost their brain and reverted to animal instinct where the only thing that seemed to matter was rutting. But here he was, already anticipating tonight and what might happen between him and Void. He imagined there was no way he could convince the other man to use the guestroom, meaning they'd be sharing his bed.

It'd almost be like they were really dating.

He stopped strumming, giving up on practice, and cursed himself. Baikal had told him just this morning that he'd planned all along to trap him permanently, and yet here he was, fantasizing about what being the guy's boyfriend might be like.

What the actual hell was wrong with him?

Rabbit still barely even knew him.

Baikal Void had a close-knit friend group, was a hard worker and a straight-A student, and fucked hard. He liked making Rabbit squirm and got off on seeing him cry—not a lot, but a little. His dad and he had a close relationship and he preferred alcoholic beverages. That was pretty much the extent of Rabbit’s knowledge.

That wasn’t enough for him to be developing feelings over.

It didn’t matter that there was sometimes a lonely edge to Baikal’s gaze when he thought no one was looking, or that Rabbit had noticed a time or two the worrying way he nibbled on his bottom lip, lost in thought. Baikal had yet to share anything truly personal about himself, too intent on getting Rabbit to spill all of his secrets first.

It wasn’t fair.

And, Rabbit didn’t want to know anyway.

Damn it.

How was Rabbit supposed to keep his attraction a secret in such proximity? If he didn’t, Void would eat that shit up and hold it over his head, but there’d be nowhere to hide if the Brumal Prince insisted on becoming his roommate. Plus, for how long? What if Rabbit started getting used to having him around and then he *did* actually get bored of him?

He couldn’t afford to believe Baikal when he said this was meant to be forever between them.

Hell, Rabbit didn’t even fully comprehend what the word forever meant. To him, his entire life, that word had been synonymous with trapped.

His mom would never allow it, even if this was something Rabbit decided he did want to explore.

Everything seemed to darken around him, and at first, Rabbit mistook that darkness as the beginning of one of his panic attacks. Until he realized he wasn’t hyperventilating. Frowning, he turned away from the window he’d been standing in front of, taking in the small square space that was his practice room.

Sure enough, tendrils of black were snaking their way across the marble floor and over the high stone ceiling. They slunk over the piano set in the far corner, encased the single stool in the middle of the room in front of the music stand Rabbit had walked away from a few minutes ago when his mind had first begun to wander and the tune he’d been playing had altered on its own.

His arms dropped to his sides, the beiska in his left hand hanging forgotten as he stepped back, trying to escape those black strands as they came toward him. Rabbit’s back hit the window a moment before that darkness engulfed the panes of glass, blocking out the midafternoon sunlight.

In less than two minutes, the entire room was bathed in a thick, blackness.

Rabbit started panting then, the fear gripping him tightly. When the instrument was plucked from his finger by some unseen entity, he gasped and tried to stumble through the darkness blind. He only made it a single step before strong arms captured him around the waist and swung his body around. His shoulder blades hit the wall and he brought his hands up, grabbing fistfuls of a silky material.

He was about to call for help when the familiar smell hit him, woodsy crisp.

“Void?” his voice sounded strange in the dark, too loud. He didn’t get a reply, but the person confining him stepped closer, bringing more of that scent. “This isn’t funny. You know what turning the lights off does to me.”

“Use logic next time. There’s only one person in your life who can do what I just did.

Avoidance only feeds anxiety in the long term, little bunny,” Baikal finally spoke, and though his heart was still pounding, Rabbit let out a small sigh of relief. “Hasn’t anyone ever taught you that?”

“You have no idea what I’m actually running from,” Rabbit said. “And it’s none of your business anyway.”

“Wrong,” he clicked his tongue.

Sensing that was going to do nothing but spur on an unwinnable argument, Rabbit switched tactics. Anything to get Void to lift the darkness he’d created with his Shout ability.

His right hand loosened its hold, sliding down to Baikal’s hip.

Only to be stopped in its tracks by a firm hand pressing against it.

“None of that now,” Baikal chided. “While I’m not above sex therapy, that’s not why I came today.”

“Why did you come?” he asked. When he’d left Rabbit alone in his room earlier, it’d sounded like he hadn’t intended to see him again until later that night. “To tell me you changed your mind and realized the error of your ways?”

“Love that even you know to say that sarcastically,” Baikal said. “However, you’ll pay for it later.”

Rabbit felt the ghostly press of warm lips against his own, the kiss so brief for a second he thought maybe he’d imagined it until Void spoke again, his voice closer this time.

“Remember this, little bunny,” he said, low and seductive despite his earlier claims he wasn’t there for sex, “now that the misunderstanding has been cleared, every time you try to bring up leaving me, I’ll punish you.”

“You can’t—”

“My father is dying.”

Rabbit grew quiet, waiting, but nothing followed after that. He wished he could see Void’s face to get a better read on the situation, unsure how he was meant to react. They’d never spoken about his relationship with his dad before, but Rabbit had gathered on his own that the two were close.

“I’m sorry,” he ended up saying, no longer able to take the cavernous silence threatening to swallow him whole along with the pitch black already doing so. He needed light, but knowing already that begging wouldn’t get him anywhere, opted to follow down whatever twisted path Baikal was choosing to lead them instead of bothering.

“You don’t understand why I’m telling you,” Baikal surmised, and Rabbit was forced to admit that was true.

“So that I’ll feel bad for you and give in?” He doubted it, but it was the only thing he could think of.

Sure enough, Void snorted derisively. “Bunny, once my father dies the crown moves to me. I’m going to be king soon, a lot sooner than I imagine anyone anticipated. And that means,” he leaned in even closer, his warm breath fanning against Rabbit’s left cheek, “I can literally get away with anything.”

“You already get away with murder.” Internally, he scolded himself but the words didn’t stop. “What else is there, really?”

“You tell me,” Baikal countered. “You’re the one who seems to think threatening me with the law will get you somewhere. It won’t though. In fact, you won’t be going anywhere without me for the foreseeable future, not until I know you can be trusted not to try to escape.”

His earlier thoughts about buying a ticket off planet flickered through his mind, which was

unfortunate, because it caused him to be silent for a second longer than he should have, clueing the Brumal Prince into his train of thought.

A hand wrapped itself loosely around Rabbit's neck, thumb and forefinger pressing at the bottom ends of his jaw so his head tipped upward slightly.

Rabbit squeezed his eyes shut.

"Are you afraid, little bunny?" Baikal asked silkily.

"Yes."

"Of me?"

He considered the question. Of course on some level he was still scared of the Brumal Prince, only an idiot wouldn't be. But right now his fear stemmed from the blackness surrounding them and the inability to see. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was out there, lurking in the darkness, waiting to attack the second he wasn't careful.

"No," Rabbit ended up answering honestly.

"That so?" It didn't sound like he entirely believed him.

"You're very frightening, Void," he corrected, then explained, "And yeah, the things you say you want to do to me, how you keep insisting you won't let me go, all of that is incredibly alarming. But I can see you. Touch you. You aren't a ghost."

Baikal was quiet and contemplative a moment before asking, "What does that mean?"

"I am running," he said, "but I'm smart enough not to bother trying to run from you."

"Then what are you running from?"

"I'm not quite sure," he admitted. "I don't remember. And I want to keep it that way."

"Avoidance—"

"I get it. That doesn't change my mind." Rabbit had put too much effort into keeping those horrible memories buried. He wouldn't allow anyone, not even Void to drudge them up again now. "I'm finally starting to function like a normal person again. Please. Don't ruin that for me."

"You think needing to suck my cock before a performance because it's covered in mint-flavored lube constitutes as functioning, Rabbit?" His touch turned delicate, fingers trailing back to stroke the short hairs at the base of his skull. "I have a friend who likes to take people apart because he finds it interesting, and even he functions better than you do."

"Why do you think that?"

"He's in control of himself, always," Baikal said. "Berga doesn't let anything take control of him, not even his own emotions."

"It sounds like he just doesn't have any," Rabbit drawled. He should be more caught up on the part about taking people apart, but he wasn't. It wasn't like the Brumal and what they potentially did in the shadows was any sort of new commodity to him.

"You'll change your mind when the two of you meet."

He stiffened. "I don't want to meet any of your friends, Void. This is already close enough for me. I don't—"

"You're mine," he cut him off. "When I'm king, you'll bow before me, same as everyone else, and then I'll drag you up before the entire Brumal and declare you my Possessio. The whole planet will know better than to mess with you, including your mother."

A spark flickered to life inside of him, and damn it, Rabbit thought it might be hope.

He couldn't afford hope.

The last time he had...

"And if I don't want to be known as your possession?" Rabbit may not be Brumal, but that

didn't mean he didn't understand how their hierarchy worked. The Dominus ruled, and the Possessio was whomever they decided to spend their life with.

"You'll be my husband, too," Baikal revealed, "don't worry. I was going to wait to bring it up. I knew hearing it would freak you out."

"It has," he confirmed. Yesterday he'd been trying to wrap his head around staying with Void long enough to have intercourse. Now he was being told in no uncertain terms that when he'd said forever, Void had meant it in every sense of the word.

"You'll adjust."

"You're so certain," Rabbit said. "You've been so sure of yourself since the beginning. Is that because you grew up always getting what you want without having to lift a finger? People just bow and cower and hand you whatever you want, isn't that right?"

"It's not wrong."

"I don't want to marry you." He blindly grabbed at Baikal's wrist, going for the hand still at the back of his head. "I don't want the title Possessio. We aren't even dating!"

"Do you want to date first?" Baikal sounded like he actually hadn't considered that before. "Would that make the transition easier for you? Or is it the title itself after all? If I were Kelevra, I could give you Royal Consort, but I'm not Imperial and the Brumal doesn't recognize consort as an official designation. What's wrong with being called my possession anyway?"

"I'm not a thing," Rabbit stated.

"You're paying too much attention to the wrong part, little bunny."

"Oh?" He scowled. "Enlighten me."

Baikal brought his mouth to his a second time, pressing his lips lightly against Rabbit's. When that caused Rabbit to gasp, he slipped his tongue inside, lapping at the roof of his mouth before sucking on his bottom lip. He nipped him just before pulling away.

"The important part of that sentence," Baikal whispered, "is the word *my*. To be frank, I don't care if it's Possessio, boyfriend, lover, or husband that you're called. If you'd prefer I only use the first amongst the Brumal, I can do that for you. When we're alone, you don't ever have to hear the word if you so wish. There's really only one thing I'm unwilling to budge on, tiny obsession, and that is the classification *mine*."

"Although," he shook Rabbit's hold off his wrist and then reached down to palm his hip, "since you were so open to the idea of marrying Arlet after graduation, I'll admit, I might take offense if you refuse me when I ask the same of you."

Rabbit swallowed the sudden lump in his throat.

"Trying to come up with another escape plan, little bunny?" he asked darkly, but Rabbit gave a small shake of his head.

"Trying to figure out what the actual hell is wrong with me."

"Because?"

"Because somehow part of that sounded somewhat romantic even though logically I understand it was anything but," he disclosed, unable to keep it to himself now that his heart rate was increasing again, this time less to do with the darkness and more to do with the man currently sealing his front over his, chest to chest.

Baikal made a pleased noise, clearly liking that comment, and wrapped both arms around Rabbit's waist to pull him close and keep him there. "The proposal?"

Rabbit snorted. "No, that was a terrible marriage proposal, if you can even call it one. The other thing. The part about how you'll avoid calling me Possessio if I really don't like it—which I

don't, and yes, it is because I don't like the idea of being a possession. Not just yours. In general. To clarify."

He'd spent his entire life feeling like nothing but an object to his mother. The last thing he wanted was for that to be his future, for him to constantly doubt that he was seen as a living, breathing being.

After everything that Baikal had already put him through, it made no sense that Rabbit wanted to be seen as something more by the Brumal Prince, and yet...If he was going to be trapped for now, the least the other guy could do was help him not feel so horrible about himself.

"I have self-worth," he said a bit more resolutely. "You're not the only one who grew up praised for their brilliance and told they could have the world on a silver platter if they wanted."

"Mine was diamond studded," Baikal teased, "but I get it. If your fear is I don't recognize your value, you're mistaken, little bunny. I know it all too well. I'm about to be a king, Rabbit. I deserve only the best, and you, you're the best of the best."

"I'm damaged goods," he reminded. "Case in point, can't you feel my heart beating a mile a minute? I'm a grown man who's afraid of the dark."

"So much for that self-worth huh?" Baikal brought his mouth to the curve of Rabbit's ear. "Are you sure your heart's not pounding for other reasons? Like, the fact I'm standing so close to you? Think about it. You stopped hyperventilating the second you heard my voice and realized I was here with you. Subconsciously you know I'd never let anything bad happen. I'll protect you, little bunny." He nipped at his ear lobe. "Just obey."

"You mentioned you were here for a reason." Rabbit cleared his throat. He wasn't about to fall into that trap and admit he'd noticed how his body had calmed with Baikal near. Especially not after all that heavy talk about things like marriage.

Sure, he'd been willing to tie his hand to a random girl his mother had selected, but that'd been different. Somehow.

"Turn the lights back on," he demanded, only to feel the brush of Baikal's hair across his cheek as the other man leaned back. For a second he removed all touch and left Rabbit standing there on his own, and just like that, his blood started to thrum. "Void?"

"I'm here," Baikal replied from less than a foot away. "I'm just getting the basket."

"What basket?"

"The one with your lunch in it."

"My..." He frowned. "What?"

Baikal returned and then something chilled pressed against the seam of Rabbit's lips. "Open."

He hesitated but not seeing a reason to fight, tentatively opened, humming when something sweet settled on his tongue. When he began to chew, the flavor of the oj berry got stronger, the aftertaste a little sour.

"How did you know I like these?" he asked after swallowing, dutifully allowing another berry to be pushed into his mouth.

"It's the only thing you don't just pick at and move around on your lunch tray," Baikal stated dryly. "We need to work on that bad habit, by the way. I won't have you starved or passing out on me from lack of energy."

Rabbit stuck out his tongue.

"I saw that."

He blinked. "...How?"

"I made these shadows," Baikal said. "Of course I can see through them."

“Stupid Shout abilities,” he mumbled, then chomped down a little harder on the next morsel that slipped past his lips. He ended up wrapping those lips around the end of Baikal’s finger in the process, pulling back instantly.

“My power just means I’m perfect for you,” Baikal disagreed. “Who better to help you overcome your fear than someone who can manipulate the thing you’re so afraid of?”

“Don’t recall asking anyone to do that.” Rabbit continued to eat despite his haughty tone.

“Considering you can’t even be bothered to feed yourself, that’s not surprising. Did you even eat anything today?”

He glanced away.

“That’s what I thought. Here,” something plastic poked at his bottom lip, “it’s a straw. Drink.”

Rabbit took a sip, eyes narrowing at the chocolate flavor.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Baikal said. “I noticed what you like to drink. Your obsession with chocolate and mint knows no bounds.”

“Clearly,” he stated sarcastically.

“Thinking about that time you blew me?” Baikal was no doubt grinning.

“You’re the one who brought it up first!”

“Careful, you’re tempting me to give up on my plan and make you blow me again after all.”

It was a good thing he couldn’t see because Rabbit would have definitely dropped his gaze to the Brumal Prince’s pants if he could. Already he was wondering if the other guy was turned on...

“Next time you try to tell me you’re not interested, I hope you remember this moment, Rabbit,” Baikal said then. “You’re getting hard for me.”

“Shut up.”

“There’s a sandwich too.” The sound of parchment paper crinkling filled the space between them. “Do you want me to feed this to you as well?”

“I can manage.” Rabbit needed him to leave before he gave in to the sudden lust. It was embarrassing enough that his body was betraying him like this already. “You can leave it on the table.”

“You’ll eat it?”

He opened his mouth to tell Void he wasn’t a child but thought better of it. “Yes.”

“Rabbit.”

“I will.”

“Good. Because, little bunny,” his mouth returned to his ear, voice lowering suggestively, “I have plans for you later, ones that are going to require you to have a lot of energy.”

“No.”

“Wasn’t asking.” He moved away.

“Void?”

“I’ll see you at home.” The door to the practice room opened and clicked shut again, but the lights didn’t immediately come back on.

Just as Rabbit was beginning to sweat, he noticed the room lightening, the thick tendrils of shadow slowly dissipating little by little. After a moment he could make out the location of the floating light orb at the center of the ceiling, and the window at his back started to brighten as well.

He pressed at the spot on his chest over his heart and willed himself to calm down. When he opened his eyes again, the room had returned to normal, the only trace that Baikal had disrupted his personal space at all being the wrapped sandwich set on the small table beside Rabbit.

And if Rabbit smiled at it?

It was only because he was hungry.

Chapter 22:

He stayed at school longer than he would typically, which was saying a lot considering on more than one occasion he felt like he'd blink and suddenly it'd be well past nightfall. The sky was dark when he stepped out of the music building, his instrument case in his right hand, bag strap slung over his left shoulder. For a moment, Rabbit stood there staring up at the stars, taking in the cool breeze.

The night wasn't so scary when he was on campus, since the place was lit up all over. He'd never had to worry about his fear taking hold, so long as he didn't stray too far from the cement paths or any of the buildings.

A single raindrop plopped onto his nose and he scrunched it, brushing it off with the back of his hand. Others soon followed until he was being rained on and struggling to shift his bag to his front to grab the umbrella he'd stashed somewhere in the middle pocket.

"How is it that you grew up here and yet you still stepped outside unprepared?" Baikal called out a second before he appeared from beneath a massive humdrum tree. He was carrying a large black umbrella and he took his time as he made his way over to Rabbit, smirking when Rabbit glared at him from beneath wet bangs.

"Could you walk any slower?" he asked, just as Baikal reached him and positioned the umbrella over them both.

"Oh, so now you want my help, is that it?" Baikal clucked his tongue. "Feeling kind of used, little bunny."

"Shitty feeling, huh."

His eyes narrowed. "I've never used you, Rabbit. And I don't intend to start."

"We'll agree to disagree." He glanced down the sidewalk, noting there were no other students around. "Why are you here?"

"I told you to hurry home and you didn't," Baikal said.

"So you what, came to fetch me yourself?" He rolled his eyes. "Don't be so dramatic."

"Are you forgetting how you were almost kidnapped two days ago?"

Actually...yeah, he sort of had forgotten. Between that and everything going on with Void, honestly? It didn't seem like that big of a deal. The thing with the Brumal Prince was proving to last a hell of a lot longer, after all.

"Come on." Baikal motioned with his chin to the left, but Rabbit shook his head.

"I parked in the opposite lot." His car had been left here since he'd been knocked out before reaching it, and though he'd checked up on it when he'd arrived on campus, it still made him uncomfortable to leave it there another night. He had a scan chip on the dash for the campus police to check and be sure he was a student, but they still frowned on abandoned vehicles.

"I moved your car already." Baikal kept walking, forcing Rabbit to rush to catch up and avoid getting wet.

"What do you mean you—" He swore. "You stole my keys earlier, didn't you?"

"Considering you only just noticed, I'd say it wasn't that big a loss."

Had Void planned on picking him up all this time then? Was the fact he'd been late just an excuse? Rabbit frowned over at him as they slowly made their way toward the south parking lot. Void wasn't the type to beat around the bush, so why was he bothering now?

“What?” Baikal glanced at him, his expression enigmatic. He was still dressed in his school uniform, the Vail crest pinned over his left pec. Typically it was worn on a bag of some sort, but he didn’t have anything with him.

“I’m surprised you bother following school policy,” he noted.

The corner of Baikal’s lips turned up. “I only break the rules if I’ll get something out of it. I’m not a complete delinquent.”

“Just a Brumal brat.” Rabbit pretended to find interest in a particularly odd shaped leaf floating in a puddle they were approaching then, ignoring the warning look Void sent him. “So,” he broke the silence a moment later, just as the parking lot came into view, “is this how it’s going to be from now on? You walk me to my car and drive me home and we act like we’re some couple?”

“We aren’t acting,” he corrected, “and I’ll only hover like this until I’m certain the man who attacked you has been dealt with and is no longer a threat. Believe it or not, Rabbit, I don’t want to control you. I like who you are, and I’m not in the market for a pet. My life is too hectic to raise another living creature.”

Rabbit scoffed. “Is that your way of telling me to get my own damn lunch from now on? I didn’t ask you to bring me anything, Void.”

“Why does every little thing have to turn into a fight with you?” He pinched the bridge of his nose, and that’s when Rabbit realized he wasn’t wearing his glasses. Noticing his attention, Baikal rolled his eyes. “Like I’d fall for that again. I switched to the contact version. Insight 5.”

“There’s a contact version?” Rabbit hadn’t been aware.

“Of course there is.”

“Then why did you bother with the glasses?”

“Because I look good in them, obviously.”

“Obviously,” he drawled, coming to a stop in front of his car. He held out his hand palm up, but Void merely chuckled and then pulled the keys from his front pocket.

Baikal rounded the hovercar, leaving Rabbit once again standing in the rain.

“Hey!” He lifted the instrument case over his head, resting the dirtiest look he could manage on the Brumal Prince as the other man took his time unlocking the doors. As soon Rabbit heard the click, he yanked open the passenger side, sliding in and tossing his bags into the back, still glaring at Void as he settled into the driver’s seat. “This is my car.”

“So it is,” Baikal hummed, waving the scanner on the end of the key over the motion panel at the center. The engine came to life, front lights flashing and cutting through the thick sheet of rain now pouring down outside.

“You could at least ask, you know?” Rabbit moved his arms so the automatic seat belt could snap into place over his waist.

“Could I have?” Void did the same and then started to drive them out of the lot.

“Yes!”

“Would you have let me?”

Rabbit clenched his jaw.

“That’s what I thought.” Baikal winked at him and pulled them out onto the street, heading toward Rabbit’s house.

“What was with that whole spiel about not wanting to control me?”

“I don’t,” he said. “And I wouldn’t have to if you’d just embrace me.”

“Pretty sure the word you’re looking for is actually obey.”

“Pretty sure I’ve made that clear enough times I shouldn’t have to repeat myself,” Baikal

stated dryly. “But you so love pushing me, don’t you, little rabbit? Are you hoping for a bigger payoff later, perhaps? Asking for punishment before we’ve even made it into the driveway?”

Rabbit bristled. “Absolutely not.”

“I brought you lunch,” Baikal said, “waited for you, am bringing you home...of course I’m expecting something in return.”

He was still recovering from last night. Sure, thanks to the sun cream there was almost no discomfort now, but that didn’t mean he was looking forward to another round!

...Right?

Rabbit squirmed in his leather seat. Sex had never been an interest of his before, since he’d been too occupied with his lessons, and later, getting over his stage fright enough he could keep it hidden from his mother and her spy, Professor Ludo. It’d been scary and the pain when Void had first entered him had been *a lot*, and yet...

Baikal placed a hand on Rabbit’s thigh and he jumped. “Relax, little bunny, I promise to go easy on you this time. Plus, I packed the sun cream.”

He wanted to point out that there’d be no need for the cream if Void did, in fact, intend to “go easy”, but then they arrived at his house and his nerves kicked into overdrive as the censor had the metal gate swinging open for them.

The hovercar traveled down the long path and circled to the parking area slightly to the back. Baikal shut it off and then pocketed the key. He tossed Rabbit the folded umbrella and then reached into the back to grab his items himself, carrying them out of the car without a second glance.

Rabbit exited the vehicle and struggled with the umbrella for a second, finally getting it to open with a huff. Then he ran over and up the steps leading to the side entrance, which was supposed to have a bio-scanner on it. He wasn’t too surprised to find that Baikal had bypassed that already and was in the process of walking through the narrow hall that opened into the living area.

“How did you do it the first time?” Rabbit asked, catching up with him. They were in the living room, the white and powder blue details adding a calm, relaxed feeling to the space that Rabbit had never actually experienced. The tension whenever his mom was around was impossible to miss, even with snow-white couches and fuzzy blue throw pillows. “When you broke in that night?”

“I hacked in using the imprint scan I did of you with the Insight glasses. You haven’t bothered checking the side of your security system, have you?”

Rabbit frowned and then went back the way they’d come, moving up to the control panel on the inside next to the door. Void Electronic Prime was written in big bold lettering on the side of the white plastic.

He swore and heard Baikal laugh from the other room.

Void wasn’t in the living room when he returned, and Rabbit leaned in toward the kitchen and listened but couldn’t make any noises out. The layout of the main floor had the living area in the center, the kitchen to the far right, and the foyer and stairs to the far left.

Something made a snapping sound and he glanced up, finding Baikal leaning over the banister that wrapped around the entire second level.

“Coming, little bunny?” Baikal smirked and then without waiting for a response, pushed off the railing and disappeared through the doorway leading into Rabbit’s room.

He went after him without thinking, not liking the idea of the Brumal Prince alone in his personal space. But by the time he made it up the stairs, down the hall, and entered himself, he was slightly out of breath and had to pause to breathe.

Which is when he noticed all the subtle changes that hadn’t been there when he’d left for

school a couple of days ago.

The door to his walk-in closet was wide open—he always left it shut—and there was a holo-tablet on the right end table next to the bed that didn't belong to him. An unzipped duffle was at the foot of the bed, but aside from a single t-shirt, it was empty. Probably because the other items had already been removed and rehomed.

Here. In Rabbit's room.

"What the hell." He picked up the glass orb he'd seen at Baikal's last night, setting back down to glare accusatorily at Void when he stepped from the attached bathroom. "What did you do?"

"Moved in," Baikal said plainly. "Like I told you I was going to do."

"This is ridiculous." He rubbed at his temple. "You can't just insert yourself into someone else's life like this."

"Sure I can." He flicked Rabbit's nose as he passed, undoing the strap of his multi-slate and setting in next to the holo-tablet. "I'm taking this side of the bed. Cool?"

"Literally no."

Baikal tipped his head contemplatively. "Do you sleep on this side? I figured you'd want to be furthest from the door. People with trouble sleeping in the dark tend not to feel safe enough to sleep close to the only entrance in case of an intruder."

"You *are* the intruder!"

"You're going to start to piss me off, little bunny," Baikal warned then, fingers deftly starting down the line of buttons on his shirt, slipping them loose one by one. "It's already late and I'm irritated you kept me waiting for so long. Don't push your luck."

"You know you make no sense, right?" Rabbit countered. "You say you don't want to control me, and then you move into my house without permission. You say you like who I am as a person, and then you tell me not to speak if you don't like what I have to—"

"I didn't order you to be quiet," Void corrected, pulling off his shirt and draping it over the edge of the bed as he advanced toward him. "I merely suggested you pick and choose your words more carefully. That's all."

"Oh, is it?"

"Yes." While maintaining eye contact, he reached for the button on his jeans next, and then the zipper.

"Stop it." Rabbit glanced away, hating how his cheeks started to warm.

"Stop what?" Baikal took another step closer, so the heat of his body wafted toward Rabbit invitingly.

Rabbit had already guessed that the two of them would be sharing a room, and, if he was being completely honest, at least with himself, he wasn't actually all that upset about it. When was the last time there'd been another soul in here aside from him? His mother hadn't been in over six months, and while he'd choose loneliness over her company any day, that didn't change the fact that he was in fact a bit lonely.

Up until last year, he'd at least had—

He cut that thought short.

But it was worth recalling, at least in part. In the rush of it all, he'd almost forgotten that his mother was aware of his and Void's relationship. He'd yet to hear from her only because the dozen or so voice memos she'd sent had been left sitting, but there was no way she was planning on letting this slide.

She could never stand back and allow anyone to get too close to Rabbit for fear they would

distract him from his goal—aka, her goal. Prodigies didn't have time for friendships or romantic entanglements according to December Trace, something that must have slipped her mind when she'd tried hoisting him off on the Zamir family.

Should he call her? Playing offense may be the safest way to ensure both he and Void were left alone by her in the long run. If she chose to get involved there was no telling what she'd do, or how she'd approach someone of Void's stature.

"Hey." Baikal's hand was suddenly on his nape, forcing him to turn back and look at him. "What was that?"

Rabbit feigned indifference. "What?"

"You get this look on your face sometimes..."

"How would I know?" He shoved Void's hand off of him and stepped back. "I can't see my own expression. Whatever. I'm going to get ready for bed."

"What do you think I'm in the process of doing?" Baikal stopped him, grabbing onto his wrist to lead him into the bathroom. He shut the door behind them, and then made his way over to the glass shower stall, flicking the spray on and testing it before turning back. When he saw that Rabbit hadn't moved an inch from where he'd left him he quirked a brow. "Are you planning on getting in fully clothed?"

"Is that an option?" Rabbit asked before he could help it. Then sighed. "I don't want to shower with you, Void. We can take turns."

Baikal stared him down silently.

"Come on," he crossed his arms, "it's not like you have to worry about me making a run for it. This is my house, remember? I don't have anywhere else to go."

"Even if you did," Baikal promised darkly, "I'd find you."

"Yeah, yeah," he shook his head and made light of it to mask the way that comment had his stomach twisting into tight knots—and not necessarily in a bad way like they should. "I get it. I'm yours, blah, blah, blah."

Baikal's spine stiffened and his shoulders went tense. In less time than it took to blink, his entire demeanor changed, hardening.

Rabbit actually retreated a full step before those sharp eyes cut through him and gave him pause. He stilled, freezing up under all that intense interest.

Gone was any of the playfulness that had been there, the Void standing before him now the one who bore his last name like a title. There'd been more than one occasion where he'd appeared like this in front of Rabbit, but all day he'd taken on a softer edge, almost like he'd been attempting to coax Rabbit to let his guard down around him.

And like an idiot, that's exactly what he'd done.

After losing his virginity to the other man last night, Rabbit had foolishly assumed the worst had come and gone, and yet the way Baikal was gazing at him now, as though preparing to eat him alive...He got the distinct sense he'd been very wrong about that assumption.

"Say it again," Baikal's voice was low and rumble, the order delivered with no room for argument or resistance.

Still a bit—okay, a lot—freaked out, Rabbit didn't even bother trying. "Which part?"

"Don't fuck with me right now, tiny obsession."

"I said I'm yours," he blurted, knowing that was exactly what the Brumal Prince wanted him to repeat.

Sure enough, Baikal's eyes slid closed and he made a pleased sound in the back of his throat.

When he opened them on Rabbit again, they appeared to be brighter somehow, the teal almost glowing in the dim bathroom.

Wait.

Rabbit glanced around and realized that at some point, coils of smoke had snaked their way around the dozen light orbs he had floating on the sides of the ceiling. The room was still lit enough they could see everything, but the ambiance changed, the setting taking on a more mysterious and romantic feel.

Which Rabbit so wasn't in the mood for.

He took another backward step but it was a mistake.

Baikal was upon him in a flash, slamming him against the closed bathroom door, hard enough to have air whooshing out of Rabbit's lungs. One hand went to his hip bruisingly, the other tangling into his hair and yanking on those silver strands to force Rabbit's head back.

He cried out but the sound was instantly swallowed by Baikal's mouth, the kiss demanding and raw right from the jump. Void plundered, licking and sucking on everything he could, adding nips of various level of strength throughout. And Rabbit had no other option but to stand there and take it, to be consumed by the other man.

There was something thrilling about being kissed like this, like Baikal had forgotten how to breathe and was struggling to find oxygen buried in Rabbit's mouth instead. Like the whole world might come to a complete end if they slowed or lost traction, this heightened, poised moment building and building around them until it was close to bursting.

Rabbit's only real experiences with kisses like this were from Void, but he didn't think it had anything to do with lack of knowledge on his part. What had the Brumal Prince told him that first night in the theater?

His body wasn't acting this way because it was his first time. It was reacting to Baikal specifically.

He hadn't wanted to believe it then, but little by little his resolve had been chipped through, and now, standing in his bathroom, trapped between the firm body of the Brumal Prince and the hard wooden door, Rabbit gave in to that truth.

So what if he was attracted to Baikal Void? Everyone and their grandmother was. And so what if he enjoyed making out with him and being tossed around like this? There was no shame in liking things rough in the bedroom. His leaning toward that type of proclivity probably did have something to do with the fact that all his sexual encounters had been of this particular flavor though.

"You did it on purpose, didn't you?" He pulled back and gasped, settling a hand over Baikal's heart when the other man moved in to recapture his mouth.

Amazingly enough, Void actually paused.

"You like it rough," Rabbit said, "and you wanted to make sure I'd end up liking it that way as well. That's why you handled me the way you did. Why you snuck into my house and forced me to take that first plug. Why you made me take the second one without warning."

"I was getting you ready for me, little bunny," Void explained, stroking a hand through Rabbit's hair almost tenderly despite the way his eyes were still lit up like tiny infernos that clearly wanted to set Rabbit ablaze. "I tried not to hurt you as best I could."

"Liar."

"All right. I tried. I could have tried harder."

"*Harder* definitely isn't something I think you struggle with, actually." Rabbit cursed himself in his head as soon as he said it.

Baikal's lips turned up in a sneaky smile, and he settled more of his weight against Rabbit, pinning him to the door with his arms up at either side of his head. His gaze searched his for a lengthy moment and then he asked in sultry tone, "Did it work?"

Rabbit gulped, not even bothering to pretend he didn't understand.

"I wasn't sure it'd work," he continued when he didn't get a response. "Not everyone can handle me. Not everyone wants to."

"I don't want to."

He snorted. "Now who's the liar?"

Rabbit dropped his gaze, but it was a mistake, since all that did was leave him staring at Baikal's perfectly formed mouth. Which had him instantly thinking about all of the things the Brumal Prince was capable of doing with said mouth...A needy sound akin to a whine slipped out of him and his eyes widened in shock.

Baikal laughed. "Some things are just natural instinct. Some people want soft, and affectionate. If that ended up being to your liking, I would have delivered."

Rabbit gave him a knowing look.

"I would have," he insisted. "Sometimes."

"Uh huh."

"I can compromise."

"Sure." Rabbit was enjoying himself too much. He realized it, but he didn't stop himself or try to get away and end this.

He didn't want to.

"What are you thinking about?" Void asked, and this time Rabbit answered honestly.

"I'm trying to remember when the last time I felt this relaxed was."

"Interesting word choice." He leaned back enough to glance down between them, pointedly motioning toward where Rabbit's dick was straining to get free from the confines of his pants.

"I want you," Rabbit stated matter-of-factly, a tiny thrill of pride skating through him when it became apparent he'd caught Void off guard with that admission. "I like the way you make me focus on nothing else but the things you can make me feel. I like the way you look at me like I'm important to you."

"You are."

"No," he shook his head. "You don't get it. All my life I've been the prodigy. The son of the great December Trace. Even my own mother doesn't see me for who I am. Do you know the last time she reminded me to eat something?" Rabbit scoffed and fought back tears. "I went three days once without food because she kept me locked in the practice room, in the dark. She wouldn't let me leave until I produced another color on the beiska."

Anyone else would have given Rabbit platitudes and told him how horrible that was, but Baikal merely held his gaze and asked, "Did you?"

Rabbit licked his lips. "I passed out before I even came close. She didn't even realize."

"Were you brought to the hospital?"

"Yeah."

"By who?"

"...Someone else."

"Another secret, little bunny?"

Rabbit closed his eyes. "Can't you just be satisfied that I'm trying?"

"Why do you play the right handed beiska?" he asked suddenly, clearly seizing the opportunity

now that Rabbit was being forthcoming. "You're left handed."

"She made me," he stated bitterly.

"Because?"

"Our first performance on stage together was some dumb parent child charity event. She's also left handed, but she wanted us to stand on the stand side by side and not look the same. Said it would look better if we played on opposite shoulders. I was young enough she was certain she could make me relearn."

Baikal reached up and started playing with a strand of Rabbit's hair, and it was strange, but Rabbit understood it was meant to be a comforting gesture. "How did she make you?"

"How else?" He snorted.

His gaze went dark. "She beat you."

"She'd tie me up and throw me in the closet sometimes," he admitted. "If I couldn't use one hand properly, I wouldn't be allowed to use either. It was meant as incentive."

"That bitch."

"I'm not disagreeing, even though she's my mother." Rabbit recalled the information bomb Baikal had dropped earlier and asked, "What about your dad? You two are close. Are you...okay?"

"You mean because he's dying?" Baikal seemed to be considering his words and then, "Let's not get into it right this second."

"Why? Why are you the only one allowed to ask the hard questions?"

"That's not it," he said. "I'm glad you're showing an interest, Rabbit, and I want to tell you. I will tell you. But..."

Rabbit searched his face. "It's like me with my memories, isn't it? Some things are too upsetting to just randomly bring up."

"Yeah."

That's why Baikal had understood whenever Rabbit had told him not to press that issue.

"Why are you trying?" Void asked him then. "What's changed? Don't tell me it's because I took your virginity. You aren't the type to cling because of something like that."

Baikal took his chin between two fingers, waiting until Rabbit looked at him once more. "What's really going on in that sensual little head of yours, bunny? Don't leave me in suspense."

Rabbit took a stuttering breath and just went for it. "You're the first person who's given me a choice." He chuckled humorlessly. "Even if the choices aren't really choices at all. Even if the end always leads back to you, at least you let me decide how I get there. You let me set the pace."

Baikal watched him closely. "You're making me sound far nobler than I am, Rabbit."

"Don't worry," he said. "I know what you are, Void. I'll never forget that. How could I when everywhere we go there'll be someone whispering devil? I'm not saying I've mistaken you for a good person. I'm saying even knowing that you aren't, you've still somehow managed to crawl under my skin."

"You're admitting all of this out of fear," Baikal concluded suddenly. "But it isn't fear of me."

"She won't like it," Rabbit told him. "She'll try to keep us apart. Even if I give in, even if that's my choice, she'll stop at nothing to make you stay away from me."

"I'm not afraid of your mother," he began, but Rabbit stopped him.

"You saw that video."

Baikal frowned. "That guy? Who was he?"

The jealousy was so intense it threatened to gouge out Rabbit's eyes, but he held his ground.

This was progress for him. Being able to talk about it, in any capacity. It was progress.

“Someone who tried to get close to me once,” Rabbit said quietly. “She wasn’t pleased.”

“He refused to stay away, that it?”

He nodded.

“I’m a Brumal Prince. It’ll take a lot more than a disgruntled mother to hurt me. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then—”

“I want a new deal,” Rabbit stated, the idea only just now coming to him. If he were smarter he’d wait and let it ruminate since he was already eighty percent certain he’d regret it come morning, but he wasn’t thinking clearly. Right now, with the dim lighting and the cloying scent of Baikal, combined with the heat of his body...Rabbit didn’t want to think clearly. He just wanted to act.

For once, he wanted to do what felt right to *him*.

Chapter 23:

“The old one wasn’t fair,” he continued when Baikal didn’t say anything. “I want a new one.”

“Why should I?” Void cocked his head. “I already have everything I want.”

“Not everything.” He should stop. Now. Before it was too late. “You said you wanted me to be yours. I assume you meant all of me.”

Baikal’s eyes narrowed, a calculative expression washing over his features. “I’m listening.”

“You mentioned freedom before,” Rabbit reminded. “Be free or be yours. You twisted things so I had to choose the latter. Twist things again.”

“I won’t let you go,” he warned.

“I’m not asking you to. I’m done trying to convince you we’re not good together. I’m done trying to convince myself I don’t enjoy the push and pull between us. I even like this,” he rested his hands on Baikal’s hips and pulled him closer, “How you pin me down and make me confront my own feelings.”

“This speech of yours better be heading in a direction where you surrender yourself to me in full, little bunny, or so help me, I will make you pay for stringing me along. And that, you will not like.”

“Be free or be yours,” Rabbit repeated. “Change it. Make it be free *and* be yours, and I’ll accept.”

Baikal stared as though trying to see through him and find the trap. “In return?”

“You do everything you can to follow through on the first part. I want to be free, Baikal. I’m tired of struggling.”

He seemed pleased when Rabbit called him by name, but then, “You want to quit playing the beiska.”

“I don’t know.” He sighed. “Does that disappoint you?” It certainly sounded like it had.

“You’ll play for me,” Baikal ended up ordering. “Whenever I want. If I ask, you’ll play. Understood?”

It wasn’t even that he minded, but Rabbit hesitated to make it seem like he wasn’t a pushover. Instead of getting the reaction he anticipated however, aka another pushy threat from Baikal, the other man looked a bit...desperate.

“You wanted to know how I’m handling my father’s impending end?” he asked. “Not well. Not well at all in fact. You came along at just the right time, and maybe it isn’t healthy for me or fair for you, but it is what it is. I don’t just want you, Rabbit. I need you, and whether you want to believe it or not, your music is a big part of who you are.”

“You don’t want to lose it,” he guessed, only for Void to correct him.

“I don’t want you to.”

Rabbit wasn’t sure how to respond. On the one hand, Baikal was right, but on the other, so much of music and his mother were tangled into one mess. He wanted to undo the knots. Wanted the chance to figure out how much of that love was actually his and how much was simply the little boy inside of him, still desperate to earn his mother’s affection.

But he wouldn’t be able to solve that problem right now.

“Just for you,” he conceded, and the Brumal Prince nodded right away.

“I won’t make you do it in front of an audience. So long as I can hear you, that’s enough.”

“Why?” Rabbit recalled their earlier conversation. “You said you’d been watching me for a year? Why?”

“My father,” Baikal told him. “A few weeks after I found out he was dying, I saw you.”

Rabbit tried not to feel hurt by that, but he wasn’t fast enough to keep it from his face.

“Hey,” Baikal cupped his cheek. “It’s not what you think. Yes, listening to you play calms me, but it isn’t the music itself, Rabbit. It’s you. It’s the way you open yourself up to your own emotions whenever you’re holding the beiska. The way you did that night when you came while a hundred strangers watched you from below.”

“I’m still pissed about that, by the way,” he stated, because it would go down as one of the most mortifying experiences of his life.

And the most invigorating.

In many ways, that night had been a catalyst for Rabbit. Up until that point, he’d only experienced life in snapshots from afar, only feeling when he was up on stage playing the beiska. He’d resigned himself to his fate and had stopped trying to look for a way out.

Until Baikal had stormed into his orbit and forced him to feel things he hadn’t known were possible.

“You unlocked a new color,” Baikal reminded, smiling. “It’s the same color as my eyes.”

“I’d really hoped you hadn’t noticed that,” he groaned.

Baikal grinned and then grew serious. “If you want to quit, you quit. If it’s a matter of not knowing what you’ll do next, there’s no need to worry about that. I have more than enough money and influence to keep you content in the interim. You can take all the time that you need to figure out your next step, Rabbit, and when you do, I’ll help you in any way I can. But.”

“But?” He held his breath.

Money wouldn’t be an issue for a while, since he’d secretly opened up a bank account his mother wasn’t aware of at the beginning of college. He would eventually run out, however, and his mother would cut him off if he quit music, so there’d be no financial support for him to fall back on. A year ago when he’d considered taking control of his own life for the first, and last, time, that had been the major factor holding him back.

Void was one of the richest people on the entire planet though, and for some reason he still couldn’t quite understand, he’d taken an interest in Rabbit. A strong enough one that he was even suggesting things like marriage.

Still, nothing ever came without a price.

“I’m about to become the Dominus of the Vitality Brumal,” Baikal said. “That means my home is here, on this planet, and it always will be.”

“You want me to swear I won’t choose a career that would have me leaving,” he caught on. “Only, you do realize that if I stick with music, being a professional musician will entail traveling?” It’d sounded like Baikal was against him quitting before and now Rabbit was confused.

“At the start of this,” he explained, “I was the Brumal Prince and you were the prodigy. We had set goals. I wouldn’t have interfered with yours, not if it was a lifelong dream. If that’s not the case? If you don’t want that life? All I’m asking is you consider me in your plans. Find something to do *here*, on planet. By my side.”

“Do you realize how unfair you sound?” Rabbit couldn’t help but point out. “You want me to consider you and your feelings? When have you ever done the same for me?”

“All the time,” Baikal asserted. “Always. If I hadn’t, I would have come for you that very night and woken you with my cock buried deep inside of you.”

He scowled. "Like a beast."

"I'm not above acting like a monster, Rabbit," he said. "I've done monstrous things in the past, and I'll do worse things in the future. But isn't that what you need? Isn't that why you're suddenly changing your tune, offering yourself up to me like some virgin sacrifice?"

He glared.

"Sorry, ex-virgin now," Baikal corrected. "If December Trace is really as awful as you claim—and I believe you, little bunny, no need to scold me for suggesting otherwise—it'll take much more than power and influence to unchain her shackles."

"A monster won't suffice," Rabbit agreed. "I need a devil." He inhaled. "I need you."

"And I need you." Baikal brushed his knuckles over the rise of Rabbit's cheekbone. "You'll obey."

He swallowed the urge to argue and gave a single curt nod of his head instead.

"If you decide you want to continue being a professional musician, I'll allow it. But," his gaze hardened, "you can only take jobs when I'm available to travel with you."

Rabbit frowned. "How often will that be?"

"In the beginning? Not often. After half a year or so, once I've settled into the position and established myself, it'll be different. I have a strong satellite. They're loyal and intelligent. I can trust them to keep things running while I'm away."

"You'd really do that?" Rabbit had heard about Baikal's father traveling off planet now and again for business, but it hadn't seemed that frequently.

"If you're mine?" Baikal nodded. "I can do that for you."

"Thought I was already yours?" he almost didn't recognize the flirty edge to his own voice, but Rabbit didn't fight it.

Baikal grinned. "We're in the middle of negotiations, little bunny. I'm trying to ease you into the idea. If you choose to quit and want to do something else, that's fine too. What you do for the rest of your life is your decision. I leave that entirely to you. Who you spend the rest of your life with, however...Make no mistake, Rabbit, the only man who will ever be at your side from here until the day you breathe your last breath will be me. If you allow anyone else to so much as touch you—"

"You're the only person I've ever actually wanted to touch me," Rabbit admitted. "That should make you happy enough to quell whatever jealousy you've just been experiencing for the made up phantom future lover I won't have any interest in anyway. Feeling this level of sexual attraction to someone was another first for me, and you took that as well."

"And I'll have them all from here on out. All your firsts," Baikal stated, the possessiveness in his tone impossible to miss. Instead of stroking his ego with that reveal, it seemed like Rabbit had merely spurred his dominating side on. "You'll marry me."

"I—"

He cut him a warning look. "You promised to obey. So obey. You *will* marry me. Say it."

"Why is that important?"

"Because I'll have all of you in every possible way I can. Submit, Rabbit."

"Or what?" He felt the first flare of anger in a while. "You'll leave me to deal with my mother on my own? And when she comes after you? What then?"

Baikal straightened. "Are you worried about me, or about her? If she tries for the company, she'll be dealt with by the Brumal. They're one and the same. You know that. Are you making this deal not because you want freedom as you claim, but out of loyalty toward your mother? Do you think I would hurt her?"

“Void,” his voice turned steely, “I’m going to say this once, and only once because it honestly sickens me to do so and it makes me feel like scum. I couldn’t care less what you or anyone else does to that woman.”

He cocked his head. “Then...are you asking me to kill her?”

“What?!” Rabbit gaped at him. “Good Light, no! I’m not saying I actively want her hurt, just that whether or not her own actions get her in trouble is her problem, not mine. I don’t want you to kill anyone.”

“That better not be one of your terms, little bunny, because I can’t agree to that.”

He blinked, but it was obvious that Baikal wasn’t joking.

“You won’t have to see it if you don’t want,” Void quickly added, coming back to hug him close once more, as though trying to soothe him with his touch.

It was working ,damn it.

“You won’t have to be involved in anything Brumal. Like I said, your future is yours to decide.”

“So long as it’s with you.”

“Exactly.” He smiled at him. “Give yourself to me, little bunny, and I’ll make all your dreams come true.”

Before, picturing life after graduation was him being rushed from planet to planet by a manager selected by his mother. One who kept him on her leash from afar. He’d marry who she chose, attend the parties that she told him to go to. He’d play the part he’d been playing all his life.

Her puppet on her strings.

Baikal was offering a different possibility, one which may still include strings of sorts, but one which also allowed him to make his own choices. He could decide what to do with his time.

“What about friends?” he asked, hating that he sounded small but unable to lift his voice any higher. He also couldn’t meet Void’s gaze head on, staring instead at his navel, counting the rise and fall of his abs as he waited.

“Friends?” Baikal was clearly confused. “What about them?”

“Can I...” He exhaled and forced it out. “Can I have them?”

The silence was deafening.

Rabbit eventually glanced up, unable to stand it any longer.

Baikal was frowning at him again, but this time there was something else mixed in with the expression. It wasn’t pity, necessarily, but it was close. “Rabbit. Are you...Are you not allowed to have *friends*?”

He felt like a child.

“What about Sila?” Baikal insisted.

“We don’t hang out off campus,” Rabbit explained. “And Professor Ludo has never spotted us together. An acquaintance is all right, but if she thinks I’m letting someone become a distraction...”

“Professor Ludo? What does he have to do with anything?”

“He’s a spy for my mom. He fills her in on everything I do. I was worried he’d told her about you being in my dressing room that day before the recital, but when she didn’t bring it up I figured your reputation had scared him enough he’d kept it a secret. Now though...You told her yourself, so that’s that.”

“You mentioned she locked you in a dark room and forced you to play for three days without food,” Baikal brought up. “And the left handed thing...What else has she done to you? I knew you were afraid and there had to be a better reason than simply you being too much of a coward to say no

to your mother, but...Rabbit. Tell me. What has she done?"

Suddenly, Baikal was tugging at his clothes, tearing the black button up shirt off his body haphazardly, seemingly unaware of the buttons he sent flying in his wake or the way Rabbit protested. His hands roamed down his chest and then over his arms before he spun Rabbit around and did the same on his back.

"There aren't any marks," Rabbit told him solemnly when it hit him what Void was doing. He felt the moment the other man stilled behind him, but he didn't turn back around. "You've stared at me naked enough times to know that already. She wouldn't do anything that could leave evidence behind. It would jeopardize her career."

"Rabbit."

"I spent a lot of time in the dark," he said. "Sometimes she'd be there yelling instructions, other times she'd leave me alone for hours. It'd be recorded live and sent to her multi-slate so I knew she was always watching even if she wasn't physically there."

"That's why you're afraid of the dark."

"Partially," he admitted. "It wasn't this bad...before."

"Rabbit."

"Not yet." He wasn't ready to explain that night yet. "Ease me into this, remember? This is already a lot for me."

"You've never told anyone before?"

He hesitated, then said, "One person."

"The guy in the video."

He nodded.

"It wasn't that bad," Rabbit tried to say, but Baikal shut that down.

"It was abuse!"

"I had a roof over my head and—"

"You're so stressed and anxious all the time you barely remember to eat every other day!" Baikal swore. "I should kill her."

That finally had Rabbit spinning back around, grabbing onto Void's arm. "Don't."

"Let's leave," Baikal suggested. "Get out of this house. We can go back to mine and you never have to return here. You never have to see her again, Rabbit."

"This is my home," he said weakly.

"This isn't a home."

"Yours isn't one to me yet either."

Baikal flinched as though slapped, and for some reason that had Rabbit feeling guilty. He may be an asshole, but at least in this he was trying to be helpful for Rabbit's sake and nothing more.

"Can we figure this part out later?" Rabbit moved in closer, tentatively placing his arms around Baikal's neck. "We've already covered so much."

"We've barely scratched the surface," he disagreed. "I know there's still a lot you aren't telling me. She had to have done something more to get you to willingly agree to tie yourself to a mafia prince. I'm telling you I want forever, Rabbit."

"You've been pretty upfront about that for a while now," he said.

"This isn't funny."

"I'm not laughing." Though, Rabbit did find it a little ironic that their script had seemingly been reversed. "You really care that she hurt me, don't you?"

"Are you kidding me?" He reached up and held onto Rabbit's wrists. "I'm seething right

now.”

“Maybe we should take a cold shower instead of a hot one then. Speaking of,” he glanced over toward it pointedly, “we’ve wasted a lot of water.” He went to take a step toward the shower stall, but Baikal pulled him to a stop.

“I’ll have all of you,” Void swore.

“Okay,” Rabbit replied, pretending like he didn’t understand how much weight the prince’s statement truly carried.

“Say it, little bunny.”

He knew what he wanted. He wanted him to seal the deal. To openly agree once and for all so that in the future, there’d be no more chance for Rabbit to blame Baikal for anything else that transpired between them. From this moment on, he’d have signed over his fate.

It didn’t matter if Rabbit understood that, however.

For something like freedom? Rabbit could sell his soul to the devil any day.

“I’ll be yours,” he said.

“And I’ll be your freedom,” Baikal confirmed.

“Then,” he captured the short distance between them, “we have a deal.”

This time when Baikal leaned down and kissed him, Rabbit put up no resistance, and for the first time in forever, the bathroom and the house they were standing in finally felt a little bit more like a home.

Chapter 24:

“I’ll call you a cab,” Rabbit lifted his multi-slate and started doing just that. “They’ll bring you directly to the hospital. Take my account info, I have enough to cover—”

“I don’t want your money, Rabbit,” Oli stated, sounding slightly offended, but mostly just harried.

“Then,” even knowing he shouldn’t ask it, that he should insist Oli go immediately, Rabbit hesitated, “What do you want, Oli?”

“She’s a monster,” he told him. “She isn’t safe to be around. You need to leave before—”

There was a hard crashing sound and Oli instantly stopped talking. For a moment, Rabbit didn’t understand why or what was going on, frowning over at the older man.

Then—

“Rabbit.”

It wasn’t the typical voice from his dream, sounded deeper and vexed, causing Rabbit to cower away from it, pushing further into the pillow and mattress he was lying on. Consciousness tugged at him, the remnants of the dream slipping away, the distress it’d caused going along with it.

“Rabbit,” someone shook him roughly, and then a large hand settled itself around his throat, squeezing in warning.

His eyes popped open and he blinked through the darkness, waiting for his vision to adjust enough that he could make out the identity of the figure looming over him. The room wasn’t completely dark though, the glass orb Void had brought with him actually a nightlight of sorts. It cast stars and moons across the walls and ceiling, providing enough brightness Rabbit still felt safe with the main lights off, and Baikal could still sleep as well.

As soon as he recognized Baikal, his shoulders lost some of their tension.

Only for it to return full force when the Brumal Prince glared down at him and squeezed a little tighter.

“You with me, baby?” Baikal had never called him that before, and for reasons unknown, it didn’t come off sweet.

Rabbit gently reached up and touched Void’s wrist, but he didn’t attempt to pull him away just yet. “What’s wrong?”

After they’d set new terms, they’d showered and gone straight to bed. He’d been expecting the Brumal Prince to initiate sex, had been sad and a little disappointed when he hadn’t. A part of him wondered if maybe Baikal was giving him a break but he hadn’t asked and he wouldn’t.

“You were talking in your sleep,” Baikal said.

“Okay…” He could see how that might be annoying, but he didn’t think it garnered this type of extreme reaction.

Until he recalled he’d been dreaming and what about.

Rabbit must have gone pale, because Baikal snorted derisively and lowered his face a bit closer, practically snarling when he asked, “Who the hell is Oli?”

He went still, and for a second his vision narrowed and the walls around them seemed to be closing in, a pall of unease settling around him. When Void shifted overtop him he latched on, silently begging him not to go and leave him there.

“Hey,” suddenly Baikal didn’t seem so upset, and he hushed him calmly, draping his body

over Rabbit's so there was a comfortable weight but he wasn't crushing him. "I'm not going anywhere. Breathe through it."

There were no monsters lurking in the corners or under the bed. His mother wasn't secretly watching him suffer from a video camera. He was all right, he was with Void, and the dream he'd been having was just that. A dream.

"It's a memory," he whispered, as though unable to allow his mind to convince himself of the lie like it usually did when he woke in a cold sweat after. "A terrible memory."

"It's okay," Baikal said. "I'm here. The past can't hurt you anymore, Rabbit."

"Not me." He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes, blocking out the dark before realizing that didn't make things any better. When he opened them again, he made sure to keep them locked on Baikal's teal gaze instead, taking in the vibrant color, like a tropical ocean on a perfect summer day.

"Who then?" Baikal picked up after giving Rabbit a minute to collect himself. "Who got hurt, little bunny?"

He licked his lips, hesitant before, "Oli."

A slight narrowing of his eyes was the only indication the name pissed him off. "Tell me."

"I don't want to remember."

"Nothing will ever get better if you keep running from it, Rabbit."

"It's already getting better," he disagreed. "You've made it better."

Baikal eased his hand off his throat and moved to comb his fingers through Rabbit's bangs instead. "This has to be a joint effort. Just like fucking."

He scrunched up his nose.

"What? It's true."

"Making light of the situation won't help," Rabbit stated.

"Sure it will," he said. "You need to feel comfortable enough to open up to me. Are you there yet?"

Rabbit wanted to pretend it all away like he usually did, but something stopped him. Perhaps it was because this time he wasn't alone, or perhaps it was because he was emotionally drained by all of this. He was tired of carrying it around, and while he still didn't want to remember everything entirely, what he did recall he could share.

"Do you know much about music?" he asked, and Baikal shook his head.

"I only started listening to you play because it's you," he said. "I never had an interest before. Even now, if it isn't you up on that stage, I don't care."

"So you've probably never heard of Oli Easton then?"

Another shake in the negative.

"He wasn't nearly as famous as my mother, had only just begun his professional career, but he was a rising star in the community. A beiska player." Rabbit had to pause as another wave of panic threatened to wash over him, breathing through it and continuing once he had it under control. "When I was twenty, my mother started touring more and more off planet, but she didn't trust I wouldn't fall behind in my practices so she hired someone to teach me."

"To spy on you," Baikal guessed. "Like Professor Ludo."

"That was the plan," he nodded, "at first. But Oli wasn't anything like the professor. He started out idolizing my mother the same as everyone else, but unlike them, he was gifted a front row seat to the way she treated me. She explained it was the best way to gain results and told him I had agreed."

"To being locked up in a room with no food and no light?"

“He was skeptical about that too.” The corner of Rabbit’s mouth started to rise and then abruptly stopped as he brought up the rest. “After a few months, he started to help me. Whenever she’d go on a trip, he’d tell her he was sticking to her methods and would lock me up if I didn’t produce anything new after a month.”

“This happened monthly?” Baikal sounded shocked.

“It depended on her mood. When she was home, it could happen on any given day. You’d think I would have gotten past my fear after being thrown into the dark so many times. I sort of had, actually, but then... That night happened.” He sighed. “Saying all of this out loud makes me sound like an ungrateful prick, doesn’t it? Like I’m complaining about being treated poorly when it wasn’t even all that bad. It wasn’t really abuse—”

“It was,” he disagreed vehemently. “How often did she starve you?”

Rabbit thought about it. “I’m not really sure. At some point I stopped feeling hungry all that often.”

“Which is why now you pick at your food.”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t diminish what was done to you just because it could have been worse.”

“She never said she was proud of me or that I’d done a good job,” Rabbit said, only partially realizing that had bothered him all this time. “When she paid attention to me, it was to ensure I was working hard and on the right path. If for any reason she thought I’d deviated from it, she reacted without mercy. I wasn’t allowed to have friends, couldn’t partake in any other activities. I went to school and I played the beiska. That’s it.”

“You’re an adult now,” Baikal told him. “You don’t have to let her control you. You can leave.”

“I have a secret bank account she doesn’t know about,” he confessed. “But it only has enough in it to last me a couple of months on my own. Since most of the professional gigs were set up by her, she pocketed any of the funds I made.”

“So she’s financially controlling you on top of everything else,” he growled. “You don’t need her money. I have enough.”

“I know.”

“What else?”

Rabbit frowned.

“There’s more to it. You aren’t worried about disappointing your only parent, or afraid of ending up on the streets homeless. But you are scared of something. What else has she done that has you so frightened of her?”

It was too late to go back...

“She found out that Oli and I were friends. Instead of forcing me to practice for eight hours after school, we’d sometimes go for a walk, or to the movies. We’d talk. All stuff she deemed a waste of time. You saw what happened next. It was conveniently recorded and left for you to find.”

“The guy she had beaten up,” Baikal caught on, “that was Oli. It looked like she’d stomped on his hand.”

“Broke a couple of his fingers,” he confirmed. “They looked bad. Like, possible career ending type bad.”

“Did it? End his career?”

“I don’t know.”

Baikal searched his expression. “Do you want me to find him for you?”

He assumed Rabbit didn't know because after that event, Oli had heeded his mother's warning and vanished without a word. But that wasn't true. Even with all of his connections, Baikal wouldn't be able to locate Oli. There were some things even the Brumal Prince couldn't do.

"Real monsters don't know they're monsters because from their perspective their choices are just," Rabbit said quietly. "Isn't it interesting, how someone can convince themselves they're doing the right thing even when they're so obviously hurting another person? That's what I like about you, Baikal. You've never bothered pretending. You didn't approach me with a lie. I knew who and what you are right from the start, because you wanted me to. You wanted me to see you."

"I'm keeping you forever," Baikal replied. "That's far too long a timeframe to pull off a lie like that. I had to come to you as I am. I had to make you fall for the monster."

"You aren't a monster," he cupped the side of his face. "You're a devil. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

"There is to me. It's all kinds of fucked up and twisted, but on some level, I know you've pulled back for me. You've curbed your need for violence and control. You've been horrible and a part of me still hates you a little for it, for making me feel things despite all of that, for making me question my sanity, but..."

"But?" Baikal prompted.

"My mother was the one person in existence who was supposed to care about my feelings and she never did. She didn't bend for me, not once. That night, she didn't even give me the curtsy of speaking with me about things first. She waited until I was in the middle of playing on stage, in front of a packed audience, and then she went and got Oli and led him out of the auditorium. But not before she made eye contact with me, just to be certain I understood what was happening. That I understood there was nothing I could do to stop it."

"Did you know she was going to take things that far?"

"Of course not. Up until then, I'd only ever seen her be cruel to me. When I found out I almost threw up."

"Rabbit," Baikal said, "tell me honestly. Were you two really just friends?"

"Yes."

"No hesitation?"

"Why would there be?" Rabbit had never felt anything other than companionship with Oli. He'd been older by almost five years, more worldly and experienced. He'd had stories to share and favorite movies and books and songs that weren't classical. He'd been three dimensional, the first person Rabbit felt like he could actually reach out and touch. Everyone else treated him like delicate crystal, easily breakable and too expensive to risk getting too close to.

"Your jealousy is only justified by one thing. He was the only best friend I've ever had." Not even Sila could be considered that. They were friends, but only because Rabbit hadn't had the heart to ignore him last year, and now it seemed like their roles had been reversed and Sila stuck around out of some misguided loyalty. He liked the younger guy, but he'd never confided in him anything overly personal, and he'd never asked Sila to do so either.

"You think he knew you better than I do?" Baikal asked.

"I think you and I have never been friends," Rabbit corrected, holding his gaze. "But that's okay. That's not something I want from you anyway."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you want, little bunny?"

"Something more," he admitted. "And it isn't just a want. It's a need. I need for there to be more between us, Void. I need a valid reason to feel the way I do."

“How do you feel?”

“Like I like you.”

“You like the things I do to you,” Baikal said.

“That too.” It was hard to explain, and this late into the night, Rabbit was too exhausted to try. “Anyway. Now you know. Oli was my ex music tutor and the man my mom brutally beat. She ruined his life and all because he dared to get close to me.”

“That’s why you were so upset when you found out I’d told her about us,” Baikal stated. “History won’t repeat itself, Rabbit.” He sighed and shifted onto his side so that he was cradling Rabbit instead of hovering over him. “Do you want me to find him for you?” he repeated. “Maybe that’ll give you the closure you need to get past your stage fright.”

Baikal thought Rabbit got scared before performing because he’d watched his mom take Oli in the middle of one.

But that wasn’t it.

“You can’t,” Rabbit said, turning his head on the pillow to meet Baikal’s gaze head on. “He’s dead. Not even you can catch a ghost.”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “What?”

“It’s not about what happened outside the auditorium,” the words left his lips, but Rabbit only barely noticed now, operating on autopilot, his mind busy picturing everything that led up to the hazy parts of that night. “The reason I have panic attacks and stage fright is due to what happened after. I can’t remember much...It was dark, so dark it was hard to make out anything further than three feet away. Oli snuck over and called me. Told me to come outside...”

Rabbit’s heart started to race and he grabbed onto Baikal’s arm that was around his waist, needing more contact, something to ground him to the present so he wouldn’t get lost in the pain of the past.

“After that things get fuzzy. I don’t remember anything past the moment where I went out to meet him and saw what state he was in. How dark it was and how awful I felt...How scared...” Those things had lingered even without detailed memories to hold them.

“How do you know he’s dead then?” Baikal asked.

“I mentioned an accident before,” it’d been in passing and he’d quickly changed the subject, “This is what I meant. I went outside, met him, and then nothing. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the hospital with my mother on one side and a doctor on the other. They were speaking to me, but I only came to part of the way in. That’s when they told me what had happened.”

Rabbit hadn’t believed them at first. He’d screamed and cried and denied it, but the doctor had insisted, and since there’d be no reason for a stranger in the medical field to lie to him...He’d been forced to accept the truth.

“My mother came out that night and tried to scare Oli off our property. Knowing that she’d already destroyed his life, Oli chose to do the unthinkable.” Rabbit took a shaky breath. “He killed himself. He’d brought a blaster and he shot himself in the head. Right in front of me. Apparently that’s why I can’t remember. My brain blocked it out because of how traumatic it was. But it didn’t do a good enough job. Whenever it’s dark or I’m reminded of that night I’m triggered.”

“Part of you wants to remember,” Baikal surmised. “The other part of you is fighting against it.”

“Why would I want to recall something so horrible my own mind didn’t think I’d be able to handle it?” He didn’t. “I want to forget. It’s callous of me to say, but I wish I could erase Oli from my memory entirely. He’s already gone anyway. The one left now to suffer is me.”

Baikal pulled him in closer and kissed his forehead. “You aren’t alone.”

“Void.” He wasn’t even sure what he wanted to ask him.

“I’ll help you,” Baikal reassured anyway. “We’ll get through this, Rabbit. You won’t always have to be afraid of the dark.”

“That sounds too good to be true.”

“You belong to the Brumal Prince. You bow to no one but me.”

“You did not just seriously call yourself that.” Rabbit felt a prick of humor slip past the melancholy.

“What’s wrong, little bunny? Unlike some, I come to grips with my reality rather quickly. And your reality,” he nipped at his earlobe, “is that you’ve signed a binding contract with a Devil. And this Devil? He refuses to share you with anyone or anything else. Not even a phantom. I’ll get you past this, Rabbit. I’ll show you there’s nothing for you to fear from the dark. I control the shadows, remember? I control everything.”

No one could control everything, but in the dim room, encased in Baikal’s arms, Rabbit found he didn’t want to argue that fact. For the first time in a long time, he’d spoken about the monster in his closet, and even if he wasn’t yet ready to actually remember the tragic events of that night, he was hopeful that just maybe one day he now might be.

Chapter 25:

Blood splattered on Baikal's shoe and he scowled.

A few feet away, Berga gagged and turned to partially hide behind Flix's back, who rolled his eyes at the display.

"You cut people into pieces for a living," Flix reminded. "While they're still *awake*."

"You've got to move past this issue," Kazimir agreed, shoving the other prisoner they'd brought to the ground.

The man was in his mid-thirties, eyes wide as his knees were forced into a pool of blood. He kept staring at the person he'd been brought in with, the guy Baikal had just shot in the heart.

The one who'd they'd confirmed had been responsible for drugging and attempting to kidnap Rabbit that day.

They were in the foyer of the Void estate, Kal's satellite having already concluded they'd caught the right guys before being ordered to bring them straight here. He'd left school in the middle of the day to deal with it, barely containing his rage as he'd sped down the streets to get here.

He'd come crashing through the massive double doors, demanded to know which of the two prisoners was the one who'd drugged his tiny obsession, and had pulled out his blaster and killed the man without batting an eye.

"Mazzie isn't going to be pleased," Whim, his father's underboss who was standing at the foot of the stairs, stared at the mess and shook his head. "She's always talking about how hard it is to scrub blood out of the floorboards."

"I'll make it worth her effort," Kal said absently, still feeling strung and coiled. He shifted the barrel of the blaster in front of the second prisoner, noting the man was missing three of his fingers and part of the bottom half of his left ear. A pointed glance at the dead guy was all it took for his cousin to understand what he was wordlessly asking.

"The reason he doesn't have that much damage is because Berga, the absolute psycho, cut out his damn tongue," Kazimir informed him.

Berga, who'd recovered some from his queasiness, popped his head out from behind Flix and shrugged. "You ordered me to get them talking quick once they were brought in. I went the extreme route to incentivize the other one into spilling."

"And the fingers?" Baikal lifted a brow.

"Apparently watching his friends tongue get snipped out with garden sheers wasn't enough incentive after all."

"You've got some serious problems," Kazimir said.

"I got the job done," Berga disagreed.

Kaz motioned toward his feet. "You've got blood on the end of your pants."

Berga freaked out, shooting away from the body, face turning green before he realized he'd been messed with. "Sleep with one eye open, Ambrose."

"Why? You want to steal it?"

"Enough." Baikal tipped his head at the man still shaking on his knees before him. "You said he confessed?"

"He works for the Shepards," Flix told him. "I confirmed it myself before we contacted you."

"So your theory that Kor is behind this is wrong?" Whim asked. He was about thirty years

older than the rest of them, only a few years younger than Baikal's father. Like the Void's, he'd been born into this life and had been loyal all this time. If there was one thing he hated more than anything else it was a traitor, so he'd been onboard with Kal's plan to wipe Kor's segment out if they could prove he'd had a hand in the attacks.

"Actually," Berga held up a finger, "it isn't. We were able to both confirm that while these men are part of the Shepard gang, it isn't their leader who hired them to exercise the attacks."

"He said we'd be welcomed into the Brumal if we did what he said," the man at Baikal's feet stated. "If he took over, he'd take in any of the Shepard's who wanted out."

"What's a gang compared to a prestigious organization like a mafia?" Kazimir grinned.

Flix snorted. "Prestigious."

"It was Henley Maynard," the man on the ground said. "He asked me—" His eyes shifted toward his dead friend, "—*us*, to leave traces behind so the Shepard's would be implicated."

"He told you to frame your own and you did it?" Whim sneered.

"Most of the group want out anyway," he explained frantically. "If this worked, it wouldn't matter if the Shepards went under. We'd be Brumal by then anyway."

"Henley is one of Kor's," Sullivan Void's voice boomed from the top of the stairs, and they all turned to find him standing there dressed in a three-piece suit. His black hair was slicked back and his skin was its natural golden hue. There was no sign of the IV and aside from a slight shake to his hands as he stood there, he appeared in good health. The epitome of a king purveying his subjects.

Baikal resisted the urge to go up there and insist he sit down. How long had his father needed to prepare to come out here like this? It was an unnecessary display of power, considering it was only them present. His satellite didn't know about their leader's illness, but Whim did. There was no one here to impress.

Unless...

"I can handle it," he gave his back to the prisoner, trying to plead with his father with his eyes alone, certain he'd caught on to his intentions. "There's no need for you to get your hands dirty."

"I'm the Dominus," Sullivan disagreed, starting down the steps toward them. "If an example needs to be made, of course I should be there when it's done."

"How can we be sure Henley wasn't acting on his own?" Whim asked once Sullivan was standing on the step just before the landing. "Kor is a long way from the throne. He'd have to do a complete overthrow, and unless he planned on pinning the attacks on Baikal, I don't see how that's possible."

"They were going to try and make it seem like the Shepards are Baikal's creation," Flix replied. "I followed Henley for a couple of hours while the others stayed with the prisoners. These aren't the only Shepard members he's met with. It was simple enough to slip a bug on him—He's a mere foot soldier for a reason."

"Do you have verbal proof?" Sullivan asked, and when Flix nodded, motioned to him. "Go ahead then, son."

Flix lifted the black multi-slate attached to his left wrist and clicked a few buttons, searching for the right file. Then he held out his arm and allowed a voice projection to begin playing, the sound waves shown in neon blue holographic displayed a few inches above the device's screen.

"Move into part two of the plan," a crisp voice said, and because there was no video to go along with it, Flix had to indicate to them all that it was Henley speaking. "Boss gave us the go-ahead since everything is running smoothly."

"Not sure I'd say that," another man argued lightly. "The Prince has taken over the case. If

we're not careful—”

“The Prince has been distracted lately,” Henley snorted. “Haven’t you heard the rumors? He’s gotten himself a little boyfriend and spends all his time shacking it up.”

“I heard he even brought the guy to the estate,” another voice, gruffer than the first two, added.

“Bringing his fuck toy home to meet daddy?” Everyone laughed at that one.

Baikal’s hold on the blaster at his side tightened and then relaxed as he forced himself to calm and keep listening. No matter what they said next, however, they were now destined to die at his hand.

No one talked about Rabbit that way. Period.

“Get your shit together. This seem like a joke to you?” Henley snapped.

There was silence and then the second speaker asked, “Kor really tell you to have us go through with this? Framing the Prince...”

“Yeah, man,” the third person agreed. “We’re already risking our necks, and for what? There’s no guarantee the other group bosses will rally with Kor even if he does expose the Prince for being a traitor. Not to mention the Underboss... Whim is loyal.”

“Kor is an idiot,” Henley said. “He trusts we can get the job done, and once we do, it’s just a matter of manipulating him to do what we want, remember? That’s always been our goal. You guys can’t seriously be chickening out now?”

“Turn it off.” Sullivan made a face of disgust and Flix clicked on his multi-slate, following the order.

“The rest is just them talking about how they’ll frame Baikal. Kor has been here a few times, and he’s had some of his men pick up loose items the past couple of visits. A jacket, an earring; things they could plant at the Shepard home base to help frame Baikal.”

Baikal had figured those things had been lost in the wash since they kept such a trustworthy staff, but now he clenched his jaw.

“Sounds like Kor’s being used,” Whim said.

“Morons don’t deserve to live,” Sullivan grunted. He turned to his son. “You take the lead.”

“Please,” the man on the ground glanced between them, “I need medical assistance! I told you what you wanted to know!”

“That’s true,” Baikal said. He rotated on his heels, aimed, and shot. “Someone tell Mazzie I’ll make up for the mess.” He motioned to his satellite. “Let’s go.”

They were going to go skin a rat.

Maybe even literally, if his mood hadn’t improved by the time they made it to that part of the city.

* * *

“This boyfriend.” Sullivan cleared his throat and glanced out the side window of the hovercar as they sped back toward the estate several hours later. The illness was finally catching up to him, and the doctor had already been called and was waiting at home for when they arrived. “Is it serious?”

“Yes.” Baikal didn’t bother lying. He was sitting in the back next to his father, the two of them having just finished taking care of Kor and his men. They’d left Kazimir and Flix behind to handle the cleanup, and Whim was in contact with the police they had in their pockets to try and get the news to die down before it spread too far across the city.

It'd been a bloodbath, so of course they hadn't been able to keep as tight a lid on things as they'd hoped. Case in point, the fact Baikal currently had red painted up and down his arms and all over his clothes. At least the black helped to hide it.

His father was spotless, having stood in the background, allowing his son to take control of the situation. Kal saw it for what it was, a king showing approval for the prince's choices publicly. It was a statement that he was confident in his heir. To the rest of the Brumal, it'd seem like he was nothing more than a proud Dominus, preparing to merge his adult son into the family business once he graduated in the Fall.

But Baikal knew the truth.

His father had wanted to put a failsafe in place, a recent event the rest of the Brumal could look back on when he was gone and say definitively, "He trusted his son to take the crown. So should we".

Which implied anyone had a choice in the matter.

Which pissed Baikal off.

He'd thought he'd expended enough energy when they'd surrounded Kor's ranch-style home and attacked before anyone knew what hit them. That making his way through the building, killing the traitors who'd planned to not only discredit him in the eyes of the rest of the Brumal, but had also had a hand in what had happened with Rabbit a few days ago, would have relieved all that pent up negative energy.

But it hadn't. He could still feel it swirling in his gut, threatening to claw its way out. It was the same feeling he'd suffered through at the beginning of his father's diagnosis when they'd discovered he was going to die and there was nothing any of them could have done to stop it. Baikal had been a wild, chaotic force of darkness.

Until he'd met Rabbit.

"When the time is right," he told his father, "I'll move him into the estate."

Sullivan thought it over. "It's a little too late for me to get involved in your romantic life. Besides, when I'm gone, you'll need someone to lean on. He isn't Brumal?"

"No."

"Shall I ask Whim to look into him, or will you be forthcoming?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to know about him," Baikal said. "I've got nothing to hide. He's the one. Plain and simple."

"Meaning nothing and no one can change your mind." He chuckled and clapped him on the back. "And he's agreed?"

Baikal thought about last night.

Rabbit had tried to change the game on him, and he'd admittedly been caught off guard by that fact. He'd never anticipated his tiny obsession coming around so soon, but there'd been nothing but sincerity shining in Rabbit's eyes when he'd made the new offer.

After hearing about some of the things his mother had done to him, it was no wonder that he'd developed a fear of the dark and was used to being pushed around by someone with more authority than him. On campus, Rabbit always walked with his chin up, this air of royalty coming off of him. Baikal never would have guessed he was so unhappy just from scratching at the surface.

If he hadn't seen him play that night one year ago, he probably never would have figured it out even.

Rabbit was good at masking his true emotions, at hiding in plain sight. So the fact that he was willing to come out of his shell even a little, to risk suggesting new terms with Kal...It was progress.

Which was why he'd rewarded him by leaving him alone. They'd bathed and he'd helped Rabbit into his pajamas, laughing when he'd been chided and told that his little bunny wasn't a child. Then they'd slipped beneath the snow-white sheets on Rabbit's bed and he'd pulled him in close and...That was it.

They'd fallen asleep with Rabbit's head cradled on his chest.

It'd been the best night's sleep Baikal had ever had.

Until Rabbit's nightmare had woken him.

Some people might say what December Trace had done wasn't that big of a deal, that she was merely strict and disciplined her son to extreme levels, but that her heart was in the right place. Baikal knew better. He'd spoken to the woman when Rabbit had been drugged, and she'd sounded frustrated that her son wasn't answering her calls, nothing more than that. When he'd explained what had happened, she'd grunted like it was no big deal, muttered something about a scandal meaning he'd finally made it, and then ended the call.

He'd had a bad feeling and had reached out to his contacts in the local news and had gotten their assurances they wouldn't publish anything about the incident if December reached out to them. It'd been less than an hour later that he'd received a message letting him know that she had in fact tried.

Her only child had been attacked, and the only thing that woman cared about was using his ill fortune to boost her career.

The Brumal may be made up of criminals, but even criminals understood the importance of loyalty. And if they didn't? Then they ended up like Kor.

With their head severed from their body.

"He needs my help with something," Baikal ended up replying finally. At least Rabbit had figured that part out on his own and finally admitted what was going on with his home life. Maybe it was because Baikal had opened up first by telling him about his dad's impending death. Maybe not. He wasn't about to ask and shake the already rocky boat.

There was no way in hell he was ever going to let Rabbit slip through his fingers, but that didn't mean he didn't eventually want to be wanted back. And not just physically.

"It's a long game," he confessed. "Winning someone over who has demons takes time."

"No one better than a devil to get the job done." Sullivan smiled, the expression tinged in sadness. "Just remember, son, people can be forced to do just about anything except for love. You can make him need you, but not even you can make him love you."

"Watch me." Baikal always got what he wanted.

This was going to be no different.

Chapter 26:

Rabbit got home early, unable to concentrate at school. Baikal had sent him a text letting him know that he had somewhere to be, and then a few hours later there'd been talk about a fight whispered all over campus.

He'd tried not to eavesdrop and ignore it, but the continuous glances had finally escalated by four pm, with students walking up to him to ask him about it.

They'd wanted to know if Baikal was all right, and instead of feeling annoyed that they were distracting him from his practice hours?

Rabbit had been upset that he didn't have an accurate answer.

There'd only been one article about it online, but even that had been removed—and while he'd been in the middle of reading it. All he'd managed to gather was there'd been a hit on a known Brumal house and there were reported casualties. It didn't say who the place belonged to or list any names of those who'd been harmed or killed.

So he'd caved and packed his stuff and headed home, even going so far as to send a message to Void asking where he was.

The bastard hadn't responded.

He was planning on making himself concentrate on practice, not wanting to waste energy caring for someone like Baikal, but when he'd stormed down the hallway leading to the practice studio in his house, he'd come to a standstill at the open entrance.

The room was spacious, with a tall, dome-shaped ceiling. It was made of cream-colored sand wood, a solid, insulating type of material that helped keep the sounds of music from trickling to other parts of the house and disrupting anyone else. There was a single window that opened up onto the backyard, though with just the porchlight there to illuminate the grounds only a small patch of grass was visible amidst the otherwise darkness of the evening.

Since his mother hadn't used this room in over a year, Rabbit had taken to make it more of his own in a poor attempt to wash away the bad memories here. He'd dried out all of the Rose Ephemeral he'd received and strung them around the wainscoting, so they hung just above waist level. They added a splash of color to the otherwise clinically white space.

Baikal, dressed in all black, stood out even more.

He was checking the flowers, gently caressing the full bloom of one the same shade as Rabbit's hair.

Those flowers were pretty much the only possession Rabbit owned that he felt an attachment to, and he'd already taken a single step inside, intent on telling him to be careful when he paused all over again.

He'd been wondering all this time who his secret admirer was...

The flowers had started coming a year ago.

Hadn't Void confessed that's how long he'd been watching him?

The Rose Ephemeral wasn't cheap, but to someone like Baikal, someone who made money in his sleep thanks to his company, they'd cost less than a drop in a bucket.

"Pretty," Void murmured to himself then, breaking whatever spell Rabbit had momentarily been under.

He could ask about the flowers later, right now...

“Where have you been?” He hadn’t meant for the accusation to seep into his tone, but he couldn’t help himself. His brow was furrowed when Baikal turned toward him, and though he stood his ground, he couldn’t hide the fact he was upset either.

“You’re home early,” Baikal noted.

“I texted you.”

He frowned and checked his multi-slate. “So you did.”

“Void.”

Baikal lifted his gaze and that’s when Rabbit realized there were splashes of blood on the side of his neck.

He was across the room before he could think better of it, grabbing onto the bottom of Baikal’s face to force his head to the side so he could take a better look. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

Void went still in his hold, allowing him to maneuver him without complaint.

There was red on his forearms too.

Rabbit took one of his hands and twisted his arm in the light.

“It’s not mine,” Baikal finally answered after making him wait for it.

“Oh.” He released him like he was on fire. “You should have said so sooner.”

“And miss the worried expression on your face?” He tsked. “I don’t think so.”

“Bastard.”

“Sure,” he grinned, “but one that you’re concerned about.”

With a huff, Rabbit spun on his heels, about to leave, when Baikal latched onto his wrist and yanked him back. He slammed into his front, sucking in a breath when those strong arms wrapped around his waist and held him close.

Baikal rested his chin on Rabbit’s shoulder, and though he couldn’t see turned away, Rabbit was certain he was still smiling triumphantly. “Should we be keeping score, do you think?”

“What?” Rabbit tugged on his arms but Baikal refused to release him. He gave up and sighed. “What are you talking about now?”

“How many times you’ve given in to your feelings for me,” Baikal explained. “Should we count them?”

“Shut up. I don’t have feelings for you.” At least, not ones he was willing to discuss out loud just yet. Not when he was still so twisted up and confused about them himself. “I was worried about losing my investment, that’s all. We’ve only just agreed last night that you’d help me shake my mom. If something happened to you today, I’d have gotten my hopes up for nothing.”

Baikal hummed and pressed his lips to the side of Rabbit’s neck, laughing when he tried to shake him off. “I don’t believe you, little bunny. But feel free to keep on pretending. I don’t mind.”

“Do you have feelings for me?” Rabbit had meant it more taunting than it’d come out, but was shocked into momentary silence when Void replied breezily, as though the topic weren’t weighted or taboo in any sense.

“Of course,” he said. “I wouldn’t be going through all of this trouble if I didn’t. I was clear from the start, I’ve never been after something temporary. I never considered you a whore, as you so crassly put it before. I’ve always intended for us to end up right here, with you in my arms,” he smirked again, “worried about me.”

“Shut up.” Rabbit pulled away and this time Baikal let him go. When he turned back around, the smile on the Brumal Prince’s face made him want to run, but he held his ground despite the way his insides were twisting. He’d promised himself he wouldn’t cower from this anymore, no matter

what *this* turned out to be. “What are you doing in here anyway?”

“I wanted to see it.” Just like that, Baikal’s good mood vanished. He inspected the room, a scowl setting over his handsome features. “This is where you were made to fear the dark. Where did you pass out exactly? Was it here?” He pointed to the spot they were standing in, then over to another a bit further away. “Or there?”

“What’s it matter?”

“I want to know.”

“Why?”

“I want to know everything about you.”

Rabbit stared at him. “Do you really have no idea how creepy that sounds?”

“It’s not romantic?”

“When you say it while looking at me like you want to sink your teeth into my flesh? No. No, not in the slightest.”

“Well,” he shrugged. “I tried.”

“Why?” Rabbit asked, not even caring that he sounded like a broken record. That was pretty par for the course by this point when it came to conversations with Void. “Why’d you even bother?”

“Because,” something else flashed across his face, “we’re going to fuck tonight. I was trying to put you at ease before I made my move.”

Rabbit stiffened, eyes going wide. “Mission *not* accomplished.”

He should be used to Baikal saying things like that without a moment’s hesitation by now as well, though. If he was considering forever with this man—and as of now, it did legitimately seem like the lesser of two evil choices—Rabbit would have to adjust to hearing those types of comments eventually... Wouldn’t he?

“You’re blushing,” Baikal pointed out.

“I’m not.” Rabbit retreated a step and cupped his cheeks. Sure enough, they were warm to the touch.

“Where are you going, little bunny?” Baikal’s chin tipped downward and he advanced on him slowly, that predatory gleam Rabbit recognized by now apparent in his possessive gaze.

Rabbit bolted.

He raced down the hall and burst through the living room area, losing a few precious seconds only when he hesitated in front of the couch, torn between the side exit and the stairs. Without putting much stock in it, he shot to the right, racing up the steps two at a time, heart skipping a beat when he heard Baikal in pursuit.

His bedroom came into view when he hit the top of the stairs and he picked up speed, almost slipping past it at the last second. He pulled the door behind him but didn’t bother trying to shut or lock it, already moving toward the adjoined bathroom instead.

The second his feet hit the tiled floor, a hand latched onto the material of his shirt and pulled him back. He slammed into Baikal but fought to free himself, somehow managing to get loose from that hold enough to turn and withdraw, moving until he bumped up against the sink counter.

Baikal stood in the doorway for a minute, watching him with a calculative expression, the air seemingly snapping and popping with the heightened tension. Then he took that last step over the threshold and reached out, taking the side of the door and easing it shut. He flicked the lock for good measure and advanced.

With nowhere else to go, Rabbit held his ground, gripping the edge of the counter tightly as he waited for Void to reach him. He was out of breath from the run, his lungs and his thighs burning from

the exertion, but that was it.

Resting his palms on either side of Rabbit's hips, Baikal leaned in and searched his eyes. "You don't look scared, little bunny."

"I'm not." He wasn't about to suffer from a panic attack either. Sure, his blood was pumping and he felt like he was standing on a cliff, just for once it wasn't in a bad way. "You aren't hurt."

Baikal frowned.

"You chased after me just fine," Rabbit explained. "In the news, they said there was a fight. People were injured."

"Not me."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "No, not you."

Baikal's gaze softened somewhat. "You really were worried for me, weren't you?"

It wasn't a question, but he answered it anyway. "In what has to be the shock of the century, I'm starting to think you're growing on me. Like a fungus."

He tutted him and straightened, though his arms remained to cage him and keep him close. "You'll pay for that one, just you wait."

Rabbit planted a hand on his chest when he went to lean in for a kiss. "You're covered in blood."

Baikal angled his head toward the shower and then narrowed his eyes. "You played me."

Rabbit smirked. "I learned from the best."

"Last night..."

"When we stood in here and made the new deal?" Rabbit let his hand slink an inch lower over Baikal's chest, pretending he didn't notice what he was doing. "What about it?"

"You meant that, too."

"You've been watching me for over a year," he reminded. "You should have picked up on the fact I rarely waste my words. I don't say things I don't mean."

"Except for when you're denying you want me," he countered.

Rabbit dropped his arm and tried to straighten from the counter, pursing his lips when Baikal refused to move out of the way.

"I let you run already," the Brumal Prince said. "You're done for the day."

"Void."

"Hmm?"

Rabbit exhaled in mock annoyance. "Just..." he circled his finger in the air, "take your clothes off already."

That at least got him to finally step back, but as he started to take his shirt off he asked, "You remember what I said downstairs?"

"Yes," Rabbit replied tersely, trying, and failing, to avoid looking as all of that toned body was exposed to view. Because of his beiska playing, he'd been photographed and displayed on magazine covers practically all his life, but it should have been Baikal on them instead.

His muscles rippled as he removed the shirt and started on his pants, the long length of his fit torso catching Rabbit's attention the way his mint-flavored candy bars used to.

"You're drooling," Baikal teased, but Rabbit checked, swiping the back of his hand over his mouth.

"Bastard."

"Keep calling me names," he dared, stepping out of his pants and boxers all at once so that he was left completely naked before Rabbit. "I'm going to enjoy taking it out on your ass later. I gave

you a break last night to let you fully heal from our first time, but you won't be getting so lucky tonight."

He hummed. "Pretty sure I will be."

Baikal blinked at him. "Did you just make a sex joke?"

"Why? Are you the only one allowed to do that?"

He reached for him and started turning him every which way.

"What are you doing?" Rabbit shook him off.

"Checking to make sure you haven't been replaced with a robot."

He laughed, the sound bright and vibrant, filling the bathroom with a lingering echo that trickled away as Baikal stared awestruck.

"Do that again," he ordered.

"Do what?" Realizing he meant for him to laugh, Rabbit shook his head. "You have to say something funny first, and that's a rarity for you."

"Another insult? Really?"

"I'm on a roll tonight," Rabbit stated.

"You're about to be on your back with your knees up by your ears."

All of the out-of-character playfulness he'd been feeling dried up in a flash at that, his chest constricting as his mind formed an image of what that would look and feel like. Rabbit shivered, the anticipation rising to impossible levels within him. He didn't even care that he was suddenly hard, or that Baikal obviously noticed.

"Strip," the order was given in a clipped tone, leaving no room for argument.

Which was good, because Rabbit had lost all ability to form speech. Before he could fully process what he was doing, was giving into the command, starting with the thin black belt around his waist. His eyes remained locked on Baikal the entire time, his clothes uncaringly torn from his body and tossed onto the sink counter.

At least his buttons had survived intact this time. A small win in the grand scheme of things, considering it was glaringly apparent now that Rabbit had lost in all other categories.

Vaguely, he wondered when it'd started to happen, when he'd started to really fall for the Brumal Prince. When the thought of his forceful touches and domineering presence had stopped absolutely terrifying him and turned into something else. Something potent and raw and primal.

Recalling the pain of the other night had him hesitating the moment he was fully undressed, and that prickle of uncertainty must have shown on his face because, in the next instant, Baikal was on him, forcing his attention back onto the lines of his rock-hard body and all the ways he could use said body to make Rabbit feel good.

He kissed him like he wanted to devour him, tangling their tongues and stroking in deep. All the while, he backed them toward the shower stall, one hand on Rabbit's hip and the other behind his head, carefully guiding him across the room.

When he pulled away, Rabbit actually made a sound of protest, but Baikal merely chuckled at him and reached into the stall to flick on the shower spray. Then he was back, clutching him close all over again, those delicious lips sealing over his as he pulled him in.

Rabbit yelped at the first splash of hot water against his shoulder, glowering as Baikal quickly went to adjust the temperature, making it a bit cooler.

It placed Void's arm directly under the spray, and some of the dried blood caked on his skin was washed off. Trails of pink water swirled at their feet, spiraling toward the drain. He gave Rabbit a dark look when he tried to kiss him a third time only to be rejected.

Motioning with his chin to the blood, Rabbit silently reminded him why they were there, much to his chagrin.

Baikal rolled his eyes but reached for the bodywash in the stone cubby set into the white walls, but Rabbit snatched the bottle from him before he could open it.

Applying a generous amount to his palm, Rabbit set the bottle on the floor and then got to work, roaming his hands up Baikal's solid arms and over his shoulders. He smoothed them down his chest next, appreciating the plains of his abs and the dip of his pecs when he trailed them up again. At his neck, he scrubbed a bit harder, focused on getting rid of every spec of blood he could see.

"Admit it," Baikal drawled huskily, his eyes partially closed, "this was just an excuse to feel me up."

"Says the one who seems to be enjoying it the most," Rabbit countered.

"I am," he agreed. "I love it when you touch me. I love that you *want* to touch me."

Rabbit's hands faltered.

"Don't get scared on me now, little bunny, you're doing so well. Being so good for me. Keep being good," he tilted forward on his feet, bringing his mouth to Rabbit's ear, "and I might forgive one of your transgressions. There were four." He grinned when Rabbit pulled back and scowled. "I've been keeping track."

He opened his mouth to call him a bastard again, but when Baikal's brow lifted and his grin widened challengingly, he realized he'd only be digging himself a deeper hole. Rabbit slammed his jaw shut and scrubbed harder than necessary against the other man's skin.

"If you're going to be that rough," Baikal captured his right hand and eased it lower, "I can think of somewhere else I'd rather you lavish with your attention."

Rabbit slapped at his hand with his free one and then went back to cleaning off his shoulders, the furthest place he could get from the Brumal Prince's erect cock. This time was different in the sense that he wanted it, completely, without any false protests or that annoying voice in his head trying to convince him that being attracted to someone like Void was immoral and bad. But that didn't mean he wasn't still nervous.

That first time had hurt. A lot.

"Why aren't you asking me?" Baikal's tone altered, less seductive and more uncertain. It was a bit odd coming from him, someone who was always so in control of everything, including his emotions.

"Asking you what?" Rabbit urged him under the spray so he could rinse the suds off, thoroughly checking to make sure he hadn't missed any spots of red.

"Whose blood this is."

Satisfied he'd gotten it all, he lightly pushed Baikal out of the way so he could rinse his own hair. "Why don't we just say I'm practicing?"

"Practicing?"

"There's an echo in here." Rabbit smiled but Void wasn't taking the bait, still watching him seriously. "For the role. Spouse of the Dominus was never a possibility I even imagined, but I figure this is relatively normal, no? You showing up covered in blood?"

He tilted his head. "I wouldn't say it's that common, actually."

"Really?" He hummed. "That's good to hear."

"Rabbit."

"Yeah?"

"Stop it."

Rabbit paused as he was washing himself and lifted a brow. "I'm not sure what you mean. No, really, this time," he added when it didn't seem like Void believed him. "I don't."

He'd gone with the flow despite the fact he was curious—of course he was—and he hated that he'd just been touching the blood of some faceless, nameless stranger. But if this was going to be his future, he needed to start adjusting now, while there was still time for him to take things slowly and learn to adapt.

"You can't say things like that without thinking them through," Baikal warned.

That only made his confusion grow.

"Isn't this what we agreed on?" Was Void telling him he didn't like him being amicable? "You said—"

Baikal shoved him up against the shower wall, his mouth crashing down on Rabbit's in a brutal kiss that didn't last nearly as long as Rabbit would have liked.

"Tell me you'll be my Possessio," Void demanded, pulling back just enough to speak. He rested his forehead against Rabbit's, the contact hot and sticky.

"I'm not a fan of that title," Rabbit reminded.

"Tell me anyway," he insisted. "Say it this once and I promise I won't ask again."

That was...interesting. Void didn't make promises lightly—he manipulated his words to fit his agenda, sure, but this was pretty clear-cut no matter which way Rabbit tried to spin it.

"I've never wanted a Possessio before," Baikal admitted then. "A life partner was something I figured I'd have to consider years from now. But I want you, little bunny. I want all of you and I want you to want all of me. This is the closest you've come to that. Even last night, you only changed the terms out of fear of your mother."

"I want freedom," he corrected. "I want to have choices."

"I can let you do that."

"To you, decision and choice have the same meaning."

"Don't they?"

"A decision is something you can make when you *have a choice*," Rabbit said.

"So then decide and choose to tell me you'll be my future Possessio," Baikal stated.

"Why should I?"

"Because if you do," he nuzzled their noses together briefly, "I'll allow you all the choices you want. The only one I won't give you is the right to choose me. You don't have that, Rabbit. You don't get to tell me no or say you won't be mine."

"And everything else?" He should be more afraid, should be rethinking all of this, and figuring out a way to escape from the Brumal Prince and his possessive grip on him. But Rabbit was very good at adapting, and the way he saw it, what was done was done. Anything short of finding a way to go back in time and stopping Void from seeing him a year ago would be a waste of energy.

"I'll stand by what I agreed to," Baikal told him. "Come on, little bunny, it's already a done deal anyway. Just say it. For me."

Rabbit wanted to sleep with him again, wanted help overcoming whatever trauma he'd been hiding from and enduring. Wanted to not have to be scared of his own damn mother or the things she was capable of.

But that didn't mean he was sure about forever with Void.

"Convince me," he said earnestly. "Convince me that's something I should want and I will."

"Negotiating again?"

"This thing between us has always been transactional," Rabbit reminded. "Even if I've

always been on the short end of the stick.”

Baikal stared for a moment, considering, and then the corner of his mouth tipped up ever so slightly. “All right. I’ll make you want it. I’ll help you see that being mine is the best thing that could have ever happened to you. But, Rabbit.” He licked the curve of his ear. “There’s nothing short about my stick. Here. Let me show you.”

Chapter 27:

Void shoved him down onto the bed and swung a leg over him, straddling his narrow waist. Outside, the windows showed an inky night sky and within moments, the lights in the room began to dim.

Baikal was using his power, tendrils of smoke seeping out to snag at the light orbs and encase them in their darkness.

Rabbit's throat went dry and he swallowed, some of his earlier anticipation dying as that familiar cloying panic started to take root. "Keep the lights on."

It was already so dark it was almost hard to make out the slight shaking of Baikal's head as he refused.

"Void, I can't." He sucked in a breath but the oxygen burned his lungs.

"We talked about this, little bunny," he said soothingly, leaning down to plant feather-light kisses all over Rabbit's face and then down the side of his neck to the curve of his shoulder. "There's no need to avoid it, you're safe. I'm here. Would I ever let anything hurt you?"

"You're hurting me," he snapped, but that wasn't entirely the truth and they both knew it. Something within Rabbit was thrumming, and he shook like a leaf beneath Baikal as he continued moving that sinful mouth all over him.

He rolled the tip of his tongue over one of Rabbit's nipples and then nipped and sucked, hard.

Rabbit bowed, crying out at the sharp pain, which was followed quickly by gentle caresses as Baikal dipped his head lower.

"I'm the only one who can," he told him. "I'm the only one who can lay a hand on this creamy skin. Who can mark it," he sucked again, and there was no doubt there'd be an angry-looking blotch there by morning, "and taste it. No one can hurt you but me. I won't let them."

The Brumal Prince licked a stripe down the center of his chest and bit lightly at the spot just above his navel before passing it and traveling further. With him down there, there was no longer anything for Rabbit to focus on in front of his face aside from the dark, and he made a frantic sound in the back of his throat that had Baikal instantly returning to kiss him properly.

It was slow and coaxing, different from the other times but no less claiming. Baikal's tongue swirled around his and sucked. He kissed him until Rabbit's lips were raw and he was dizzy from being out of breath.

"Open your eyes, little bunny."

He hadn't been aware he'd closed them, but he listened, peeling them open to find those teal-blue ones peering back at him. "Breathe, Rabbit. Breathe."

Rabbit inhaled deeply, filling his lungs. Then he let the air trickle out slowly and did it again, all the while maintaining eye contact. He felt a tiny burst of pleasure explode within him when he saw the approving way Baikal nodded and smiled back at him. He'd never cared about pleasing anyone before, not even his mother, but seeing the Brumal Prince staring at him with pride...

He was worse off than he'd thought.

With intense clarity, Rabbit realized he was already a goner.

"Keep it up," Baikal said softly. "Just like that, little bunny. There's nothing to fear. The darkness can't hurt you. Only I can hurt you. And I won't, so long as?"

"So long as I obey," the words slipped past Rabbit's lips with little to no thought.

“Good boy.” He grinned at him. “So obey. Breathe, Rabbit. Breathe for me.”

Rabbit continued to focus on inhaling and exhaling, but it got harder and harder to do the lower Baikal trailed those fingers. By the time he’d wrapped them around Rabbit’s thick length, he’d lost the rhyme and was practically panting.

“You’re horny,” Baikal pointed out, giving him a solid pump of his tight fist as if rewarding him for it. “Remember this feeling. This is what can happen to you in the dark, little bunny. You can end up feeling so good, isn’t that right?” He swirled his thumb over Rabbit’s slit, chuckling when that had him thrashing against the mattress. “So sensitive.”

“Void.” His brain was fritzing, it had to be, because all of a sudden it was impossible for Rabbit to recall what exactly they’d been talking about a moment ago. He didn’t care that it was dark and he could barely make out the width of the other man’s broad shoulders. All he cared about was the heavy weight pinning him down to the bed, the knee slipping between his thighs to force them to part.

The hand stroking him in slow, almost lazy motions, smearing drops of precome down his shaft so that Baikal’s palm practically glided over his skin.

Baikal cupped his balls and pinched one of Rabbit’s nipples with his other hand, then he went back to rubbing him out, the slick sounds mingling with breathy moans as Rabbit came undone beneath him.

“Look at me,” Baikal demanded, and Rabbit’s gaze went back to his. “It’s going to be me, just me, from here on out. I can make you feel amazing, can’t I? I can make you come alive for me in the dark. From now on, if you hesitate, the only other voice in that head of yours should be mine. Me telling you what to do. Me making you feel. Me, little bunny. Just me.”

“Just you.” Rabbit rolled his hips and arched into that touch, needing more friction, but was denied at the last second when Baikal loosened his grip. He whined, but the Brumal Prince merely tutted at him.

“There’s not enough room in your head for the both of us. Your mother or—”

“You,” Rabbit repeated, momentarily confused as to what his mother had to do with this or anything. “There’s only you.”

There was only them and this bed and this room. Only Baikal’s heated breaths fanning across Rabbit’s cheeks and the feel of him grinding his knee against his achy hole and his hold on his dick as he worked him into a frenzy.

There was only the way Rabbit’s heart was beating, not out of fear or anxiety, but because he was so aroused he thought all of him might burst at the seams and he didn’t even care.

Baikal Void had ruined him and he didn’t even care.

“You’re my Possessio,” Baikal said, a hint of excitement and anticipation in his tone.

A tiny voice in Rabbit’s head turned its nose at that title, but when he didn’t immediately respond and that hand on his dick threatened to come to a complete stop, Rabbit quashed it.

“Yes.” He’d be whatever the hell the other guy wanted so long as he fucked him.

Baikal groaned, and like with most things, gained an inch but wanted a mile. The hand that had been tweaking Rabbit’s nipples moved, pushing at that puckered ring of muscle next. Two fingers forced their way inside, pumping deep and hard enough to have Rabbit crying out from the intrusion.

“You’re a slave to my cock,” Baikal prompted, clearly wanting to hear him say it.

“That’s a bit much,” Rabbit slipped out of his lust haze enough to tell him.

He grunted. “Remember what I told you before? About how one day you’d be begging me for it and I may or may not oblige?”

Rabbit moved faster than he ever had in his entire life when Baikal went to release him and move away. He shot forward, latching onto his wrist to keep his hand close to where he needed him.

“Something to share, little bunny?” Baikal asked in a mock bored tone, kneeling between his spread thighs, two fingers still stuffed in his hole. As if to encourage him, he pressed those digits against his prostate once, twice, before they stilled.

“Weren’t we discussing something important a second ago?” Rabbit could have sworn they had been, and that it must be a safer topic than this one, and yet...Those fingers curled again and he swore and dropped back to the bed.

“I want it,” he relented, shifting down an inch in an attempt to force those fingers even deeper.

“Want what?” Baikal added a third finger, stretching his opening.

“You,” Rabbit’s voice came out crackly and weird and he ground his teeth against the pulsations of pleasure zipping through him. He felt both full and empty at the same time, a frustrating sensation, and one he wanted remedied as soon as possible. “Good Light, Void! I want you.”

He hummed, still feigning that mild indifference. “What part of me? Be specific.”

He was going to make Rabbit say it.

Damn it.

Rabbit clutched at the sheets, twisting the material around his fingers as the ones inside him came to yet another standstill as they battled wills.

But it wasn’t really even a battle at all, was it.

Baikal always won.

“Your cock,” Rabbit gave in. “I want your cock. Inside me. Filling me up. I want to feel your crown dragging against my inner—”

This time Baikal was the one cursing. He pulled his hand free before Rabbit could even finish his ramble and lined himself up to his entrance. Without further delay, he pressed in, the fit tight despite them having done this the other night, and it was obvious he was holding himself back from just ramming in.

For some reason, that bothered Rabbit. He didn’t want gentle or sweet.

“I gave myself to a devil,” he found himself saying, holding Baikal’s gaze unflinchingly when the Brumal Prince paused and glanced up at him. “So act like one.”

Baikal broke out in a grin unlike any he’d ever shown before. It was beautiful and depraved and promised sinful delight, which he delivered in full when he grabbed onto Rabbit’s thighs, spread him wide, and thrust inside.

Rabbit cried out, the pain, though fleeting, causing tears to prick at the corners of his eyes as that thick cock barreled through him.

“I was trying to give you slow,” Baikal said as he pulled all the way out to the tip and then slammed back in, his balls slapping against Rabbit’s upturned ass. “Was trying to be gentle since this is about working through your trauma.”

“Don’t want gentle.” What the hell was he saying? Since when?

“I don’t want to be compared to her again.”

Rabbit made a face. “Don’t talk about my mom while you’re rearranging my insides, Void. Ew.”

“Childish,” he snorted. “I’d rather refer to it as I’m fucking some sense into you.” He stroked in deep and rocked against him for emphasis. Changing his hold, he grabbed onto Rabbit’s hips and began moving his body in time with his thrusts, pounding into him with vigor as though spurred on by his own dirty words.

The bed shook beneath them and Rabbit whimpered whenever Baikal slammed all the way in. “Too deep.”

“No such thing,” Baikal disagreed.

“Says the guy *not* getting pegged.”

“That sound interesting to you?” he teased, surprising Rabbit by smirking. “Want to fuck me back, Rabbit?”

“Yes.” But not like that. Using a burst of energy he hadn’t even known he possessed, Rabbit sat up and shoved Void onto his back, instantly crawling on top of him. He fumbled a bit getting into the right position, since he’d never done this before, but then he was lining Baikal back up with his hole and dropping down over it.

Baikal dug his fingers into his thighs and groaned, only allowing Rabbit to take the reins until he was fully seated before he took control once more. He fucked up into him with powerful thrusts that had Rabbit’s entire body shaking.

Rabbit fell forward from the force of it, his palms landing with a smack against Baikal’s firm chest. He gasped at the new angle, that cock hitting a different place, sending him wailing all over again.

“Where are we, little bunny?” Baikal’s voice sounded strained. He was close.

Good, because Rabbit’s lower abdomen was starting to feel like it was filled with lighter fluid, and that friction rubbing at his insides was this close to giving off the spark that would ignite it all.

“What?” He shook his head, not understanding the question, or even why it was being asked.

Baikal took hold of Rabbit’s dick but didn’t pump him. “Where are we?”

“My room.” Duh.

“And?”

He scowled, but it was clear Baikal wasn’t going to give him what he needed until he answered. “I don’t know what you want from me. We’re fucking in my room and I’m about to come.”

“No, you aren’t.” He slipped his hand lower and wrapped those wicked fingers around the root of Rabbit’s dick, applying a vice-like grip.

“Wait,” Rabbit reached down and tried to pry him off, but he was no match for the Brumal Prince. “Stop.”

“Stop?” He stilled with his cock buried all the way, intense expression never wavering even when Rabbit made a pleading sound.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

“Just tell me what you want to hear!” Rabbit was about to lose his mind for real. He rocked on that thickness inside of himself, but it wasn’t enough to satisfy him. He needed Void to start moving again. “Tell me so I can say it. I’ll say anything you want me to.”

That seemed to pique his interest. “Anything?”

“Yes!” He’d regret it later. That’s what the morning after was for anyway, right?

“Look around, Rabbit. What do you see?”

What did he see? With a huff, he did as he was told, but while his eyes had partially adjusted to the lack of light, he still couldn’t make much out. Aside from the man sprawled out underneath him, that was.

“You,” he replied. “I see you. Now will you keep fucking me?”

He chuckled. “That isn’t what I meant, but I’m glad you see me, little bunny. For the record, I

see you too. I've always seen you."

That sounded an awful lot like they weren't talking about the same thing, but Rabbit didn't get a chance to investigate since Baikal wasn't finished.

"I blocked out all the light except one," he said, and with a start, Rabbit realized he was right.

The only reason he could make out Baikal was because the two of them were so close and the nightlight Rabbit had in the bathroom had been left alone by Baikal's shadows. The dim pale blue glow barely reached the bed. The rest of the room had been completely shrouded in darkness.

Rabbit stilled, preparing himself for the usual panic to seize him but Baikal lifted his hips and ground his cock inside him, and the panic never came.

He blinked, waiting.

"Oh, my god."

"I wanted you to call me king," Baikal joked, "but god works too."

"It's a fluke," Rabbit countered. "People don't just miraculously overcome trauma."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "But it's a start, and isn't that something? It's the same as it was in the dressing room. Before your performance, with those pretty red lips of yours wrapped around my cock. You forgot all about your fears then too. And our first time? My room was dimly lit at the start and practically dark by the end. You didn't seem to notice so I didn't want to point it out."

He'd known...

"You've been doing it on purpose." For how long?

"Think, little bunny. The only time I came to you in the light was when you convinced me to pull you out of class and relieve your ass of that first plug. I liked making it clear to everyone you belonged to me, but that was otherwise unplanned. Every other encounter?"

It'd been in partial or near darkness.

"Do you want to discuss this further," Baikal teased. "Or would you rather I keep fucking you, as you so sexily put it? You're hot when you're dirty. You're hot when you're clean too, actually. Especially when you're riding my dick and screaming my name."

Rabbit narrowed his eyes. "I don't recall doing that last part."

Baikal grinned up at him and loosened his fingers to stroke straight up to his tip and back. "You will. Same rules apply, little bunny. You come calling my name or we do this again and again until you do."

He rolled, pinning Rabbit back beneath him so he could take total control of the pace, pistoning inside of him. Baikal worked Rabbit in time with his thrusts, movements so fast it was hard for Rabbit to catch or hold on to any one sensation before it was chased away by another.

"Come for me," Baikal ordered, and just like that, Rabbit's body obeyed.

His orgasm crashed through him and he groaned and cried through it as he came all over Baikal's hand and his stomach.

But he didn't say the Brumal Prince's name.

Just as he was coming down from the high, Baikal pulled out and flipped him over. He lined back up and slammed home, chuckling at the strangled sound that clawed its way up Rabbit's throat.

"Don't think I don't recognize you did that on purpose," he whispered against the curve of Rabbit's ear darkly. "If you wanted it harder, all you had to do was ask, little bunny."

The witty quip he'd been all set to deliver died on Rabbit's tongue as soon as that cock started hammering his hole all over again. All he could do was claw at the sheets, press his face into the mattress, and moan.

Three hours later they'd showered again, changed the sheets, and were back in bed, this time to try and get some sleep before they had to be up for class in the morning.

Rabbit didn't bother being shy, sliding in as close to Baikal's side as possible, flinging his arm around his middle, and resting his head on his shoulder. He breathed deep that calming scent and glanced around the room.

The lights were still off, and he tested himself, waiting to see if his reaction to the darkness would be different now that there wasn't a massive cock to distract him. There was a slight flutter in his chest, a mild sense of dread that came and went faster than he could worry about it, but that was all.

"Are you sore?" Baikal was playing with Rabbit's hair, running the strands through his fingers absently. "Should I get the sun cream from my bag?"

"No." He rubbed his thighs together and while there was a slight burn, it was manageable. "The warm shower helped."

"It'll get easier each time."

"Considering how many rounds you think equates to one time," Rabbit drawled, "I doubt it."

"You only came five—"

"I might have been a virgin at the start of this," he cut him off, "but even I know how typical sex works. Five times is insane. You're lucky I didn't pass out on you."

"That's why I made sure to provide water." Baikal had left Rabbit as a puddle of blissed-out mush for a few minutes while he went to the kitchen to get some. Then he'd forced Rabbit to drink before bending him over the edge of the bed and entering him all over again.

"Would you like a gold star?" Rabbit grumbled.

"I can think of—"

"Don't. Don't think about anything. Just go to sleep."

Baikal laughed but didn't continue.

It was weird, how comfortable Rabbit felt, in the arms of a madman who he'd once thought he hated. Maybe a part of him still resented Void for forcing him, but that part seemed to be growing smaller and smaller with each passing day, and it was getting more tiring trying to pump air back into it than it should have been.

"You're nothing like her, by the way," he said after a quiet had settled over them. He felt Baikal still beneath his cheek. "My mother. You two aren't the same. You both torture me, but with her, it's for purely selfish reasons. With you... You're all kinds of fucked up, but you care for me. I don't understand why, but you do. That's something she isn't capable of."

Baikal held him tighter.

"I'm going to tell Professor Ludo that this upcoming performance might be my last." Rabbit had been thinking about it all day, and while he still wasn't certain, saying it out loud helped to make it feel real at least. "I'll need to again for my final, in order to graduate, but this upcoming one is ungraded. I agreed to it because I could never say no before."

"Whatever you decide to do," those fingers went back to combing through his hair, "I've got you."

"I know." Having the Brumal Prince, a Devil of Vitality, in his corner shouldn't be as big of a relief as it was. Hell, the man had come home covered in blood earlier and Rabbit still hadn't gotten the full story.

But when they were like this, with that Devil petting him like he was something worth protecting, something precious, it was impossible for Rabbit to deny the truth.

He was falling in love with Baikal Void.

Chapter 28:

Someone latched onto his ankle and yanked him clean off the bed.

Rabbit came to when he hit the floor, his shoulder blades connecting with the hard ground, sending spikes of pain throughout his entire system. There was a slight chill in the room, but the morning sun streamed through the thin, gauzy blinds, lighting the space up and chasing away all of the monsters that may have been hiding in the dark only a few hours prior.

Except for one, who stood standing over him, absolutely enraged.

Her hair was a similar shade to his, though a bit more on the platinum blonde side, and she wore it in a tight bun with not a single strand out of place. Her makeup was sparse, with natural tones to help highlight her wide hazel eyes and the high arch of her cheeks, but nothing overly noticeable from a mere glance. She was dressed in a black pencil skirt, the formfitting material showing off her toned body. Staying in shape and keeping herself young looking took up a third of her time, but all the effort and money had paid off. She didn't appear to be a day over thirty-five, despite the fact she was pushing fifty next June.

Reporters had frequently commented that the two of them could be brother and sister, and she'd giggled and swooned and pretended like she didn't agree. Pretended. Because it was a show to her. Everything was always a damn show to her.

Even her own son.

Even this.

December Trace didn't wear any other shoes but heels, and she was tapping hers against the floor, glaring down at Rabbit with so much vitriol he actually cowered like he was still a five-year-old boy who'd upset his mommy. At his reaction, she gave a dramatic huff and planted her hands on her waist.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Baikal's cold accusation cut across the room and Rabbit's head snapped up and in his direction.

In the midst of it all, he'd momentarily forgotten that he wasn't alone. He started to rise to his feet, but his mother's shiny red pump lashed out, kicking him in the shin hard enough to send him sprawling out on his back once more. He clutched at the injury, and rolled onto his side protectively, already anticipating there being more.

There always was.

December didn't do anything in half measures, not even beat her son.

Rabbit was so used to the routine that he caved in on himself and waited for it, but the next blow never came, and with a frown, he risked glancing past the protective barrier of his arms to see why.

Baikal had moved around the bed and was standing in front of him, fully nude. He didn't seem to give a shit about being naked in front of the older woman, however, quite the opposite, in fact. His spine was straight, his shoulders back, and the air around him felt menacing, like a separate entity weighing down the air in the room, causing tensions to skyrocket.

He was beautiful, Rabbit's Devil.

But he was also facing down the monster in the dark and the last time—

Rabbit shot back onto his feet with renewed vigor, putting himself between the two people who had haunted his existence, though for entirely different reasons. He held his arm out in front of

Baikal to silently keep him back and pulled himself to his full height. He'd never stood up against her before, but he tried to imagine this wasn't his mother in front of him.

This was just another outing and he was simply playing another part.

Just like she'd taught him.

The unruffled and diamond-hard prodigy.

"I wasn't informed you were returning," he said, his voice cool and clipped, like chipped ice off an ice sculpture. It took everything in him not to flinch when his mother set those furious eyes back on him and shifted half an inch closer in her heels threateningly.

"I don't need to get permission from you to enter my own home," she snapped, then threw out a hand, stabbing a well-manicured white nail in the air at Baikal. "I leave you on your own for a few months and this is how you repay me? By gallivanting around the city with criminal scum?" She set that harsh stare on the Brumal Prince. "Get the fuck out of my house before I call the police."

"Do," Baikal challenged. "I've been considering filing a physical abuse claim since you woke us—If he bruises anywhere that you've put those grimy hands, I'll make you pay tenfold."

"Excuse you?" She remained poised, but it was obvious he'd hit a nerve and she was merely waiting for the right opportunity to strike. December wouldn't risk anything in public, but they were currently in the private confines of her home, with no witnesses and therefore no one to stop her. "Rabbit, remove yourself from that deviant's side right this second and go wait for me in the practice room."

"Don't," Baikal said, delivering his own order. "Stay."

Rabbit hesitated, two sides at war with themselves. Survival instincts built upon throughout his life told him to do as his mother told him. Going along with her moods was the best way to avoid harsh punishment. But everything else inside of him was screaming not to go, to ignore her and focus on Baikal instead, not because his orders were more important, but because his were the ones Rabbit had chosen to follow.

Choice.

Didn't he have any?

"I'm twenty-two," he reminded December, proud when his voice remained firm. "I'm no longer a child. You don't get to snap your fingers and lock me up when you're bored anymore."

Her eyes narrowed. "Bored? Everything I've done I did for you, and you damn well know it, you ungrateful brat. Now, listen to your mother. I don't know what kind of nonsense this boy has put in your head but—"

Baikal's burst of sharp laughter brought her to a screeching halt. When he stopped long enough to notice her irritated stare, he motioned to her. "By all means, please continue."

"He's the Brumal Prince and the heir to Void United, mom," Rabbit stated, knowing that was exactly why Baikal had found her referring to him as a boy amusing. "He isn't just anybody."

Baikal hummed in agreement. "You can't simply hire thugs off the street to gang up and beat me in a filthy alleyway."

December sucked in a breath and sent an accusatory look to Rabbit.

"I don't think I want to play the beiska professionally," he said, deciding not to bother with anything else and get straight to the point. Finally.

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "It's your senior year, it's far too late for you to switch your life course and besides, there isn't even anything else that you're good at. What, do you think I'll fund your life if you've got nothing to show for it? Think again. You're a prodigy, Rabbit. You don't get the luxury of quitting. Did you put this idea into his head?" she accused Baikal.

“This has nothing to do with him,” Rabbit said, putting himself between them even more, not wanting to drag Void any deeper into this mess than he already was. He was an adult, even if he’d been unable to get that through his thick skull until now. Rabbit didn’t need his mother’s permission to choose his own path. “If you’re that against it, I can go. I can pack my things and—”

“Excuse you?” She shook her head. “You aren’t going anywhere. What would the media say if they found out my only child left home, and with a Brumal member no less?” A slightly manic twinkle entered her hazel eyes, sparking something within Rabbit that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

“Is that all you care about?” he asked, even as he tried to grab hold of the root for that odd feeling swirling around his gut. That crazed look on her wasn’t exactly new—she’d lost her temper with him more times than he could count—but, there was something specific about it now that was putting him on edge, warning him of...something.

“I shouldn’t have left you alone for so long,” she stated. “The doctor told me after the accident that you’d need to be monitored, but when you told me you were fine I believed you because yes, you are an adult. But I see now that was a mistake. I’ll pull you from university.” She tapped her chin. “Yes, that’ll do. You don’t need it anymore anyway. You’ll get a jumpstart on your career early. Teza Sound has been contacting me for ages trying to sign you to their label. I’ll give them a call and—”

“Stop.” Rabbit was afraid he’d gotten whiplash from all of that. “Teza Sound?” She’d never mentioned they’d called her about signing him before. “They’re located on Tigra.”

That wasn’t even in their galaxy.

“Exactly. Clearly a change of scenery will do you some good.”

“He isn’t going,” Baikal said, and even though the venom in his tone wasn’t directed at him, Rabbit felt a shiver skate down his spine anyway.

“Get out of my house,” December repeated. “I don’t care who your father is or what connections you supposedly have. I’m revered throughout the universe. You? You’re nothing but a criminal. And you will stay away from my son. Now, Rabbit, come here.”

Rabbit let out a startled sound when she grabbed his wrist and yanked on him hard enough he stumbled forward. Her grip was tight, grinding the bones together so they pinched, but it didn’t last long.

Baikal was there, tearing her off of him and flinging her back. He didn’t seem to care that she was Rabbit’s mother, or that he was standing in her house. He treated her like he did everyone else.

Like they were mere subjects and he was their king.

“Touch him again,” he growled, “and I’ll show you what kind of connections I truly have.”

“Void.” Rabbit reached for him, but that set his mother off and before he could touch him she screamed.

The sound was chaotic and terrifying, like a banshee wail, and she shot across the floor with seemingly supernatural speed and snatched up the glass orb Baikal had brought along with him. By the time she’d turned back, she was lifting it high above her head, letting out another insane battle cry before lunging and—

Rabbit didn’t see what happened after that.

The memory, that one he’d struggled against for so long, snapped back into place as though someone had hit play on a television set that had been paused for too long. Images flashed before his eyes, recollection sinking him into a headspace that took him far from his actual surroundings and planted him right in the midst of a nightmare.

He’d been crying in the practice room. His mother had driven them home from the recital in a rage, refusing to answer any of his questions about Oli. He’d seen her pull him from the

auditorium, and he had a bad feeling.

Up until this point, she'd only ever shown that side of herself to Rabbit, but there was always the chance, wasn't there? The chance that she'd slip up and she'd do something monstrous and the whole world would—

Something pinged against the pane of glass by his head and he turned, searching the darkness outside for any sign of what could have produced the sound. He'd been about to pull back when he heard his name whisper-yelled a second before Oli appeared on the other side.

He startled, slamming a palm over his chest, but Oli didn't give him much more time than that to recover, pointing to the right before disappearing around the side of the house.

Rabbit started toward the door leading out of the room but hesitated just beneath the threshold.

December had made it abundantly clear that Rabbit was never allowed to meet with his music teacher again. She'd screamed and ranted the entire drive about how big of a disappointment to her he'd been, how she'd always wished she'd had a daughter instead, someone who would listen to her and relate.

She'd slammed her hands on the steering wheel a couple of times, and though Rabbit was now twice her size, he'd still winced from the impacts, curling his shoulders in on himself protectively despite her never aiming his way.

This time.

If circumstances had been any different, Rabbit would have gone upstairs and pretended not to have noticed Oli at all, for both their sakes but...

Had he been seeing things, or had there been blood on Oli's shirt collar?

He had to see. Had to know what had happened between the older boy and his mother once and for all, and since she refused to tell him, he'd have to go to the other party for answers.

Trusting that she was in bed—since she typically lost steam immediately after one of her outbursts—Rabbit snuck toward the back entrance and slipped out into the night. The cold air bit at his bare arms and he huddled as he darted around toward the side part of the house where he suspected Oli would be waiting. Overhead, the stars winked and a full moon helped to cast a pale glow, the only source to give him any sort of aid as he moved.

Shadows lurked from every corner and he tried not to pay them any heed, reminding himself that it'd been a long time since he'd been truly scared of the dark and that wasn't something he wanted to go back to. He was older now, more in control.

"Rabbit!"

He followed that voice, picking up the pace when he spotted Oli standing just beneath the side porch light located by the small greenhouse. Grateful for a beacon out of the pitch black otherwise hovering around them.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, the fear he'd held for himself fizzling to nothingness the second he got a good look at Oli's face.

His bruised and swollen face.

One of his eyes was entirely sealed shut, and his lip was cracked in three places. His cheeks and his jawline were covered in a smattering of harsh, purple, and blue blotches that had Rabbit instantly feeling sick to his stomach, and that was before the man took a step toward him.

Limped toward him.

"She didn't..." Rabbit couldn't comprehend what he was seeing, even though it was painfully obvious what had transpired after he'd lost sight of Oli and his mother out the back

doors of the auditorium.

He'd wanted to leap off the stage and go after them, this intense dread coming over him then, but Rabbit hadn't been able to. He was a slave to the beiska and the stage, and if he'd left in the middle of a performance, anything his mother had planned would have only been worse.

At least, that's what he'd convinced himself. A pretty lie, perhaps, so he could say he wasn't simply a coward too afraid of their mommy to act on their own, even if that action would be in the best interest of the only person on the entire planet who had ever treated him like a person and not a prop or a glittering item to ooh and aah at.

That's what he was doing now even, however. Being a coward, trying to convince himself that what he was staring at wasn't real for the sake of his sanity.

She'd hurt him in the past, sure, but that was different, and even then, she'd been sure not to leave any visible or long-lasting marks. She'd covered her tracks and left no evidence behind.

"Light." Rabbit had realized there was something off about his mother a long time ago when she'd tossed the birthday gifts his kindergarten class had gotten him into the trash because they'd be "distractions".

Or when she'd threatened to cut off all his hair if he didn't unlock a new color.

Or when he'd woken that one time, in the dead of night, only to find her standing over his bedside watching with glassy eyes. She'd told him she'd come to get him for practice and had forced him up and down to that room where she'd locked him in until he'd been a crying, shaking mess.

December Trace was a monster, and the one thing that could keep her in check, could keep those monstrous tendencies of hers from leaking out and poisoning the air around her, was music. There'd been little doubt in Rabbit's mind that if he hadn't been born gifted enough to play the beiska, she would have tossed him onto the streets long ago and washed her hands of him entirely.

But this...Hurting him was one thing. Hurting him allowed her to purge those inner demons and keep the mask firmly intact. Rabbit wasn't the only one good at lying to himself, after all, he'd picked the skill up from her just as he had everything else.

December didn't just fool the world into thinking she was the caring, sophisticated musician and mother, she'd also fooled herself into believing it. She thought with every fiber of her being she was molding Rabbit into a perfect masterpiece, a musician who'd one day be skilled enough to stand on stage next to her and draw even more attention her way.

Her way. Not Rabbit's. Because even she hadn't managed to manipulate herself enough to believe any of this was actually for his benefit. She'd always known it was for her own. Rabbit could tell. He could see the fact of that written on her face and in her greedy expression whenever a news reporter asked her questions about when the two of them would be seen on stage together. When they complimented her for raising such an exemplary student. When they flattered her by saying she looked young enough to be his sister.

The reason everyone said those things to her was because she was a master of disguise. She'd perfected her character and presented it to the rest of the universe flawlessly.

Until now.

Oli grabbed his hand and squeezed when Rabbit reached for him, stopping him before he could touch his brutalized face.

Rabbit's music teacher had always been like sunshine incarnate, bright, and bubbly. He could find a silver lining amid the darkest storms and had the uncanny ability to make Rabbit want to do the same. He'd always admired the dimples on his cheeks and the fine arch of his golden

brows, but now everything was caked in dried blood, and the fact that his mother was the reason for it made him want to both throw-up and beg for forgiveness.

"I should have stayed away." He tried to pull his hand free, but Oli's grip tightened, keeping him captive as panic swept across the older man's expression.

"Come with me," he blurted, casting his eyes toward the dark, looming house. The single porch light illuminated them only enough to make them visible to one another while standing this close, less than three feet apart. "Let's leave, Rabbit. We can go and never look back. You can be free."

"What—" He tried to take Oli's other hand, gasping when that had him crying out.

Oli Easton, the best musician on this side of the planet aside from December Trace, had three broken fingers.

"No." Rabbit shook his head and stepped back, yanking himself free from that hold. That cowardly voice returned tenfold despite his earlier thoughts. His mother was a controlling nightmare to him, sure, but music was her God. She would never... "You need to get to a hospital!" He forgot all about the need to be quiet, grabbing onto his elbow to tug him toward the other side of the house.

They only made it a few steps before Oli dug his heels in.

"That's not important right now," Oli said, but Rabbit didn't agree.

"If you don't get this checked you'll never play again!"

"I don't care."

"How can you say that?" Rabbit had only met Oli because of their shared love for the beiska. There was no way his teacher would willingly give that up, and for what? His ex-student with the overbearing mother? It didn't make sense.

It wasn't worth it.

"I'll call you a cab," Rabbit lifted his multi-slate and started doing just that. "They'll bring you directly to the hospital. Take my account info, I have enough to cover—"

"I don't want your money, Rabbit," Oli stated, sounding slightly offended, but mostly just harried.

"Then," even knowing he shouldn't ask it, that he should insist Oli go immediately, Rabbit hesitated, "What do you want, Oli?"

"She's a monster," he told him. "She isn't safe to be around. You need to leave before—"

There was a hard crashing sound and Oli instantly stopped talking. For a moment, Rabbit didn't understand why or what was going on, frowning over at the older man.

And then a trickle of blood rolled over Oli's forehead, dripping down the long bridge of his nose. His light blue eyes were wide and frozen, a dash of fear shimmering in those irises that had always reminded Rabbit of sweet summer skies.

He watched, frozen in horror, as that light winked and then dimmed and went out completely.

It had to have only been seconds, half a minute at most, but time seemed to stretch and move in slow motion from Rabbit's perspective, and the moment when Oli had been talking to him and the one where his body collapsed in a lifeless heap seemed to have years spanning between them.

Oli's head struck the ground right between Rabbit's feet, him having been unable to move away from that falling body, the shock holding him in place.

He blinked at the blood caking in the locks of curly hair he'd grown fond of. He pictured

the way Oli used to twirl it around his fingers whenever he was excited about something—like a scene in a movie he loved and wanted Rabbit to see, or a song on the radio he listened to when he was a kid.

Now that hair was matted and soaking with crimson and for what felt like another lifetime Rabbit's brain simply could not process what he was looking at.

December shifted in the shadows then, the sound of her heels scrapping against the concrete path finally pulling Rabbit out of his stupor. Her hair was in disarray now as well, her bangs falling before her pinched brow. She was scowling down at Oli's body, but not in a confused or upset way.

Derisively.

Like she couldn't believe he'd dare step foot on her property and he'd gotten what he deserved for it.

Rabbit's gaze trailed lower, stopping on the shattered bits of the flower pot still clutched tightly in his mother's right hand. One large jagged piece remained in her hold, the rest bits of broken eion ceramic littering the walkway.

The pot had been large enough he'd needed two hands to carry it when he'd brought it out here to the side patio greenhouse. It wasn't a very large structure, only around five by five feet, and made of thick glass. They hired someone to take care of the grounds. His mother was far too busy to waste her own time on such frivolous things, yet deemed it necessary since this side of the house faced the closest neighbors.

She seldom bothered coming here, so he'd thought it was the safest place for the potted plant when it'd been gifted to him by Oli last month.

Eion ceramic was tough, one of the harder materials, sturdy enough to keep in the cantankerous roots of the everlove mint plant Oli had picked out for him. He'd gone with mint because that was the last color Rabbit had successfully unlocked on the beiska. It'd been just the two of them alone in the practice room—with all the lights thankfully on—and he'd done it absently in the middle of a conversation, his fingers mindlessly strumming at strings.

Rabbit hadn't told his mother about the color either, both it and the plant becoming his little secrets of sorts. Things he thought he could keep and protect, small as they were.

Apparently, he'd been wrong, because now both Oli and the mint plant lay sprawled out at his feet, one dead already and the other surely in the process of dying now that it'd been removed from its special soil. Everlove mint was rare and hard to come by and wasn't cheap. He'd inherited a comfortable amount of coin when his parents had passed, but was by no means rolling in it. If he was careful with his spending, he could probably live off of it for a good five or so years. Purchasing frivolous, overly expensive plants shouldn't be a part of his budget, and yet he'd gotten them for Rabbit.

Oli had refused to tell Rabbit where he'd bought them too, no matter how many times Rabbit had asked, most likely because it'd been a hassle to get.

And now all that effort was going to waste.

"You killed them," the words slipped past Rabbit's lips, shaky and weak. Bewildered despite the fact he'd witnessed it all.

He'd witnessed it, meaning there was no use denying it away like he had everything else. When he stared into his mother's eyes, all he saw was the monster that lurked beneath her polished veneer.

"You did," December corrected. "You did this, Rabbit. This is your fault!"

"No." He shook his head and took a step back, but his mother only followed, her foot coming down on one of the delicate branches of the everlove mint, snapping it beneath her weight without so much as a thought.

"I warned you not to get close to anyone," she reminded. "I told you it wouldn't do you any good, that it would only end in heartache. You need to be focused on your music."

"He was my friend."

"He was no friend! A friend wouldn't distract you and put your entire future at risk the way he was!" She dropped the rest of the pot and grabbed his face, smearing blood from her palm across his left cheek.

She'd cut herself on the ceramic and hadn't seemed to notice.

"You need to learn your lesson so that this doesn't happen again," she said, her gaze wild, her mouth twisting into an evil smirk. She appeared unhinged, and he was terrified.

"Mom," he tried to pry her hands off but she was having none of that, "stop!"

She twisted them and then shoved, laughing when he stumbled back and tripped over the ledge leading into the greenhouse.

Rabbit hit the ground with a heavy thud, pain vibrating up his tailbone and throughout his legs. It was too dark, and he flicked on the light in a panic. He forgot all about it, however, when the sound of something being dragged caught his attention, and he looked over in horror to find that she was yanking Oli's body by the leg toward him.

He scuttled backward, struggling to his feet only to come up against the back table. He knocked it over, pots falling and shattering, the sound not nearly loud enough to drown out the pounding in his ears.

"What are you doing?!"

With a strength he hadn't realized she possessed, she bent and lifted Oli and then with one hard shove, pushed him into the greenhouse right at Rabbit.

Rabbit caught him, because what else was he meant to do, but when Oli's head lolled to the side he let out a cry and dropped him.

Oli's body slid to the ground and remained there, partially pinning Rabbit's legs against the table. The small space and his much larger form meant he was now blocking the exit, the smell of dirt and blood mixing and itching at Rabbit's nose.

He tried to climb over him but his foot was caught under that weight and he ended up falling forward instead, slamming on his hands, his knees coming down over Oli's thighs. They were still warm, as though he were merely sleeping and not...

Rabbit wretched, emptying the contents of his stomach—which admittedly hadn't been much, since he'd only had half a bottle of water all day. He was still gagging when the tips of his mother's high heels came into view.

"Maybe this time you'll learn your lesson," December stated coolly, brushing at the loose ends of her hair in a poor attempt to smooth them back into place. "The only person you have to rely on in this universe, Rabbit, is me. Remember that next time filth like this," she kicked out at Oli's ankle, "tries to distract you."

She grabbed one of the smaller pots on the shelf to her left then and lifted it, smashing the single overhead light bulb to pieces. The light went out, casting their surroundings in mild darkness, and she stepped back. Her hand went to the silver doorknob.

"Since you're so fond of him," she said, "I'll do you a favor as your mother. I'll let you spend one final night with him."

Rabbit couldn't have formed words if he wanted to, frozen in place as she slammed and locked the door from the outside. The sound of her footsteps retreating, followed by the side porch light going off immediately had his heart skipping in his chest.

It was too dark.

He couldn't see.

There was just the smell of dirt and blood and the dwindling warmth of the body he was kneeling on and—

He shot to his feet, tripping yet again. His head bashed against the thick glass door but it did him more harm than it. He had no clue how long he spent pounding on it, screaming until his voice had gone hoarse, begging and pleading with her to come back and let him out and turn on a light.

The darkness seemed to laugh at him.

Eventually, he got lightheaded.

He didn't remember if he'd simply passed out or if he'd tripped a fourth time and hit his head again. All Rabbit knew was the next time he woke, he was at the hospital, listening to the doctor tell him the tragic tale about how Oli Easton, the rising beiska star, had committed suicide in front of him.

At the time, the trauma and the stress of it all had made Rabbit block out the truth and he'd believed them.

He'd believed them.

Chapter 29:

Someone was calling his name but it wasn't the voice from his nightmare memory this time.

Rabbit blinked and came to slowly as if being pulled from a thrashing sea desperate to keep hold of him and bring him back under. It was tempting to allow it, to slip back into that murky nothingness where he could pretend like that night had never happened. Where he could lie to himself and act like he still believed the story the doctor had spun for his mother.

The first thing he was able to process, aside from the voice, were the arms cradled around him. He was being held close, the person's body partially blocking him as though to shield him from something.

He wanted to laugh at that because it was too late. He'd already seen the most horrible sight there was to see. Or...

Baikal's face swam into view, fuzzy at first as Rabbit's vision adjusted and cleared. He appeared frantic, the tough, unshakable Brumal Prince he was used to seeing gone. The man in his place was staring with fear in his teal eyes.

And a single drop of blood rolling down the side of his left temple.

Rabbit startled, forcing himself up onto his knees, reaching for him.

"What—"

"I told you he was fine," December's curt tone cut through the moment. She was standing a few feet away, that glass orb still clutched in her right hand. It was hanging down by her side now, but the droplets of blood smeared on the side were impossible to miss.

Blood. Like that night.

Only this time, she'd hit Baikal.

She'd. Hit. *Baikal*.

"He's melodramatic, always has been," his mother said, but Rabbit wasn't listening.

That night, he should have been braver, stronger. He should have stood his ground and not cowered behind the possibility of financial ruin and having to make it on his own. Up until that point, he'd always just assumed that was his lot in life and he needed to get over his personal troubles with it. He'd convinced himself that he needed his mother's adoration and respect.

His inability to separate himself from her nonsense had cost Oli his life and Rabbit his sanity. For months now he'd been a shell of a person, like the walking dead, at war with himself to keep what she'd done to Oli from returning to him.

Now, all of those times he'd been scared whenever someone had tried to get close made more sense. He'd assumed it was because he was worried his mom would push them off the edge like she'd done with Oli, making them want to take their own life. But Oli had never done that. She'd lied.

Rabbit hadn't been strong enough to act then, and ironically, he'd probably say he was in a more mentally unstable place now than he'd been that night, however...

He wasn't caught off guard by her actions this time around, and she hadn't simply hit a friend of his.

She'd hit Baikal.

He got to his feet and moved to the side of the bed Baikal had been sleeping on, not even noticing when Void's hand dropped away from his arm and he let him.

"What do you think he was with you for?" December chortled. "Did you really think he liked

you or something? My son? My son has a future, a bright one, and one you are not a part of. Run back to your criminal father and stay the hell away from what's mine."

Rabbit knew where Void kept it. He'd seen him place it in his backpack a couple of times before and had simply turned the other cheek.

The blood on his body last night hadn't bothered Rabbit because he'd figured anyone who got involved with the Brumal knew what they were getting themselves into. Maybe that was callous of him, but he'd never claimed to be a good person either. Things were different with his mother though. Oli had taken a job as a teacher and had ended up with his skull bashed open. Yet she dared to stand there and degrade Baikal?

There was only one monster in this room and it wasn't Rabbit's Devil.

Sure enough, Baikal had placed his bag on the floor by the nightstand, and when Rabbit opened the middle pocket and his left hand wrapped around the barrel of the blaster, he didn't stop to consider the rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins or worry about why this was the path his mind had immediately brought him down.

Maybe his mother was right after all.

Maybe he was just melodramatic.

"That's what I should be saying," his voice cut across the expanse of the room, the sheer authority there catching their attention. Rabbit lifted the blaster and aimed it directly at his mother's head as he rounded the bed and came to a stop at Baikal's side. "Stay the hell away from what's mine." His arm didn't even shake. "And get out of my life for good."

"What—" Her astonishment washed away any of the smugness she'd been throwing Void's way. "What are you doing?"

"Little bunny," Baikal whispered, turning his body closer toward him. "Think this through. That's dangerous."

"I remember," Rabbit stated, ignoring everything else but the spark of recognition in his mother's eyes. "I remember the truth of that night. Oli didn't kill himself. You killed him."

She didn't bother denying it.

"You aren't even going to try to convince me I'm wrong?" He chuckled, but the sound lacked humor. "I just told you I remember you're a murderer!"

"And?" She sighed and tossed the glass orb onto the ground absently. "What's done is done."

"That's it?"

"It's not like it matters. He had no family, the doctor was more than willing to take my money and fake the autopsy report, and his body was cremated. There's nothing for anyone to find. There's no proof. Forget him. I did you a favor."

"You made me a zombie!" All those times he'd panicked before a show or in the dark. All those sleepless nights where he stared up at his ceiling, drowning in guilt over the fact his mother had ruined someone's life so extensively that they killed themselves afterward.

But Oli had never done that, and it had never been Rabbit's fault. Any of it.

"You're a parasite," he said. "A soulless monster. That's why you've only been able to unlock three colors and why you'll never be able to unlock any more."

Her gaze darkened but he didn't care.

He was done caring about her.

"You need feelings, mother, in order to master an instrument like the beiska. Depth. And you? You don't have any." He shifted his aim from her head to her heart. "Which means there's only one way this is going to end between you and I."

“Rabbit.” Baikal rested a palm lightly against Rabbit’s narrow back, but it was impossible to tell if he was trying to talk him down or just showing his support.

It didn’t really matter.

This was Rabbit’s choice.

No one else’s.

“You aren’t going to shoot me,” December said, some of that veneer cracking. She was uncertain.

“I could,” Rabbit replied coldly. “Or I could simply release the video.”

She straightened. “What video?”

“You’re right. There is no proof you murdered Oli that night. But there is proof that no matter the how you’re the why that drove him to death.”

She frowned and shook her head.

“Security cameras,” Baikal stated, picking up on Rabbit’s plan. His hand pressed against him a little more firmly, in clear support this time. “They’re a real bitch. Us filth who grew up in the Brumal know better than to leave the scene of a crime without clearing the area of them. Too bad you didn’t think of doing that yourself.”

“There’s proof you had him beat and that you also helped,” Rabbit continued. “Once that’s leaked, all I have to do is tell the world my side of things. Even if they don’t believe me, even if the doctor sticks to your fake story, it won’t matter. Everyone will know that even if it wasn’t by your actual hand, you killed Oli.”

He recalled her cruel words that night and snarled.

“You’re the reason he’s dead.” And Rabbit’s only guilt was that he’d allowed himself to forget the truth all this time.

“You’re lying.” She licked her lips, pale and shaking now.

“I’d show you the video,” he said, “but you don’t deserve to see his face ever again, not even in grainy footage. He’s on the ground for most of it, but you? You’re front and center. There’s no mistaking it’s December Trace lording over a poor man getting kicked in the ribs.”

“Don’t forget the hand,” Baikal added helpfully. “She stomped on his hand.”

Rabbit’s mouth thinned in a line as anger and disgust boiled within him.

“Oli could have told you about all of that before I caught you two by the greenhouse,” she accused.

“Don’t believe me then,” he shrugged a single shoulder. “Risk it. Either way, I’ll still be the one standing here with the gun and you’ll still be the one who’s lost all their power. I can release the video from right here even. Should I?”

“What do you want?” She hated it, but she bit the words out finally.

“Call some of your friends,” Rabbit said to Void. “Have them come here ASAP. They’ll escort my mother to the nearest shuttleport and watch as she boards a ship off planet.”

Off of it. The planet was technically big enough for the both of them, but Rabbit couldn’t even stomach the idea of breathing the same air as this woman anymore.

“What?” Her hands fisted at her sides. “You can’t be serious? You have no right! Vitality is my home! This is my house! You ungrateful—”

He shifted on his feet, bringing the gun a few inches closer to her person. “Or I could always just shoot you and be done with it altogether. It’s as you’ve already pointed out, mother. My boyfriend is a criminal. I’m sure he knows more than one way to dispose of your body. I’ll get away with it, just as you got away with it a year ago.”

"People will come looking," she disagreed.

"And I'll play the part of the concerned son, wiping my teary eyes for the camera. Playing the audience, just like you taught me, isn't that right?" She'd always told him how important it was to work those around him, to make them see the image of himself only he wanted them to see.

"You couldn't." Her gaze dropped to the gun and then returned to his face. "I'm your mother!"

"You're the monster who locked me in the dark with the dead body of my only friend," he corrected, and it was a wonder he didn't scream it when he did. But that wasn't part of the projection now. To make her believe he was capable of shooting her as he claimed, he needed to come off cold and detached, not give in to the tumultuous rage simmering inside of him.

Baikal went still at his side, a coldness sweeping off of him. "She did what."

It came out rhetorical, but Rabbit replied anyway.

"Yeah," he said. "Turns out my trauma? A little deeper than I first assumed."

"Shoot her." It was clear Baikal wished to do so himself now.

"Fine!" December screamed. "I'll go! I'll leave for now."

"Forever," Rabbit corrected. "Stay away and I promise not to mess with the one thing you care about. Your career. Those are the terms."

"You're my son. You're saying you'll never see me again?"

"Since when have you cared about me?" He quirked a brow. "You haven't seen me in eleven months, mom, and the first thing you did was drag me violently out of bed. That isn't love or caring or whatever else you're going to try and convince me it is. That's the deal. We go our separate ways, for good, and I don't hand that video over to the media."

December stared at him, hatred painted all over her expression.

Baikal moved over to the end table and picked up his multi-slate, tapping away at it as he returned to Rabbit's side. It beeped and he hummed. "Kazimir and Flix are on their way now. They'll be here in less than ten minutes. I have them purchasing a one-way ticket off planet as we speak."

Rabbit hadn't met that last person, but he recognized the name. Flix was another student he sometimes saw walking around campus with Baikal and his cousin.

"To Ignite," December demanded.

Baikal looked to Rabbit who gave a single nod of his head.

His mom had a few colleagues there from her college days that she still visited now and again. Let her run to them for comfort.

She was going to need it.

"Stop," he ordered when she went to take a step out of the room.

"I need to pack my things," she huffed.

"No, you don't. Everything you need is already in the travel bag you brought with you. It's in the foyer, isn't it? You always leave it there and expect someone else to bring it up to your room for you."

"I'm a musician," she snapped. "My arms are too important for me to risk pulling a muscle trying to haul that heavy thing up the stairs."

"The flight has been booked," Baikal announced.

"You're going to regret this," his mother said. "I'm all you have, Rabbit. You're nothing without me."

"That's not true," he told her. "I'm nothing with you. I'm just the son of December Trace, the abuser, and the murderer, and I don't want to be that person anymore."

He just wanted to be himself. He wanted to figure out what that even meant.

And he wanted to do it free.

“They’re here,” Baikal stated, letting them know that his friends had arrived. They must have been leaving campus or something, since it was so close to his house.

December held Rabbit’s gaze, and there may have been a small spark of sadness there before she masked it so he couldn’t be sure. “I really do just want what’s best for you.”

“No, mom,” he shook his head and made himself come to terms with the truth when he said, “And you never did.”

* * *

He didn’t go with them to the shuttleport, not sure he’d be able to fake it for that long. Instead, Rabbit stayed in his room, waiting for confirmation that his mother had boarded the spaceship and it had launched.

He was sitting on the end of his bed, his elbows resting on his knees. One spot on the ground where a single drop of Baikal’s blood had spilled and dried had held his attention for the past fifteen minutes or so. Later, he’d unpack why seeing the other man bleeding like that had sent him into such a spiraling rage, but right now he had other things to deal with.

The Brumal Prince had stayed with him, refusing to leave his side even when Rabbit had been uncertain of his friends. He’d reassured him though, and eventually, Rabbit had conceded to letting him stay.

Honestly, he was grateful.

He didn’t want to be alone right now.

Void had thrown on a pair of black boxer-briefs, but hadn’t bothered with any other clothing. He’d also taken back the blaster, which was resting on the dresser he was leaning against across from the bed. He stuck close, just in case, but had otherwise given Rabbit space.

He was grateful for that too.

A multi-slate dinged and Baikal checked his, the device strapped to his wrist, making his near nakedness look a little funny. “They’ve taken off.”

“She was on it, they’re sure?”

“Positive. Kazimir even ordered the flight crew to send a photo just before launch. Do you want to see it?”

Rabbit considered and then shook his head in the negative.

“The trip to Ignite will take roughly two days. I’ll have someone on the ground there confirm she’s arrived as well,” Baikal reassured him.

“Send it.” Rabbit rubbed his hands together, that spot on the floor blurring slightly.

“Come again?”

“The video,” he explained. “Send it. Star-Void News is the largest media station on the planet and it’s got your name on it. Give it to them to be safe. We know they won’t hesitate to air the story even though the beloved December Trace is being smeared in it.”

“Rabbit.” Baikal watched him for a moment, but when he didn’t get a reply, sighed. “Are you sure?”

“She murdered him, Void,” he met his gaze head-on finally, “right in front of me. There was no remorse. No regret. Then she forced me into that greenhouse—” the one he was going to have torn down, “—and locked me in there with him. Oli didn’t deserve that. I didn’t deserve that. She has to pay.”

“Let’s think this through, little bunny.” Baikal stepped over and then crouched in front of him, resting his hands on his thighs. “I get you’re upset, and I’m not saying she doesn’t have it coming. I’d shoot her myself if I had the chance and I didn’t think that would bother you. But let’s be smart here.”

“How?” He didn’t want to listen, wanted to implode her life right here and now so that some of the anger inside of him might abate and let him breathe but... Void knew this stuff better than he did, and he’d be an idiot not to listen.

“Two days, that’s how long her trip is,” Baikal reminded. “I’ll hand over the video and give the full story to someone I trust at the station, but,” the corner of his mouth turned up viciously, “let’s tell them to wait on it. Release it just as she’s arriving at the shuttleport in Ignite.”

“Where all the reporters who found out about her arrival will already be waiting.” It was smart. And it would cause his mother the most damage. The most distress. “Am I a monster too?”

Because none of that sounded bad to him and he didn’t regret the idea of destroying her life either.

Because obviously Baikal had also committed murder before and knew the best way to hurt people, and yet Rabbit wasn’t angry with him over it.

“No, bunny.” He reached up and grasped the back of his skull, pulling him in so he could brush a light kiss over his lips. “You’re not a monster, you’ve just got scars, that’s all. But I’ll help you heal them. You can get through this.”

“I know.” Rabbit searched his teal gaze. “You’re with me.”

“Forever,” he promised.

A tear slipped past Rabbit’s defenses and as a last-ditch attempt to distract himself, he brushed his fingers through the dark hairs over the mark on Baikal’s head his mother had made. “Does it hurt?”

“This is nothing,” he grinned. “I’ve been through much worse.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to cry now.”

“You don’t have to warn me, Rabbit, or get my permission. Just be you. If you need to cry, cry. I’ve got you no matter what, remember?”

Leaning in, he planted his forehead against the curve of Baikal’s shoulder and his neck, breathing in deep that familiar and now comforting scent of wood smoke and eucalyptus.

And then Rabbit let it out, all the pain and the pent-up agony. All the secrets he’d been clinging to and the pressure to make someone proud who had never even seen him. He sobbed and clung to Baikal, and when the Brumal Prince’s arms came around him and pulled him in close, he cried some more.

Chapter 30:

The song came easily to him, the sound light and airy, uplifting. It was a change from his usual, and he could tell right away that most of the audience—at least in the front row where the lights were bright enough for him to make them out—had noticed.

That didn't really mean anything to Rabbit, however. He wasn't playing for them. For once, he was up on this stage for himself and only himself.

Wisps of buttery yellow floated on the air, mingling with strips of teal and flashes of vibrant red. They danced in the air, bursts of green crackling like fireworks joining them when he switched to a different note and poured more of his energy into the instrument in his hands. It'd been so long since he'd felt this kind of connection with his beiska, and the corner of his mouth tipped up. Instead of fighting the smile down so he could maintain his aloof and unattainable persona, the smokescreen created by his mother to keep him and the rest of the world apart, he left it.

Rabbit Trace was no longer going to dance to anyone else's tune but his own. Starting with this stage. This moment.

Yesterday's events had continued to play non-stop in his mind all evening, well into the morning, but now that he was here, he found the memories drifting away. He wasn't burying them like he'd done with the ones of that horrible night a year ago, this was different. In the way he hadn't been mentally stable enough to do last year, he was coming to grips with it.

His mother was a monster and he'd acted as the monster's son, keeping her secrets and burying his head in the sand. No more. Tomorrow, when her ship landed on Ignite, the whole universe would finally see her for what she truly was.

It would cause an uproar, and there was little doubt in his mind he'd be hounded by the press as much as they could manage—Baikal had already reassured him he'd do his best to keep them at bay, which for the Brumal Prince meant threatening reporters enough they listened—but Rabbit had already decided he'd be honest and open about everything. Even his experiences on the receiving end of her more violent tendencies.

There was a chance it would affect his career, tarnish it before it could take off but... considering Rabbit wasn't sure he wanted to proceed with it anyway, what did it matter, really? Besides, gaining his freedom and securing justice for Oli was more important. He was young. There was plenty of time to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life, even if the prospect was scary.

His gaze shifted toward the right where a figure dressed in black stood. He had his shoulder propped against the wall, his arms and ankles crossed. Even though he'd picked a spot off to the side where the glow from the spotlight over Rabbit couldn't reach him, Rabbit felt the heat of his gaze, even if he couldn't see it.

Baikal Void. The Brumal Prince. His sort of stalker.

The man Rabbit had referred to yesterday as his boyfriend.

Void had yet to bring it up, but Rabbit could tell he was just waiting for the right moment. He had no clue how he knew that, he just did. Somewhere over the course of the past month together, he'd picked up on things he hadn't meant to. Had learned to read the dark devil prince.

Had learned to find solace in his lascivious looks and the wicked skills of his tongue. It wasn't all about sexual desire though, as much as Rabbit wished otherwise. That would, at the very

least, make things less complicated.

In the beginning, Baikal had stated Rabbit needed someone to take care of him. He'd scoffed at the idea then, but now...Now he was seeing there was a difference between oppressing someone and caring for them. His mother had done the first, but with Baikal it was the latter. Even when he'd been forcing him, Rabbit had enjoyed it. He'd denied it then, but there was no point in continuing to do so.

The Brumal Prince already knew he wanted him, he'd been open about that already. As for the rest...Rabbit still needed time to sort through his thoughts and emotions. These feelings inside of him were new. He didn't want to jump the gun by confessing there was a deeper connection between them on his side. Baikal may have told him he'd never let him go, but things changed. People changed.

Rabbit brought the song to an end, the final note, a ribbon of moonlight white, spiraling up toward the spotlight before vanishing in a puff of smoke. He kept his eyes locked on Baikal's shadowy form even as the crowd erupted in familiar cheers. Kept staring when the clapping started to hurt his eardrums.

He watched until the lights came on and the Brumal Prince became visible in all his wicked glory.

Then Rabbit smiled at him and nodded his head toward the side of the stage, silently urging him to follow him.

Immediately, there were gasps and comments from the audience.

From here on out, the choice was his. And he chose to invite Baikal in.

* * *

"Are you sure about this?" Professor Ludo glanced between Rabbit and Baikal, clearly preferring they'd be alone so he could say something else but refraining out of fear.

Void stood just over Rabbit's shoulder in the hallway, waiting for Rabbit to finish up this conversation. The two of them had been on the way to his dressing room when they'd run into the professor, who'd praised Rabbit for his performance, moving off to the side when Rabbit had immediately begun to explain that he may be quitting soon.

"Take more time to think this over," the professor said. "This is a big decision that'll affect your entire future. It's not something you should decide on lightly." He stepped closer, reaching out to rest a hand on Rabbit's elbow. Only to quickly remove it when Baikal emitted a low, warning growl. "You aren't being persuaded into doing anything you don't want to, right? If you're in any danger, you can tell me, Rabbit."

Irony, considering he was in league with Rabbit's mother. But he kept that to himself. He doubted the professor had any clue about the types of methods she'd used on her son to *persuade* him over the years. He'd know soon enough, along with everyone else.

"I'm the one who's considering it," Rabbit told him. "The beiska might no longer be my passion." Might never have been. "And I want to take the time to discover what I'm actually interested in before it's too late. Which is why I'm dropping out of the next couple of performances you asked me to participate in. They aren't required of me, and frankly, it's getting in the way of my regular studies."

"Regular studies?" he spluttered.

"I have to pass my other classes to graduate," he reminded. "These past three years I've barely skated by because I was always too focused on music." That was a lie, but he didn't need to

know it.

“You’re a music major!”

“That’s true. For now. We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Mr. Trace,” he set his hands on his hips, tone taking on an edge now that he’d realized he couldn’t easily convince Rabbit to change his mind, “it is far too late for you to switch majors. If you did, you’d have to retake at least two years of schooling. What would your mother think?”

“Frankly, Professor Ludo,” Rabbit took a pointed step around him, “I don’t give a shit what she thinks. Let’s go, Void. I’m done here.”

Baikal smirked and sent a wink to the professor as they passed, chuckling when that made the older man go pale.

“You played beautifully,” he complimented as soon as the two of them were shut into the dressing room and finally alone.

Rabbit grunted. “It’s so weird hearing you say words like that.”

“Because I’m a Devil?”

“Something like that.” Rabbit went over to the table to check out the flowers and gifts that had been brought, brightening when he spotted the familiar bouquet of the Rose Ephemeral. He rolled one of the silky petals between two fingers and leaned in to take a whiff of their sharp sweetness.

“You really like those,” Baikal said. “I’m getting a bit jealous.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Rabbit rolled his eyes and plucked the card free. There was only a single word this time, the word soon in bold lettering. He frowned and held the card up toward Void. “Soon what?”

Baikal gave him an odd look. “What do you mean? Why are you asking me?”

Rabbit faltered. “Didn’t you...” He turned back to the flowers. “Aren’t you the one who’s been sending these?”

He was quiet a moment and then asked, “Why would you think that?”

“You said you’d started watching me a year ago,” Rabbit explained. “That’s around the time these started appearing. I just assumed...You aren’t the one sending them? But they’re so expensive. Who else could even afford these?”

“And why would they send them to a stranger,” Baikal drawled suspiciously.

Rabbit shook his head. “I don’t have any friends, Void. Remember?”

“Well, someone seems to be under the impression the two of you are close.”

He stepped away from the flowers. It was odd because he’d only concluded recently that Baikal had been the one sending them, so it shouldn’t be such a disappointment that he wasn’t. It shouldn’t tarnish the joy that Rabbit had always gotten whenever he did receive them, and yet...

“Don’t look so forlorn.” Baikal stepped up and pulled a different bouquet from the packed mix. “I have been getting you flowers, little bunny. If anything, I should be the one upset since it’s obvious you’ve never noticed them.”

They were roses as well, though not fancy Ephemeral ones. A dozen blood-red roses on long stems were wrapped in silver paper and tied with a teal bow.

“They’re beautiful.” There was something about the simplicity of them that Rabbit liked. He had paid attention to them a time or two, he now recalled, it was just he’d gotten so attached to the Ephemeral ones and the idea of having a secret admirer, he hadn’t paid as much care to the other gifts as he should have.

Now, he took the time, his gaze sweeping over the contents of the table. There were cards and boxes with bows and stuffed animals. The audience had always lavished him with presents, even

when he'd been a kid.

"You have a lot of fans," Baikal said, watching Rabbit closely.

If Rabbit took his mother out of the equation, how would he feel about all of this? Would he enjoy the attention like he used to? The fame? Playing on that stage just now had given him a rush he hadn't experienced in a long time. Something akin to elation. Something he wouldn't mind feeling again.

"I haven't decided on anything yet." Rabbit needed more time.

"And you don't have to." Baikal cupped the base of his skull and bent down to place a tender kiss on his brow. "Don't consider their feelings," he motioned to the gifts, "or your mother's," he paused and then said in a slightly less enthusiastic tone, "or mine. You have to choose this for yourself, Rabbit. Choose what will make you happy."

"What if—"

"Don't say it," he warned. "We were having a good moment."

Rabbit laughed. "I wasn't about to suggest leaving you."

"Sure you weren't."

He had been, but only as a joke. He shrugged, smiling playfully to ease some of the tension now in Baikal's shoulders.

The Brumal Prince took a step closer, easing into his personal space, but just before he could say anything, his multi-slate dinged. He hesitated but ended up sighing and checking the message anyway, stilling the moment his eyes scanned the screen.

"What's wrong?" Rabbit didn't like the way the room's temperature had seemingly dropped, or the wisps of black smoke now drifting off of Baikal's shoulders.

"It's my father," Baikal said tightly. "He passed out. They took him to the hospital."

"Go." Rabbit pushed him toward the door.

"Rabbit—"

"Go, I'll be fine. It's the middle of the afternoon and I have practice to get to. I'll be on campus. If you need anything, call me." He was tempted to offer to go with him, but Rabbit didn't want to overstep. There was also the issue of not understanding how things in the Brumal worked yet. He didn't want to accidentally offend the wrong person and get Baikal into trouble when he needed to focus on his father's health.

There was no need for him to stick around either. Baikal had taken care of the traitors and Rabbit was no longer at risk of being attacked by that small gang. The only reason Rabbit hadn't yet brought up that Void no longer needed to stay at his house was that he liked having the Brumal Prince around. But there was nothing for him to fear anymore, especially since his mother was currently in the middle of space on her way to another planet.

"I might not be able to check my multi-slate," Baikal said then. "If I miss a call—"

"I won't get mad like the last time," he promised. "I won't bother you. Now hurry. Go."

Baikal pulled Rabbit in for a quick kiss, his mouth bruising and possessive, and then he was pulling away and leaving, out the door in a flash.

Rabbit pressed his fingers to his bottom lip and watched the door swing shut behind him.

His future with the beiska wasn't the only thing he needed to consider.

He had to think about this thing with Void as well.

And how far he was truly willing to go with the other man.

Chapter 31:

“Sullivan Void, the CEO of Void United, died today in the hospital around one in the afternoon. He was surrounded by loved ones, including the heir to his father’s massive conglomerate, Baikal Void, who—”

“Shut that shit off,” one of the guys barked. A second later the holo-television attached to the far wall went silent.

There were twelve of them in all, all spread around the large hospital morgue on the bottom level. Some of them belonged to Baikal’s satellite, others were loyal to his father. He’d keep most of them on in their same positions, which was why they were allowed to be here to witness as he was inked with the ashes of his father.

Baikal was seated nearest the incinerator where his father’s body had been placed a couple of hours ago. The ashes had already been collected and mixed with the ink, the supplies spread out on the long metal table behind him.

The process of inking Shout tattoos was rare on this planet since the Void family were the only bloodline still living there that were Sancts, the people who were native to the planet Sanctum. His father’s ability had been ice, but he’d ended up with control over shadow. When he’d been a child, he’d been a stressful little monster who’d run amuck and driven Sullivan and the older generation of the Brumal mad since they’d had no experience with that particular power.

For the most part, he’d been forced to figure it out on his own, but his father had always encouraged him and stood in his corner.

“We are close to finished, Dominus,” Bow, a burly man who’d moved from the other side of the planet a decade ago and still had their thicker accent said. He patted his shoulder when his words had Baikal bristling, seemingly uncaring that he was potentially putting his life at risk by overstepping. “The title is yours. Accept it and move on.”

Baikal’s father had been dead less than six hours and this guy, who was slightly older than Sullivan had been, was telling him to get over it already. He clenched his palms, spirals of black smoke snaking over his knuckles to twirl around his forearms.

Chesh, who was seated in a chair across from him gave him a look, and it was the only thing that kept Baikal from lashing out.

He’d grown up with Chesh, Whim, and Knave, the older man who stood on the opposite side of the room. They’d been his father’s closest confidants and people whom Baikal knew he’d be able to rely on in the coming days. It wasn’t so much that he cared about disappointing one of them, more that he trusted their judgment.

His was probably shot to shit right now, all things considered.

Kal had made it just in time, dropping to his knees at his father’s bedside and taking his hand. There hadn’t been a chance for words, but his father had looked into his eyes, silently letting him know he’d been waiting for him, and then just like that, he’d left.

There’d been hope he’d last another year, at least until Baikal had graduated. It would be a lie to claim he didn’t feel cheated that wasn’t the case. He was livid, a deep, unsettling rage gnawing at his insides to the point he wanted to scream and destroy everything in this room.

But he refrained.

Sullivan Void had been a collected and intimidating ruler. Baikal might not be him, but at least

here, in front of his closest friends, he could try.

They were all in mourning, after all.

Bow was nearing his eighties and had recently taken on an apprentice. Shout tattoos were different from regular ones, and the process had been handed down from generation to generation. Bow, unlike his predecessors, had remained unwed and childless, and some had started to fear he'd die before passing on what he knew.

The apprentice wasn't present, since this was a closed remembrance of sorts and until he was inked, Baikal would be vulnerable to attack. They'd taken care of Kor, and from the sounds of things there was no need to fear any of the other Brumal members trying to cause trouble, but keeping the new Dominus safe was the number one goal of everyone in this room.

"Hurry up," Baikal snarled, loosening his fists. The needle buzzed behind him, the sensation of it pressing over his skin not enough to cause a real distraction and keep his mind off things. He'd chosen the design himself, and it was positioned over the back of his right shoulder. It'd be the only Shout tattoo he'd ever receive, considering there were no other living relatives who shared his bloodline, and he'd wanted it to be perfect.

"Does it feel any different from a regular tattoo?" Kazimir asked. He was standing the closest, somewhat off to the side so he could glance at both Baikal's face and his back at the work being done.

Kazimir and he were cousins through marriage, and his stepmother, Baikal's biological aunt, had passed years ago. Her ashes had gone to Sullivan since Kazimir wasn't Shout and Baikal was only the prince.

In a way, now that his dad was gone, Kazimir's mother was also sort of permanently gone as well.

"It's thrumming," Baikal replied after considering it. "I feel...Heavier?"

"Sullivan said that whenever he was inked," Whim told them. "It'll be a couple of hours until your body has adjusted to the new boost of power."

"I advise you to be careful until then, Master Kal," Chesh drawled. "We don't need the brand new Dominus causing a riot in the streets his very first day on the job, now do we?"

"Keep the patronizing tone to a minimum," Kazimir snapped. "It's as you've said. He's the Dominus now. You answer to him."

Baikal smirked.

"Have the others been alerted?" Knave, one of Sullivan's most loyal group bosses, asked Whim.

"I had the word spread already. Everyone knows who they bend the knee to now," Whim replied.

"Was there pushback?"

"No. They may not have known Sullivan was sick, but they were aware he'd been preparing them for an exchange of power. He'd gone out of his way to make sure that was known." Whim smiled softly at Baikal.

Everyone in the Brumal had assumed his father was planning on passing the mantel over to him upon his graduation. They'd joked that Sullivan was eager to retire and enjoy all of his money.

"Still," Knave insisted, "some will be concerned they'll be replaced."

When power changed hands, that typically was the case. Baikal's satellite would replace those of the old regime he didn't feel suited him and the way he planned to rule. In preparation for this, however, he and his father had many long discussions. He'd been fortunate in the sense that he'd been able to get advice from his father before his death. One final lesson.

“With Kor handled, there’s one less person we need to worry about,” Baikal said. “Flix will take over as group boss of that area.” He turned to Whim. “I trust you’ll assist him with recruiting from the applicable soldiers.”

“Oh course, Dominus.” He tipped his head.

Baikal would be keeping Chen on, and Whim would assist Kazimir and help him adjust and learn what it meant to be a good Underboss. The exchange could take years, and he had no plans to dismiss the older man any time soon.

Berga would be his new butcher—the old one would, unfortunately, have to go. He was a slight and skittish man that even his father had begun to distrust. Better to take him out of the picture than risk him stepping out of line himself. Butchers were dangerous, most of them skilled in torture and learned in the biology of multiple species.

Like Berga, who was currently a fourth-year med student at Vail. He was top of his class and fluent in several languages—despite that no longer being necessary considering all the available translation technology. He also happened to have the blueprints of over twenty different humanoid species memorized by heart.

Sometimes, when he was bored, he even started sketching them out on whatever random bit of paper was available. He’d once done an entire skeletal drawing of a Noch on a diner placemat while they’d waited for their food to arrive.

“We are finished now,” Bow stated. The sound of metal chair legs scraping against the tiled floor and his grunt as he moved signaled the real end of the session.

Baikal stood and stretched. He’d been sitting there for close to an hour, something about the ritual or process needing that long and multiple rounds in order for it to take. Honestly, he hadn’t been paying attention because he didn’t give a shit how it worked, just that it did. As the new Dominus, he’d need to be strong.

“How’s it look?” Berga asked. He moved from where he’d been lying in one of the mortuary cabinets and came over to have a peek. He blinked and gave Baikal a funny look, clicking his tongue when suddenly Flix was there pushing him out of the way.

Flix saw it and let out a low whistle, throwing up both hands when Kal sent him a scathing look. “Your body. So long as you like it.”

“I’m the only one allowed to like it,” Baikal warned.

Berga leaned into Flix, but said loud enough for them all to hear, “I don’t think he’s talking about the tattoo.”

“No shit.” Flix rolled his eyes then sobered some. “Actually, this reminds me.”

“Not now,” Kazimir told him, but Baikal was already curious.

“What?” Kal stared his friend down, waiting.

“You know how you ordered I check out the Shepards?” Flix began. “You wanted me to get in touch with their leader and hash it out, see how much they knew about their rogue members.”

“And?”

“Here’s the thing, they claim it wasn’t members that we took. It was member. As in singular.”

Baikal frowned. “What?”

“They only ID’d one of the bodies as theirs,” Kazimir sighed. “It was the last guy. The one Berga cut the tongue out of?” He motioned to the butcher who smiled wistfully thinking about it. “They say he wasn’t part of their gang at all. They hardly even knew him.”

“Then what the fuck was he doing with one of their members?” Baikal hated the knot of dread forming in his gut. That had been the one who’d drugged Rabbit in the school parking lot. That much

they were sure of. But if he hadn't been a member of the Shepards... "Did Kor hire him out?"

Flix shook his head. "They don't know for sure but they don't think so. According to them, he was their member's cousin who'd only just moved here recently. He didn't know anyone well enough to get involved with anything, and wouldn't have known where to go to get hired for a job like that. They say he was into music. Played the piano at the local community center every Saturday. Aside from the company he kept there, he was a loner."

They'd assumed he'd been working for Kor because he'd been caught with his cousin, who was now a confirmed member of the Shepards, but if that wasn't the case, why the hell had he gone after Rabbit in the first place?

"We know the second guy was part of the crew who executed the break-ins and started the fires," Kazimir explained. "So we didn't get the wrong guy, at least not in that respect."

"And tongue dude is the one who went after your man," Flix stated.

"My Possessio," Baikal corrected, barely paying them any mind when they all stared at him. He'd said it mostly out of reflex, mind still trying to put the pieces of this now smashed-up puzzle together.

Could the guy have simply been a crazy fan? They'd said he'd been into music, it was possible.

"Kal, naming a Possessio is a big deal," Whim cleared his throat and said. "Once it's done, you can't undo it."

"And I'm not going to," he snapped back, still distracted. Then he motioned to Kazimir. "Hand me my multi-slate." He'd removed it along with his shirt and placed it on another table, having set the device on silent mode. His father's death hit him hard and he wasn't in the mood to screen calls or talk to anyone who wasn't currently in this room—aside from Rabbit of course, who he'd already warned not to bother trying to get in touch.

Kazimir retrieved it and set the device in Baikal's palm.

His eyes widened and that dark feeling within him only got worse when he saw he had several missed calls.

All from Rabbit after all.

He was already halfway to the double doors before he was called to a stop, only turning so he could send a warning growl over to Whim who'd been the one to bother. "I have to go. Now."

"Where?" Whim shook his head. "You have to meet with the Brumal and hold a proper funeral."

"After."

"After what?"

"I have to check on him. Something's wrong." He curled a finger at his Satellite and grabbed his leather jacket off the chair with his other hand. "You all, with me."

They nodded and gathered their things without a single question.

"Take care of the funeral arrangements for me," Baikal ordered Whim, then turned to Chesh. "And the will. Any of the legal stuff. Get it all together so I can deal with it once I'm back."

"Of course, Dominus Baikal." The Counselor bowed his head.

Baikal shoved the doors opened and exited into the long hallway, tossing his jacket on and then securing the straps of his multi-slate over the right sleeve. He clicked on the black stud earring he was wearing that acted as a microphone connected to the device and tried Rabbit, but there was no answer.

"Where we headed, boss?" Flix finally asked as they made their way through the hospital and

to the back parking lot where they'd all parked.

"He called me even when I told him I would be busy," Baikal said, not sure if he was making much sense to them but not wanting to waste time fully explaining either. "Just follow me."

"To?" Kazimir pulled out the keys to his hovercar.

"The university." Rabbit had told him he'd stay there to practice. Hopefully, he was still there.

Hopefully, the death of his father was simply making Baikal unusually paranoid and when he got there he'd find an annoyed little bunny, wondering what the hell he'd brought all his friends around for.

Chapter 32:

The auditorium looked pretty different when all the lights were on and he was the only one left in it.

Rabbit was sitting on the edge of the stage, lying down and staring sightlessly up at the high rafters. He'd practiced for a few hours but hadn't been able to concentrate for some reason, and needing a change of scenery, had decided to walk here. The building wasn't far from the main music one anyway, so the walk itself had been less than ten minutes, not nearly long enough to really help clear his mind as he'd hoped.

Most of the other students who were still on campus were in the library or the cafeteria. Those who had night classes or were in one of the various studios would be holed up there for hours, the same way Rabbit typically was. That meant he was able to enjoy the quiet, something that usually elicited a strong sense of loneliness within him.

It wasn't like that tonight, however. Rabbit didn't feel lonely. He didn't exactly feel free yet either, but there was a sense of steadiness like he finally had his feet on the ground. A feeling that he'd been lacking for a long time.

For once in his life, he was trying to find his place. Before, that path had always been set for him. His mother was probably spending her trip concocting schemes to get him back under her heel, completely unaware that he'd already planned ahead to stop her. She wouldn't expect that from him. It was hard to see a betrayal coming from someone you'd never truly seen before, and to her, Rabbit had always been a controllable piece on her chess board and nothing more.

Baikal had already taken care of delivering the video to the news station, and he'd discussed when they were allowed to publish the story. They'd wanted to interview Rabbit as well, and after some thought, he'd decided he was going to do it. He would have told Void his decision, but he'd yet to hear from him since he'd left earlier for the hospital.

Rabbit had seen the news about his father about twenty minutes ago when he'd first come in here and fiddled with his multi-slate a bit. He'd called Baikal after much debate, but when he hadn't answered, he didn't bother with a message.

Would he even want Rabbit around?

Maybe he wouldn't even come home tonight.

Maybe Rabbit's place wouldn't be his home anymore and he'd return to Void estate where he belonged.

Rabbit had to figure out what he wanted to do with the house too. It was technically under his name since the house had belonged to his father and he'd left it to Rabbit in his will. Since he'd only been a baby then, obviously his mother had taken over all the responsibility, but on Vitality it was the name on the deed that mattered most. He could choose to sell it if he didn't want to continue living there.

Did he?

He should at least finish up his senior year at the university, right? He'd already come this far, it would be stupid of him to throw all of that away, even if at the end of the year he decided he no longer wanted a music career.

Who knew being in control of his own life would come with so many questions. He was already exhausted thinking up the ones he had and knew there were at least a dozen more he'd yet to

think of. He wanted to run all of this by Baikal, not because he didn't trust his own judgment, but because having someone to talk to about things had been...nice.

Should he call Sila? He owned an apartment just off of campus that he shared with Rin when his brother wasn't staying at the Academy. It was close. Maybe he'd be up for grabbing a late dinner with Rabbit.

Could the two of them do that? They'd never met off campus before, and this whole time Rabbit had assumed that was because his fear of his mom had been holding him back but...now that he thought about it, Sila had never even invited him anywhere other than to lunch either. What if the younger guy didn't want to hang out with him at all and Rabbit had completely misread things?

He groaned and ran a hand through his hair, frustrated with himself. He wouldn't know until he tried. He should just call the guy.

Something appeared a few inches over his face, hovering in the air and Rabbit frowned at it as his vision adjusted. It was a single Rose Ephemeral, the bloom full and crimson with a dusting of gold. He took it between two fingers and sat up, spinning the thin stem before turning, figuring it was Void and his jealous streak had gotten the best of him. It would be so like him, to stop and buy one of these on his way here just so he could tell Rabbit not to bother accepting them from anyone else.

Only, when he finally glanced over, it wasn't Baikal who was standing there to greet him.

A tall man a few years older than him was beaming down at him, his honey-toned blond hair partially falling into his light blue eyes. There was a mole above his upper lip, and three piercings in his right ear, all with tiny ruby studs in them. He'd dressed as a senior student for some reason, in black pants and a black button-up. He'd even gotten his hands on the school crest, which he'd pinned to the front of his leather belt.

He looked both the same and entirely different from the last time Rabbit had seen him.

When he'd been a dead body lying on the ground, bleeding out into the packed earth of his greenhouse.

"Oli?" Rabbit was so shocked he couldn't move, even when the ghost took a step closer and crouched before him, blinking those oval-shaped eyes of his in the same lazy fashion he used to.

Or, maybe not. There was something different about that too, something...off, that Rabbit couldn't quite place his finger on, possibly due to the surprise he was undergoing.

"Hey, Rabbit," Oli said, voice light but with an edge that hadn't been there before. Not just when he'd spoken with Rabbit either. Oli had always been overly friendly and chipper. If there was a silver lining in any given situation, he'd be the first person who found it.

Having someone like that around had uplifted Rabbit's spirits. It'd helped him feel not so trapped by his circumstances whenever his mother went off on one of her rages.

"I'd ask how you've been in my absence," Oli continued when Rabbit didn't speak, "but I already know all about that. You've been up to some very bad things, with some very bad people, haven't you?" He bopped Rabbit's nose.

It was like a switch had gone off when he felt the contact, and Rabbit finally regained control of his body. He jumped off the stage and turned, staring up at Oli as the other man straightened back to his full height.

"How?" He swallowed, his throat suddenly impossibly dry as he watched the ghost from his memories casually slide his hands into his front pockets. "You're dead."

"Is that what you thought?" Oli chuckled, but it wasn't pleasing to the ears. "Did you even try to look, Rabbit? Hmm?"

No, he hadn't.

"I'm sorry," he said, and he meant it. There'd been a funeral, a private one that he'd had to beg his mother to let him throw, but that'd been it. His mother had claimed she'd contacted his friends since he hadn't had any family and Rabbit had chosen to believe her. He'd been dealing with the loss of memories and the sudden influx of stage fright, something he'd never experienced up until then. But that didn't excuse his actions, or rather, inactions. "I was a shitty friend. I didn't—"

"Friend," Oli rolled the word on his tongue as though it were in a foreign language. "It's an interesting take, but we both know you've never had one of those a day in your life. All of these people," he threw out his arm to indicate the auditorium seats, "they come here to stare at you like you're some animal at the zoo. You're nothing more than a commodity to them. None of them know you. None of them even want to try. There was just me. Me, who got close to you. Me, who extended a hand."

He did so now, though the distance between them made it obvious he didn't intend for Rabbit to try and take it now. Sure enough, after a moment, he dropped his arm back to his side.

"Did you like my roses, Rabbit?" Oli motioned to the one being squeezed tightly in Rabbit's hand.

"You sent them?" He tried to think back on when exactly he'd received his first flower, but his life had been such a mess then, it was hard to recall much of anything. He'd spent most of his days moving through life like a zombie. If he were to guess, he thought perhaps they'd come a month or so after that horrible night. Which meant... "You've been watching me? All this time?"

That didn't make any sense.

"Why didn't you say something?" he asked. "Why didn't you go to the police? What my mom did to you was a crime!"

"I was waiting till the bitch came back," Oli admitted. "I went to every single one of your performances thinking that she'd be there. She used to hover whenever she wasn't off planet, remember? But she never came. It was almost as though she knew to stay away."

There was a gleam in Oli's eyes that shouldn't be there. It was similar to the one Rabbit had seen in Baikal's gaze whenever the Brumal Prince started thinking about causing harm to others. It was the type of look that didn't belong on the face of someone as docile and good as Oli, and seeing it there threw Rabbit off all over again.

"What happened to you?" he whispered, the question out before he could think better than to ask it. But something wasn't right. This person in front of him looked like his music teacher and yet acted nothing like him. He may as well be a stranger.

"Why ask when you were there?" Oli cocked his head. "You watched it happen. You cried over my corpse—oh, sorry, not really a corpse, since I wasn't actually dead. Passed out for a really long time though. Woke up just as a man was trying to bury me in an empty plot in the cemetery."

"What?" Had his mother tried to dispose of his body? But then, who had that been being placed into the incinerator in the basement level of the hospital? After Rabbit had woken, he'd insisted on seeing Oli's body. The doctor had grumbled the whole way down there and then let him in just in time to see the body being slid into the machine. He'd only caught sight of his legs and his shoes but he'd believed the doctor when he'd claimed it was Oli Easton.

That night, Rabbit hadn't paid any attention to what Oli had been wearing so he hadn't been in a place to disagree.

"That's horrible," Rabbit said, and Oli snorted.

"You should have seen the look on the gravedigger's face. I guess he'd been offered a hefty sum to get rid of me because I only managed to ask what was going on before he'd lifted his shovel

and tried to smash my brains in—for real this time, since your mom apparently failed to do so on her own.”

“You were almost murdered...again?”

“Seriously shitty luck I have, huh?” Oli clicked his tongue. “In my panic, I dove out of the way and the guy ended up tripping and falling. He landed inside the hole on his head. Broke his neck. I checked, by the way, so he was for certain dead. Ironical, that he’d dug his own grave. Isn’t that funny?” He laughed like it was.

Rabbit stared at him, that sense of wrongness only growing more and more with each passing second.

“Anyway, I tried to go home but I ended up seeing my obituary flashing on the screen by the funeral home entrance. Figured out what was going on pretty quickly after that.”

“Why didn’t you let me know?” Rabbit folded his hands, acting like he was cold when in reality he was pressing the button on his multi-slate that would redial the last number he’d called. Every single one of his instincts was screaming at him he was in danger and he needed Baikal. “I thought you were dead. I mourned you.”

“Did you?” Oli didn’t appear to believe that. “You seemed pretty out of it all this time, Rabbit. Didn’t look like you’d felt much of anything, to be honest. Hell, I was the one who was supposedly dead and yet you spent more time looking and acting like a ghost than I did.” He laughed again. “And why? I just told you. I accidentally killed a man. Sort of. Even if I’d gone straight to the police and tried to claim December Trace had set the whole thing up, she would have easily turned the world against me. I wouldn’t have gotten away with it like she had.”

That was true, and he could see his mom doing that. Finding some way to twist things and claim Oli was crazy, and made the whole story of her abuse up so he wouldn’t be held responsible for the gravedigger’s death. Didn’t matter that there would be obvious holes in her story or that Rabbit himself could have easily corroborated with Oli.

Oli probably hadn’t even trusted Rabbit would, and he couldn’t blame him. But the animosity aimed his way right now was a lot, and even though he fully believed Oli’s tale about the guy tripping, he also believed the rest of what he said as well, and according to him, he’d been stalking Rabbit.

Rabbit had no clue if his call was going through or not, but he kept trying, repeatedly pushing the button as many times as he could before Oli’s gaze dropped to his arms and he was forced to move them and hang them back down at his sides.

“I kept your flowers,” he ended up saying, figuring it was best to keep Oli talking. “Every single one of them. They were the only meaningful thing I had all year.”

That seemed to touch something within the other man, and some of his hatred drifted away. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Rabbit insisted. “If I’d known they were from you, they would have meant even more. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” he said, but before Rabbit could take any comfort from that added, “That’s why what you’ve done is even worse.”

“What did I do?” Were they still referring to the situation that night, or something else? Rabbit tried to think about any other possible transgressions he could have made, but was drawing a blank.

“I heard what you said to Ludo,” Oli revealed. “Quit? You can’t quit, Rabbit. What gives you the right? With less than a thousand of us left you owe it to the rest of us to keep playing.”

“I’ve spent my entire life living for someone else,” he reminded. “I’m done doing that. Even if

you're the one asking. I'm sorry, Oli."

"I may not have died that night, but that doesn't mean I came away unscathed." Oli held up his hand. It looked fine on the outside, but there was clearly more to it. "Severe nerve damage. I can barely hold a stylus let alone play an instrument. Your mother took that from me. She took my name, my music, my *life*. Everything. And then she ran off and played famous socialite on every planet in the galaxy but this one."

Rabbit felt awful about all of that. It wasn't fair, and he hadn't deserved it. "She'll pay."

"Of course she will," he agreed. Then he reached behind him and pulled out a blaster he'd had tucked into the back of his pants. "I waited an entire year for her to return only for you to say something that immediately chased her away. If I can't get to her personally, then I'll have to hurt her the only other way I know how."

Rabbit slid a step back and then froze when Oli aimed the gun at him. "She doesn't care about me, you know that."

"Not you," he agreed. "But she does care about your future and how it'll help boost her popularity."

Rabbit stared at the barrel of the gun and almost laughed. Was this how his mother had felt yesterday when he'd pulled one on her? Unsure and conflicted? On the one hand, he didn't want to believe the Oli he knew was capable of shooting someone. On the other, this wasn't the Oli he knew.

"What happened to you?" he asked again, sure there was more to this than he was missing.

"I came back different," Oli surprised him by answering. He circled a finger near the side of his head. "Something about my wiring being funky after the head trauma."

"So you were professionally diagnosed? Have you been staying with someone?"

"Your idiot mother had the funeral home run that ad to trick you, Rabbit," he stated dryly, like he thought he was the biggest moron on this side of the galaxy for having fallen for it. "She didn't file any paperwork with the city. That would have required work and an explanation. Not everyone can be paid off. Some members of this city are in the pockets of bigger fish than December Trace."

"Wait," Rabbit couldn't believe what he was hearing, "are you saying you've been living in your old apartment all this time?"

"I saw you walk by now and again," Oli said, voice softening some. "You didn't see me, but I saw you. I know you aren't lying when you say that you missed me. I know that the old me had feelings for you—I wrote about them a lot in my journal. But that's the thing, Rabbit. That was the old me. The new me only cares about one thing and one thing only."

"What?" He was certain he did not want to know.

"Revenge." That glimmer in Oli's eyes dimmed as soon as the word was out, as though he was dropping the friendly mask altogether and showing Rabbit who he truly was beneath it.

An empty shell.

"Goodbye, Rabbit."

"Wait!" He threw up his hands. "You won't hurt her this way! Think about it! The only child of December Trace is murdered at school before he can graduate from college? The press will eat that up. She'll be sobbing in front of cameras, secretly relishing all that attention and you know it!"

"Sure," he agreed almost nonchalantly. "But she'll have to come back home to throw the funeral."

"No." Rabbit's shoulders sunk as the realization that there was nothing he could say to stop this hit him.

Oli was going to shoot him.

He was going to die here.

On the same day as Baikal's father.

He squeezed his eyes shut, silently apologizing to Void in his head for that, so he wasn't looking when the blaster finally went off. He did, however, flinch at the loud bang.

Only...he was never hit.

Peeling open one eye, Rabbit checked and then gasped.

Oli was lying on the stage, holding his now bleeding arm. The blaster he'd been aiming at Rabbit had dropped and slid across the wood, far out of reach, not that he seemed to notice. Oli was too busy trying to crawl backward and escape the dark shadow currently making his way across the side of the auditorium toward him.

No, not a shadow.

"Baikal." Rabbit let out the breath he'd been holding and dropped the rose to the ground without a thought. He rested his hands on his knees and inhaled deeply, trying to steady his racing heart. "Thank Light."

He straightened, but then realized Void wasn't heading over to him, but still making his way toward Oli.

And he was still holding up the blaster he'd already used to shoot Oli in the arm.

"Don't!" Rabbit bolted forward, grabbing onto Baikal's wrist, attempting to force him to lower the weapon. "You can't!"

"Watch me," Baikal growled, shaking him off. But when he lifted the blaster again, Rabbit leaped in front of him to block his shot. "Move!"

"You can't just murder him!" Rabbit shook his head and scrambled to come up with a legitimate reason, one that Void would accept.

"He was about to murder you," Baikal reminded darkly. His eyes were flashing with anger and the swirls of smoke continued to seep off him in waves. "No one gets to threaten you in any way and live. If I had been the one who'd fired just now, he'd already be dead."

"Sorry, boss," another voice came from the other side of the stage, though Rabbit didn't turn just yet to see who it was, too busy trying to defuse the situation.

"He's not right in the head," Rabbit explained, then realized Baikal probably had no clue who exactly it was his friend—whoever that last speaker was—had shot. "That's Oli!"

The corner of Baikal's eye twitched and he paused but didn't drop his gun.

"I thought he was dead," he rushed on, "this is the first time I'm finding out he isn't. But he isn't the same, and he even mentioned something was wrong with his brain."

"Your mom hit him over the head," Baikal recalled, seemingly telling himself.

"Exactly," Rabbit agreed anyway. "That must have been it." Honestly, it was a damn miracle Oli had even survived considering the material of the pot she'd used to do it. "He's not okay. He needs help."

"He's a threat," Baikal corrected. "Move. There's only one way to deal with threats."

"No," Rabbit shook his head. "You can't."

"Move, Rabbit."

"My mom already killed him in front of me once!" Tears pooled in his eyes and he did nothing to stop them from falling. "You saw what that did to me. Baikal, *please*. I only just got myself. I don't want to lose me again. I don't want to ever feel what I felt that night again. Don't make me."

Baikal hesitated.

"Boss?" that new voice sounded again, and this time Rabbit glanced over his shoulder to find

a lithe guy standing over Oli, a blaster drawn and aimed at him as well.

He turned back to Baikal, knowing it'd be pointless to try and convince anyone else. He'd seen the new guy once or twice on campus and recognized that he was the one named Flix, a member of the Brumal. Loyal to Void.

"I'll make a deal," Rabbit blurted.

Baikal's brow furrowed. "A deal?" He snarled and motioned toward the stage. "For him?"

"No," Rabbit corrected, "for the guy he used to be. For my friend."

Rabbit understood how to be loyal too.

"It's my fault he's like this now," he said. "My mom is the one who made him this way. I can't just stand here and watch him be killed. He needs help."

"And you want to get that for him?" Baikal's mouth pressed into a firm line. "You want me to turn the other cheek and let the man who just tried to shoot my Possessio go without a scratch?"

"Flix shot him in the arm," he reminded, smart enough to know not to bother with the whole Possessio title argument right now. "I'd hardly call that unscathed."

"Rabbit."

"Baikal." He held his gaze. "Make a deal with me."

"I will not have you trading something of yours for that scum," he stated.

"Then don't. Just listen to me and what I want. Let's take him to Void Hospital and get him checked in. He needs help. We're in a position where we can help him. It's an option."

"Not one I agree with."

"It's a choice," Rabbit reiterated, "and you promised you would let me make those from now on."

Baikal searched his face and then asked a bit quieter, "This isn't because you have feelings for him, is it?"

Rabbit scowled. "What, no. Never. Seriously, it was never like that for me."

Void seemed like he needed more convincing, so Rabbit eased in closer and rested a hand on his left hip.

"You're my first," he told him.

"And I'll be your last," Baikal practically growled.

"Yeah," Rabbit nodded. "Yeah, you will."

Later, when they weren't in the middle of an actual crisis, Rabbit wanted to tell him that he'd already come to that conclusion on his own earlier. He wanted to tell him how he'd realized he'd missed him and was worried. How he'd wanted to speak with him about nothing and everything all at once.

How he'd already decided to choose Baikal Void, freely, and of his own volition.

But since doing so in front of an audience would be way too embarrassing, Rabbit held it in. For now.

"All right." Baikal slowly lowered his arm. "Have it your way, little bunny."

He sighed and smiled. "Thank—"

"Shit!" Flix cursed and by the time Rabbit turned to see what was up, the Brumal member was already flat on his back on the ground.

Somehow, Oli had gotten the jump on him and he was now holding the blaster. He lifted his arm and the weapon their way, but he wasn't aiming at Rabbit this time.

He was targeting Baikal instead.

Oli let out a scream and pulled the trigger.

The whole thing happened in a flash, including Rabbit's reaction to it.

One second he was watching in horror and the next he'd thrown himself in front of Baikal. The bullet meant for Void grazed Rabbit's shoulder, the searing pain instantaneous, though he hardly noticed. Before anyone else could react, he snatched the blaster out of Baikal's hand, raised the weapon, and fired off three consecutive shots.

Oli's body jerked as his chest was hit by all three, his body thrown backward until he was lying on the stage yet again. Only this time, he didn't move.

Rabbit was heaving, his breaths uneven, his mind racing, and blood was dripping from his right arm, but the left still held the gun up as though a part of him expected Oli to stand after all. The guy had risen from the grave once, what was to say he couldn't do it again?

"Rabbit," Baikal called to him, but he wasn't listening.

"Check him," he ordered Flix, only barely processing how the Brumal member was staring at him like he'd grown a third head or something. "Do it!"

Flix leaped into action and followed the order, kneeling, careful to avoid the pool of blood. He pressed two fingers against Oli's pulse point, waited a beat, and then shook his head. "He's dead."

"You're positive?" Rabbit asked.

Instead of insisting he was or being affronted, Flix lowered his ear down to Oli's chest and listened. "Yeah. He's for sure dead."

Rabbit dropped the weapon and swayed on his feet. The only reason he didn't stumble and fall was the fact Baikal caught him. "I get it now."

"Get what?" Baikal asked softly. He was staring down at him with concern written across his handsome face.

Rabbit smiled sadly. "Why you wanted to kill him so badly."

The second Oli had aimed that gun at Baikal, Rabbit had wanted Oli dead, too.

Chapter 33:

“These are his medical files.” Flix handed a printed document over to Rabbit. Usually in this day and age things were sent digitally, but it looked like the file had been taken from an actual hospital.

He skimmed the forms, most of them confirming what he’d already assumed after meeting with Oli again.

Traumatic brain injury. Mood swings, extreme personality changes, quick to anger, and impulsive decisions.

Oli had seen a doctor the first couple of months after he’d woken in the middle of almost being buried alive, but he hadn’t told the doctor the cause of his accident. She’d written in her notes that he’d gotten into a car crash which was a lie.

“His career had only just started making traction, so it seems like, after the first couple of months where he’d fallen off the grid, people not in the know stopped wondering where he’d gone to. He contacted his old manager and told them he couldn’t play anymore, so that’s why no one on that end ever came looking. He also abandoned his apartment and moved into a new building across the street under a false name,” Flix told Rabbit next, handing him a different file, one that included pictures. When Rabbit gave him a questioning look he sheepishly shrugged. “I didn’t have your contact details and I wasn’t sure if I should send them to you or present them so this was the best bet.”

“Overachiever,” Kazimir masked the insult with a fake cough. He was sitting in the corner of the dining room in the main home on Void estate.

Rabbit had insisted on being there when the police arrived to deal with Oli’s body. They’d been cops all in the Brumal’s pocket, who’d agreed to close the case quickly. He hadn’t wanted it covered up because Oli deserved to have a proper death certificate this time. He deserved to be acknowledged.

Possibly due to paranoia, Rabbit had also refused to allow the body to travel to the hospital without him. He’d stuck by Oli all the way, through the quick check from the doctor and then down to the morgue where they’d placed him on a slab and shoved him into the incinerator.

He wondered, vaguely, what it said about him that he only felt mildly bad. The guilt was still there, going as strong as ever because it was his mother that had made Oli this way. But he didn’t regret shooting him. Not when it meant protecting Void.

If Rabbit had known it would have led to that, that there’d even been a slight chance Baikal would be put in danger, he would have found a way to kill Oli on his own sooner.

“I bet his brain was fascinating,” the one called Berga, who Rabbit had realized all on his own was most likely set to become the next butcher, said. He was sitting on Rabbit’s left and bowed his head with a smile when he saw Rabbit was looking at him. “Sorry. He was your friend. That was in poor taste of me to say.”

“He was running out of money,” Flix picked up the conversation again. “Hadn’t paid his rent in over four months. My guess is, he got all excited when he saw December had come back, and then seeing her turn around and leave so soon unhinged him. He was desperate.”

“Desperate people do foolish things,” Rabbit said, thinking about how he’d agreed to sleep with Baikal in the beginning all because he’d been desperate to keep his mother away. “It works out for some people, but not all.”

Baikal, who was standing behind him, planted a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"Would you like the report on that now?" Kazimir asked, and it took Rabbit a moment to realize he was speaking to him and not asking his Dominus.

He nodded, knowing what was coming.

"December Trace stepped off the ship and was bombarded by reporters. She at first denied the allegations, until she realized that the video evidence had been released. She had some choice words for you, Rabbit."

"He doesn't need to hear them," Baikal stated warningly.

"I do," Rabbit disagreed, reaching up to cover his hand with his own appreciatively. "But not right now." Later, when he was on his own and wouldn't be too embarrassed if he cried. "What else?"

"The local police were contacted, and they've informed the press of what just happened. How Oli came after you as some form of revenge for what your mother had done to him. They left out the part about her having thought she'd killed him. Best not to overcomplicate things," Kazimir said.

"They also can't do anything about the video," another man stepped into the dining room, this one older than the rest and in a crisp suit, "the police are unable to file charges against her. She'll basically be allowed to continue as she has been, only now her career is unquestionably over."

"This is Chesh," Baikal leaned down and said. "He's my Counselor."

"Nice to meet you," Rabbit greeted.

Chesh bowed. "The Underboss is needed elsewhere."

"Since her whole image was built on sophistication and kindness, this will definitely destroy her career," Kazimir continued first. "We've also spoken with the authorities and have placed her on the banned list. December Trace will never be allowed back on planet."

It's what Rabbit had requested, but it still stung a bit. A part of him would always feel bad since she was his mother, even though it was her own damn fault it had come to this.

Kazimir rose to his feet. "That's all I have."

"You're dismissed." Baikal waved him off and he lowered into a bow and then followed Chesh out of the room.

Berga got up and stretched, his crystal horns shining in the harsh light of the massive chandelier hanging directly over the center of the long wooden table. "I would very much appreciate being dismissed as well."

"He has a test in the morning," Flix informed them, grabbing his jacket from the chair before making his way toward the door. "Can we go?"

"You're already leaving," Baikal drawled, but then he lifted a hand.

They both grinned, bowed, and left without another word.

Alone at last, Rabbit slumped into his seat.

Baikal chuckled and placed his other hand on his shoulder, starting to knead his achy muscles as he spoke. "They're a lot, but they'll grow on you."

"Like a fungus?"

Baikal paused and Rabbit laughed.

"I was joking," he said.

"Don't call other people the same things you call me," Baikal told him.

Rabbit rolled his eyes. "You have serious jealousy issues."

"Yes, I do," he agreed. "Keep that in mind, Possessio."

The title reminded him of everything they'd been through in the past forty-eight hours and any

semblance of a good mood vanished.

“Would you like me to refrain from calling you that after all?” Baikal asked, noting his change in demeanor.

Rabbit thought it over, but he honestly wasn’t sure. He ended up shrugging noncommittally then changed the subject.

“How are you doing?” They’d spoken briefly about Void’s father, but with everything else going on, had yet to have an in-depth discussion about it or how it was affecting him. “You know I’m here for you, right?”

“You just murdered someone for the first time,” Baikal stated. “I think out of the two of us, you’re the one who needs comforting the most.”

He pursed his lips. “Is that fair?”

“You aren’t being selfish if that’s what you mean,” he replied. “And even if you were, you’re allowed to be.”

Rabbit shifted in his chair, forcing Baikal to stop giving him a massage. He tipped his head back and stared up at him, wanting to see him to get a grasp on things fully. “How so?”

“Your well-being comes first,” he told him matter-of-factly.

“Even above yours?”

“Yes,” Baikal didn’t hesitate.

“Why?”

“Because I said so,” he patted his head, “and I’m the Dominus. And because you’re due a little selfishness, Rabbit. I won’t hold it against you.”

“You were going to let Oli go.” Rabbit was still a bit surprised by that fact, but more than that, he was moved by it.

“There’s no cure for what happened to him,” Baikal said. “You saw the scans from the hospital. Even if we had brought him in, they wouldn’t have been able to return him to the person you used to know. He was dangerous.”

“I saw.” Thinking about it brought back that spark of fury Rabbit had felt in the auditorium. He’d never felt anything like that before either. Another first. Another one brought on by the man at his side. “He almost hurt you.”

“I’m fine. You, however.” He glared down at the bandage wrapped around Rabbit’s arm from where the bullet had grazed him.

“We put sun cream on it. It’ll be healed by tonight.”

“Don’t ever do that again, Rabbit.”

“Don’t ever almost get shot again,” he countered, and when that earned him a glare he shrugged. “See how ridiculous that ask is? Let’s just both promise to be as safe as we can be from here on out. That seems fair.”

“Bargaining again, little bunny?”

“Always.” He flashed him a grin and then stood. “If you really don’t want to talk about your father right now, and I really don’t want to talk about how I just killed a man, then let’s talk about us.”

“Us?” Baikal’s look turned suspicious and he glanced at the door, almost as if trying to decide if he could make it there and throw the lock before Rabbit got a chance to escape through it. Whether or not that was what went through his mind, however, he stood his ground, giving Rabbit the chance to explain.

“You’re going to have to move back here,” Rabbit began, “now that you’re the Dominus, and my house is twenty minutes away. It’s not far, but it’s not great either. I still plan on sticking with my

regular schedule, going to the studio, keeping up with my practices. I'll ease up a bit, of course, but for now, I'm not sure enough about giving it all up to risk falling behind."

"What's your point?" Baikal asked. "Are you trying to get rid of me? You're free from your mother and now I'm no longer needed, something like that?"

Rabbit tilted his head, curious. "If I did say that, would you order her ban lifted? Tell her to come back here so she can torment me?"

He made a face as though offended. "Of course not."

"Would you lock me up in this house then?" he asked. "Keep me prisoner? Maybe take it one step further and chain me to your bed so—"

"Enough. No, and no. I wouldn't do any of those things to you, Rabbit."

"How would you stop me then? If I wanted to leave."

It was obvious Baikal didn't like that comment, but he was struggling to hold his temper in, his hands forming such tight fists at his sides his knuckles looked like they were about to pop. "Do you want to leave me?"

"Just answer the question first, Void."

"If you wanted to go, I would let you." He took a step toward Rabbit, instantly filling up his space so he was forced to retreat.

Rabbit banged into the edge of the table and Baikal followed, planting his palms at either side to trap him and fill his space with the heady scent of him.

"I'd let you, little bunny, and I'd even give you time. A year, perhaps. Maybe more, maybe less. It would depend. But once that time was up, I'd come for you. I'd come and I'd make you fall for me all over again. And you would."

"So certain?"

"Yes." He smirked wickedly. "I'm the only one who knows how to play you the way you like." He ran the pad of his fingers up the curve of Rabbit's thigh. "The only one you'll ever think about in the dark when you're touching yourself. You know I'd never hurt you. So if you want to go," he stepped back abruptly, "there's the door. No one will stop you on your way out."

Rabbit gave himself a moment to collect himself and then straightened.

To his credit, it was clear Baikal was doing his damndest not to show how nervous he was.

It was tempting to leave him hanging and make him suffer for a bit longer, the same way Void had always enjoyed making him suffer with those plugs, but he couldn't bring himself to actually do it.

Baikal sucked in a sharp breath when Rabbit stepped into him and buried his face against the curve of his throat.

He hugged him tightly, breathing in that comforting scent, letting it fill his lungs. It smelled like safety.

And home.

"Will you marry me, Void?" He felt the Brumal King tense in his arms, was prepared for when he was pulled back so Baikal could look at him.

"Repeat that."

"Marry me," Rabbit said, the words clearer now that his face wasn't pressed against Baikal's throat. "Not right this second. After graduation."

"You're asking me to marry you?"

"Yeah. Also, I was always told it's smarter to live with someone beforehand because you don't really know a person until you've lived with them or something like that, so I should probably move in as soon as possible. I wasn't a fan of your bed sheets. Can we change them?"

“You...” Baikal looked like he was a robot experiencing a glitch, “want to change my sheets?”

“Our sheets,” he corrected, “but yeah. Cool?”

“Cool?”

Rabbit chuckled. “Are you all right? Is this your way of saying no?”

“No?”

He pretended to misunderstand and dropped his arms. “Oh.”

Baikal immediately wrapped his hands around his waist and yanked him back in, the breath whooshing out of Rabbit when he slammed into his chest. “Don’t fuck with me, Rabbit.”

“But that’s half the fun,” he teased. “And I really, really like it when you’re naked.”

He blinked down at him. “You’re serious.”

“I’m always serious.” Rabbit chose his words carefully. Always had. Always would. Originally, it’d started when he was younger in an attempt to keep his mother pleased and avoid more punishments, but over time it’d just become a part of his personality. He didn’t like wasting words. “Were you not, when you suggested it before?”

“That was not a suggestion,” Baikal reminded.

“Then I’m not seeing why this is so difficult for you to grasp.”

“You’re going to marry me.”

“Only if you say yes, which for the record, you haven’t done yet.” Rabbit sighed dramatically. “I’m starting to feel unwanted here, Void. Seriously. If this is how you plan on treating me in the future I’m going to have to rethink the whole—”

Baikal captured his mouth, tongue slipping past his lips, teeth nipping at him as he practically devoured him in one go. He kissed him like it was the first time, rough and claiming, so that when he finally pulled back they were both out of breath and flushed.

“I promised I’d let you make your own choices,” Baikal said.

“You did,” Rabbit agreed, seeing where this was going.

“You’re choosing to marry me?”

“I am—After graduation,” he felt the need to reiterate that part lest the other guy get any bright ideas.

Baikal laughed but nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“If that’s your choice, little bunny,” he kissed him again, softer this time, “let’s get married.”

Rabbit held up a finger.

“*After* graduation.” Baikal pulled him in closer. “Now about those sheets...”

“I hate them. They have to go.”

“They’re made out of glow moth thread.”

“Don’t care.” He kind of did. That was expensive, but Rabbit was too invested in this now to give in.

“At least give me the chance to convince you,” Baikal said, pulling Rabbit toward the door.

The corner of his mouth turned up. “How do you plan on doing that?”

He leaned in and pressed his lips against the curve of his ear. “By fucking you on top of them again.”

“Bargaining?” Rabbit asked.

“Always.”

He pretended to think it over then, “Okay.”

Without wasting any more time, Baikal tossed Rabbit over his shoulder, shoved the door open, and carried him through the mansion up to the second floor.

Where he proceeded to prove to Rabbit that there was, in fact, nothing wrong with the sheets.

Epilogue:

9 Months Later

Baikal grabbed him around the waist and pulled Rabbit back, forcing him down directly onto his thick cock.

Rabbit gasped and tossed his head back as he slid down, that slightly curved crown rubbing against his prostate on the way in. He momentarily forgot he was pretending to resist, too blissed out just sitting there, before he felt the other man's chest rumble in laughter behind him.

"Keep playing, little bunny," Baikal cooed, wrapping his arms tightly around Rabbit's waist to hold him steady as he flicked his hips. "You stop and I stop. That was the deal."

He hated this deal. It was a dumb deal.

Why the hell had he suggested it?

He shook as he lifted the beiska again, resting it on his right shoulder. It was one of the first gifts Void had gotten him. A surprise one night, given at random. The left-handed beiska was made of even better material than his original instrument, and though he was still adjusting and learning how to play it this way again, he'd managed to successfully unlock most of the same colors he could when he played right-handed.

Rabbit had decided to stick with music, though he wasn't as certain about becoming a professional musician, at least not at the same caliber his mother had been. Right now, leaving the planet wasn't high on his to-do list, not when he had everything he could ever want or need right here.

Including the cock currently fucking into him.

His fingers strummed at the strings blindly as he bit down on his bottom lip to keep himself from moaning. He'd long since given up on trying to play anything real, mostly just picking at strings here and there, enough to keep Baikal moving and that was all.

They were in his practice room on campus, seated on the stool in the center of the room. Baikal's shadows kept the windows blocked and he'd locked the door when they'd entered, but it wouldn't be long before someone came looking for them if they didn't pick up the pace.

"We've got to be out there in ten minutes," Baikal reminded as if reading his mind. "Better hurry up."

"I should be the one saying that," he countered. "You're the one in control."

In response to that, Baikal shifted off the chair and shoved Rabbit forward so he was bent over. Then he lined himself up and thrust back into him. His hand smoothed down Rabbit's spine before he delivered a harsh slap to his left ass cheek. "I don't hear music, little bunny."

Rabbit made an annoyed sound and then went back to plucking random strings. He was so close. He just wanted—

Baikal's hand came around and he palmed Rabbit's balls, the touch barely anything at all.

But it was enough.

Rabbit screamed and came, almost collapsing to the ground from the force of it, held up by Void's arms wrapped around his waist.

Baikal hit his orgasm soon after, and the two of them crumpled to the ground in a tangled heap.

They'd had sex that morning before Rabbit had left for university, which had only been about five hours ago. Not that this was the first time Void had snuck in here to fuck him during school hours, but today was meant to be different. Special.

“We have to get up,” Rabbit said, only to have Baikal groan and tug him in closer.

The Brumal King was spooning him and seemed far too comfortable for their current predicament.

“The ceremony starts in twenty minutes and we were meant to have already been there,” Rabbit reminded, tugging at Baikal’s arms in an attempt to get him to release him. “Void. Seriously. I don’t want to miss it.”

He huffed. “Fine.”

“It’s our college graduation.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“It’s important,” Rabbit continued to argue as the two of them stood and began to clean off.

“Not as important as being inside of you,” Baikal said.

“Which you just were.”

“I could go again.”

“Absolutely not.” Rabbit yanked up his pants pointedly and crossed the room to get their graduation gowns. Taking a second to appreciate the ink over the back of Baikal’s shoulder before he handed his to him.

“See something you like?” Baikal teased as he tossed on his shirt and quickly did up the buttons.

The Shout tattoo he’d gotten with his father’s ashes was the same design as the one on the necklace he’d given him. A one-line rabbit in motion.

Rabbit was wearing that necklace now, and the matching symbols always made him feel weirdly connected.

“You said you used to call me tiny obsession in your head,” Rabbit clicked his tongue. “A tiny obsession wouldn’t result in permanence of any kind, and yet here you are with my namesake inked onto your skin. You remember when you told me it was too late for me? In actuality, it was too late for you.”

“You’re right,” Baikal agreed. “You burrowed into me the first time I saw you. I was never going to let you go.”

Not wanting things to get too serious—because that always led back to Baikal making a move and Rabbit giving in to lust—he motioned at the gown. “Hurry up.”

They were sandy gold with pearl accents, and he couldn’t help but smile when Baikal put his on. “It’s not very you, is it?”

“Does that mean we can skip and screw again after all?”

“No.” He adjusted his sash and then winked suggestively. “But maybe we can once we get home after.”

“Promises, Rabbit,” Baikal said, “don’t make them if you don’t plan on keeping them.”

“Since when have I broken a promise with you?”

Void grinned, far too pleased. “Never.”

“Exactly.”

“Say it again.”

Rabbit had made the mistake of confessing his love during climax the other night, and ever since, Baikal had been obsessed with hearing him repeat it. He rolled his eyes and picked his instrument off the floor and set it on its stand. “No.”

Living together at the Void estate was going well. Even more surprising was the fact that Rabbit had adjusted quickly to life among the Brumal. It helped that everyone was duty-bound to

show him respect since he was dating their Dominus, but he'd also made friends with most of the guys closest to Void.

He had a home and friends, and in the next half hour, he'd also have a diploma.

If he ever got out of this room that was.

"Void. Move."

"Not until you say it."

"Seriously?"

Baikal cupped his ear and turned it toward him, waiting.

Rabbit crossed his arms. "You say it first."

"Always the difficult road with you," he teased, but then he caressed his face and looked Rabbit in the eyes and told him, "I love you. I love you, little bunny. Now, be good for me and say it back."

He blew out a breath. "I love you, too."

"Like you mean it, Rabbit."

"Of course I mean it." He made a big show of clasping his hands over Baikal's which were still on his cheeks. "I love you, too. You're the only one I've ever loved. And you'll be the only one I ever love."

"Good."

"Happy?" Rabbit let go and stepped toward the door.

"The second ceremony starts exactly one hour after the first," Baikal informed him, giving him pause.

With a frown, he turned back. "What second ceremony?"

They had graduation and then afterward the school put on a huge feast in the great hall. It was tradition. There was never any other formal event scheduled on the same day.

"Did you forget?" Baikal moved toward him, reaching into the pocket beneath his gown. When he pulled his hand out, he was holding a gold band with tiny teal stones set around it. He took Rabbit's left hand and slid it on his middle finger, the traditional finger on their planet to show when one was otherwise spoken for.

He couldn't seriously mean....

Rabbit stared at him in shock.

"After graduation," Baikal told him. "That's what you said. Verbatim."

"This is not what I meant and you know it."

"Too late." He shrugged. "Everything's already planned and the invites were already sent out. And now," he lifted his multi-slate and made a face, "we're going to be late. Let's go."

"Void."

Baikal ignored him, tossing open the door and stepping out into the hall, Rabbit hot on his heels.

"You can't be serious," Rabbit said.

He reached back and took his hand as they made their way out of the building, heading toward the West Quad where the ceremony would take place.

"I'm always serious." Baikal sent him a sly glance. But then they were at the entrance to the quad, a large sandstone archway decorated with balloons, and he pulled them to stop, lifting and kissing the back of Rabbit's hand. "Let's get married. After graduation. Say yes."

Rabbit opened his mouth, but then closed it again, realizing he was only arguing for the sake of arguing, and not actually out of any real objection. "I'm always so careful with my words, and yet

you always seem to find a way to use them against me.”

“I can think of a few other things I’d like to use against you.” He stepped in closer, the hard length of him hidden beneath the gown making contact with Rabbit’s thigh briefly before he was shoved away.

“Fine,” Rabbit said. “Whatever. You already set it up anyway. But if the food is bad I’m demanding a divorce.”

Baikal laughed and stepped back, this time holding out his hand and waiting for Rabbit to take it. “Deal, little bunny.”

He slapped his palm into his and squeezed. “Deal.”

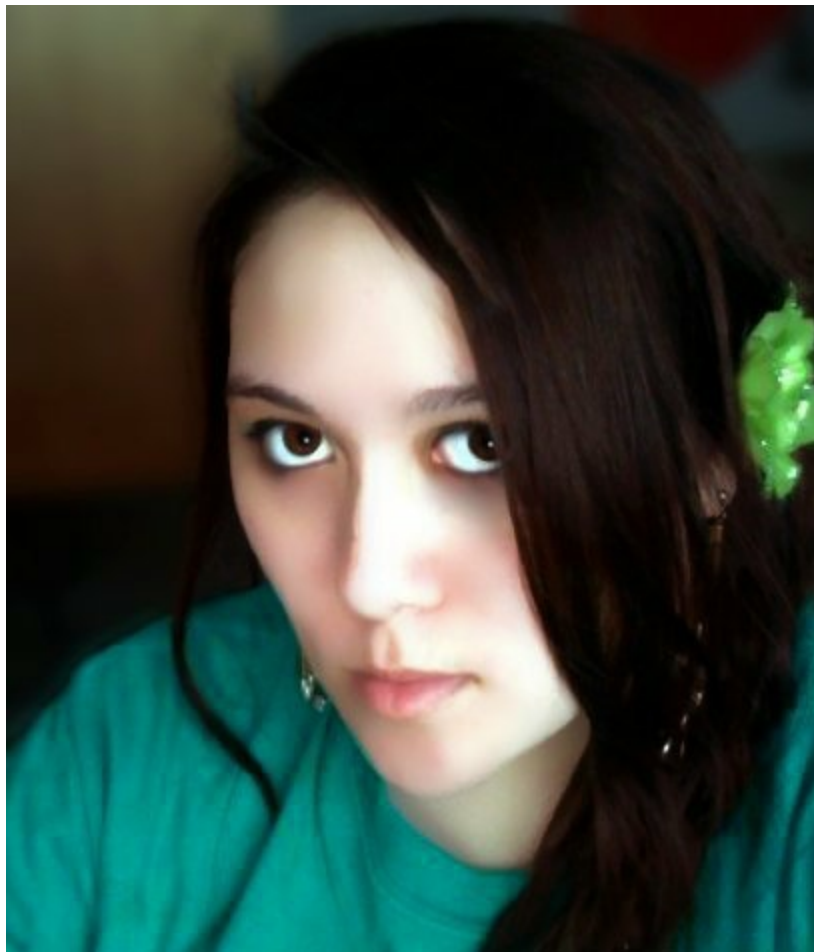
What was one more deal with the Devil, at this point anyway?

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