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**Closing the Distance**

*by YipYapYams*

**Summary**

*She could taste the sweetness that was vengeance among the raw blood and tissue that clung*
to her teeth. Perhaps her father had found something similar in the act of killing.
When Simone's grandfather dies, she is coerced by her father Leif into staying with him in
that strange house in the woods, but sorting through the estate and arranging a funeral are not
what Leif has planned for his sole progeny. Halfway through twisting her mind through pain
and subjugation, his methods are interrupted when his meddling brothers arrive.
The secrets that have lied waiting in their shared bloodline tie their family to a deadly fate
when the sins that created them threaten to destroy them.

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<><><>Feedback is appreciated!<><><>

Notes

This is my first time back in the writing saddle after many years, but I couldn't stop myself
from spilling this story out into my phone one night and figured I'd share it.
Simone had always had trouble talking with the man who was so often away in her life and never really there when he wasn't, but the way the air around him seemed to vibrate now due to the psilocybin tea's effects made him all the less approachable. She blinked, unable to look away from her father as she stood in the dark hallway looking into the small bedroom he sat in, the moment extended like a long rope of taffy. She was about to turn back and try to rouse her passed out mother instead when she heard his rich, low voice softly say, "Come here, Simone."

She swallowed thickly, her already reactive heart rate ticking up as she crossed the threshold into the stuffy room, bare feet sinking into old musty carpeting. He was looking at a toy in his hands as he told her to sit down. Not seeing any chairs, she opted to sit on the twin bed with him. She was not used to being invited to do anything by him and regretted not being sober for the rare experience. "This was my room... growing up," he told her, his gentle accent revealed in the too-careful diction of his deep voice, still not looking at her as he fidgeted with the toy in his hands. It looked like a plastic robot, but he was not necessarily focusing on it so she declined to fill the silence by commenting on the oddity. His gray eyes flitted from her face, to her chest, to her folded hands in her lap, and then back into the distance of his thoughts for a moment before he said, "You can sleep in this room while we're here. I'm not sure when we're going to be through sorting all this out; there's much do be done beyond the funeral. Your mother will be returning to the city tomorrow if you'd like to go with her, but I would like your help. It's your choice, Simone."

Simone was stunned by the wealth of words her normally silent father presented her with before she scrambled to interpret them. She cleared her throat to borrow a moment before replying, "Yeah, uh, I can stay here, I don't mind. Papa."

He turned his face to her, his steel eyes softened by a smile she couldn’t help but return, a blush warming her cheeks at this unexpected attention from the man. She was delighted that he wanted her around, actually asked for her to help him in something, and she entertained the hope that maybe there would be more moments like this if she stayed. She was snatched from her reverie when she felt the warmth of his hand descend upon her knee as he tilted her chin up toward him. His mouth was always too soft against hers, his lips sliding too slowly to latch them together rather...
than the very simple brief surface contact that a familial peck should be. The suck and then drag of his lips onto hers as he would pull away indicated more of a seeking for sensation than a simple gesture, always lingering for just a half second too long, pulling away just a bit too slowly. She had always felt awkward and sorry that he tried and failed to fill a role he couldn't; he was just a man who didn't know how to be a dad, he could only kiss the way he knew how.

As she felt his mouth move against hers at this moment with the drug in her system causing time to extend every second and every sensation amplified, she tried to ignore the arousal stirring in her. Then, he tilted his head to better fit their lips together and his hand squeezed her knee. The surprised whimper caught in her throat gave her father brief pause before he pressed closer. In her mind, she had to cling to the idea that the drug was stretching this moment out inexorably, that he hadn't been kissing her for this long in reality, his lips flexing over hers in a slide of motion that derailed her thoughts into a scrambling mess and curled her toes. The wet center of his mouth opened just slightly, pushing her plush lips apart and igniting an unexpected spill of heat in her abdomen as she tasted a hint of his saliva. Scotch, the cigarettes he was supposed to quit months ago, the cashews he ate instead of going out to dinner with his wife, and the heady taste of this forbidden contact tingled at the tip of her tongue.

Something in that taste was teasingly out of reach, something so familiar and forgotten, begging to be pursued. Before she could stop herself, she shut her eyes and leaned into his kiss, her hand latched on top of his hold at her knee. Revulsion at her own impulse seared shame onto her frenzied mind, but he was already kneading the soft flesh of her thigh under the hem of her skirt and she moaned into him, the rush of thought completely hazed out by euphoria. She felt more than heard the rough moan rumble from deep in his throat, a sound so thoroughly masculine that a primal fear mounted over her thrill and beckoned her to begin to pull back. His moan ended in a growl at this, his hand curled into claws at her thigh and her lips parted against his in a gasp at the sudden pain. He charged forward into her parted mouth with his own, his tongue intruding against hers and her racing thoughts returned all at once at the glide of that wet muscle stroking hers. A panic began to boil in her mind along with the realization of what was now happening, a panic furthered by the acknowledgment of what had in fact been happening this entire time in her drug haze. Her eyes snapped open in disbelief, but his eyes were closed and expression blissfully unbothered by the taboo they were committing.

Hi hand slid up, thumb digging into the cleft between her thigh and crotch, touching her wetness from over the cotton barrier of her panties as his kiss deepened. His other hand was quick to grab the back of her neck when she tried to jerk away. Her distressed noise of protest was muffled by his mouth still locked over hers as he pushed her slowly backward, swinging his leg over her until he was straddling her hips, locking her beneath him. When her back hit the mattress and she felt him sit down on her thighs, she looked up at his face and saw him looking down at her with such a gentle expression. Her lips were tingling from his kiss, her skin electrified with a low current that hummed through her whole body and spiraled tightly at her pelvis, and she was not quite able to tell herself it was just the drug as she held his storm gray gaze. Her fear, confusion, and shame were at odds with the pleasure and need coursing through her and it must have shown in her expression when he shushed her.

"Sshh, shh, let papa take care of his darling girl," he said in a husky whisper more heavily accented than she's ever heard him, hunching over her with one hand planted on the mattress next to her head and the other stroking her cheek soothingly.

"Papa..." she whimpered thinly, the word escaping her as a tiny plea but then the full meaning behind it slammed a harsh clarity onto her muddled state. No matter how abstract his distance had made his role in her mind or how twisted her starvation for his affection and approval had become, he was her father and she couldn't let this moment of confusion risk tarnishing their roles forever. She
tried to scramble out from under him, but his weight on her legs prevented her from budging out even an inch and the hand that had been caressing her cheek slid down to wrap around her neck. The presence of his hand on her throat was enough to still her struggles, the threat clear and shocking as she looked back up at his face, closer now than it had been.

"My sweet Simone," he whispered, his other hand disappearing between them and fumbling with something briefly before the sound of a zipper alerted her. She couldn't look away from his face, but the gentleness in his eyes belied the sharp-toothed grin that spread across his face before his hand traveled up under her dress to glide over her abdomen. "I've waited so long for you to come to me..."

Her belly was exposed the further his hand traveled up until he slipped under her bra, then his hips tilted and she felt something smooth and hot slide over her bared thigh at the same time his hand closed over her breast. Simone gasped as her father's calloused hand kneaded in time with his hips rubbing what she knew must be his penis against the top of her thigh, her body now shaking from the sustained adrenaline. She was writhing under him now for a different reason, her dread once more overtaken by the drug fog and lust. She had not been this close to her father for such a length of time, never had felt this loved by him before, and she was finding this attention as intoxicating as the hormones he was stoking. She knew she was making pathetic little breathy sounds, her face burning in mortification, but his hard cock smeared precum on her leg and his breath was hot with scotch against her temple, so she shut her eyes and let herself moan for him. The effect was almost instant.

"God, Simone!" he gasped, his hands moving quickly to wrench the dress and bra off her body. She barely had time to recover from that sudden jostling before his weight was lifted from her legs and her soaked panties were catching at her ankle in his haste to get them off. Dizzy, she watched wide-eyed as he kneeled over her, his arousal visible for the first time to her and she had to force herself not to stare. Such polite impulses missed him entirely as he blatantly took in every piece of her newly exposed flesh, the cruel grin gone and she caught the glint of something feral in his eyes. A fresh wave of fear chilled her from the back of her skull and she moved to cover her breasts, but he grabbed her wrists and pushed them away from her body. She was suddenly aware of how quiet and bleak it was in that small unfamiliar room, how even the light overhead only seemed to highlight the shadows. He was outlined entirely in darkness above her, a silhouette that could have been any man, but she was deeply ashamed that she couldn't imagine it to be anyone but her father. She tried to swallow past the knot of shame in her throat as her legs parted to show him her glistening cunt.

"Oh, darling girl..." he breathed upon seeing her pussy swollen with need and slick down her inner thighs. She was blushing almost as pink as her little cunt, unable to look at him as he bent closer to her, his hands holding her knees wide apart. She saw out of the corner of her eye that he had begun disrobing. The air moved cold on her molten cunt, but she waited on her back with her legs spread as wide as he had left her, her heartbeat loud in her own ears to fill the terrible silence between sounds of shuffling cloth.

She yelped in surprise when she felt a wetness press against her pussy, the yelp followed immediately by a loud moan as his tongue curled around her clit. She angled her hips up, offering him more of her cunt to lick and he obliged eagerly, his tongue dipping into her hole and dragging back up to her clit in slow rotations. She was barely aware of anything outside of how her father, her papa, had his face buried between her legs and made her see sparks. Her hands were running through his silvered hair, tightening their hold when she felt him pump two thick fingers into her vagina. She couldn't think — couldn't bring herself to think, not when she knew what horror and regret waited to be found beyond this pleasure.

"Papa... oh, fuck, Dad..." she heard herself panting, the high voice almost unrecognizable to her own ears. She felt him curl his fingers inside her and rub against the front of her cunt, the friction sparking pure ecstasy along her nerves that was too much, too fast. She tried to push his head away, her leg
kicking out in an uncoordinated attempt to scramble backward, heel skidding on the bedding, but his
grip on her hip was strong enough to bruise and he lapped at her clit and nearly punched his fingers
into her as she came. Her moans rose in a gasping crescendo, higher and higher in pitch as her cunt
clenched around his fingers. She panted as she came down, her skin glowing in a thin sheen of sweat
despite only having taken no more than two minutes to cum, and she looked down through half-
lidded eyes at the man responsible. He gazed up at her with an expression that made her heart ache
with the love she found there, that glint of madness gone and his eyes now warm. She felt the urge to
cry and just barely squashed it.

"Papa..." she said, voice wavering and tight with emotion. She reached down, grabbed his shoulder
and pulled him up her body, all the while babbling, "Fuck me, please... I need you, Daddy... I need
you so bad, I can't stand it, just please..."

She stopped only when she latched her mouth onto his, tasting herself on him and moaning into a
desperate kiss. His hands roamed over her body as she assaulted his mouth with her lips and tongue,
his body curled between her legs. She began grinding against his cock, sliding the long shaft
between her slick labia, moaning into his mouth in both frustration and pleasure. His hips jerked in
response to her efforts, the fat head of his cock dipping into her before slipping back out and up
against her clit, making her break her feverish kiss in a loud gasp.

"Please, Papa, please, please, please," she begged, each plead accentuated with a grind against that
teasing cock. He growled out a low groan and tilted his hips, the tip of his dick twitching against her
opening and he had to grab her neck once more to stop her from sliding down onto it. She was
hardly aware of the fear, shame and despair that screamed from some distant space in her mind, but
she heeded the threat of that large hand at her throat once more. He stared into her eyes, not letting
her look away even if she tried as he slowly penetrated her. Inch by inch, he pumped into her, the
almost painful stretch making her utter small sounds of discomfort among the gasping pleasure of it.

"I love you, I love you, I love you..." she heard herself whispering, voice cracking and foreign to
her, but she was unable stop herself. She flinched and released a sharp gasp when he was finally
fully sheathed in her pussy, the tears that had been threatening finally spilling in hot trails down her
cheeks. To her confusion, a sob wracked her frame, followed by another as he began to move.
Through tear-blurred vision, she watched as his eyes conveyed surprise, almost as though he couldn't
quite believe this situation even as he drove his cock back into her. The deep moan rumbling in his
chest as he fucked her slowly made her clench around him.

"Oh Christ, you feel so fucking good, darling girl," he growled, his cheek nuzzling her tear-streaked
face.

"Harder," she whispered, her voice ragged and close to his ear, “Make me ache... please, Papa.” At
first, she wasn't sure if he had heard her, but then his nails dug into the pliant flesh of her hips and he
started pushing into her forcefully. She cried out with each punishing thrust, his already too-large
cock now feeling as though he was bruising her inside, but she met each thrust eagerly. She wasn't
sure why, but she needed him to make this a punishment. She supposed she was a terrible daughter
to have begged for her father's cock like she had. His nails scratched painfully at her hips, dragging
swollen pink lines that spotted with blood and she hoped some of them went deep enough for a
lasting scar. She thought of looking in the mirror later and admiring them as proof of his affection
when she felt another orgasm building through the pain.

His mouth was at her neck when he began groaning out something in his native tongue, his rich
baritone rough and dark. Her arms, not long enough to fully wrap around his powerful shoulders
above her, pulled him more closely down onto her torso so she could feel his words vibrating
through his hard chest. The voice that had so long enchanted her throughout her entire life was
bewitching her into yet higher arousal now as his foreign words curled enticingly against her sensitive neck. His strange, beautiful words were peppered with her name, no hint of the American pronunciation, and it stuck out in her mind that she had always felt like a slightly different person when he addressed her, this woman he calls See-mohn.

His thrusts became more quick and short, almost as though he didn't want to leave her cunt before he was driving back into her, staying deep and smashing against her cervix with each ram of his hips. This consistent closeness rocked his lower abdomen flush against her, rubbing her clit between them, and she couldn't stop her orgasm against this onslaught of sensation. Her whole body drew taught like a bowstring ready to release, her cunt clenching down hard on his cock and this had him gasping and his hips stuttering hard into her. The twitch of his cock inside of her as he began to ejaculate, his deep voice roaring out his climax, sent her contracting around him and her voice keening as she joined him in orgasm. Her head swam as she felt him swell and spasm inside her, spilling hot semen that tingled on her bruised flesh, and her vision whited out.

When she came back seconds later, he was heavily laid out on top of her, his arms wrapped around her in an almost crushing embrace as he panted into her neck. He was still buried inside her, slowly softening and slippery with both of their fluids, her cunt erratically pulsating around him from aftershocks of her intense orgasm, her breath hitching and gasping softly. Her mind was clouded, thoughts blessedly still distant and muted as they stayed holding each other in this moment suspended from time. Eventually, he slowly pulled away from her, looking down at her sweat-slicked body as he knelt on his heels between her legs. They stayed like that for a long silent moment, his expression unreadable as he looked at her and she watched his face carefully for any reaction, anything at all to tell her if this was a mistake or... something else. She didn’t know what else this could have been. She didn’t know why she needed it to be anything else at all.

“I'm sorry,” he said quietly, then she watched him rise from the bed and walk out into the dark hallway, not even picking up his clothes as he left. Simone’s head dropped back onto the mattress and she stared up at the yellowed ceiling in that small, silent room. Despite her scratched her scratched hips and battered sex, she felt completely numb.
Leif quickly gathered the blades from his late father's house, 26 knives of various utilities and antiquities excluding the butter knives he decided to ignore, and wrapped them in a towel before hiding them in the top shelf of a closet. Deciding that the .45 handgun was safe enough remaining in the trick back of his father's nightstand, he then gathered any axes, bats, sizable wrenches, hammers, and anything he judged would make a decent makeshift weapon and locked them in the knife closet. Although he doubted the necessity to do any of this, he couldn't discount the possibility that his daughter might turn on him violently at any point.

The folding knife that was his old man’s constant companion, still waiting for him next to his wallet on his dresser, Leif took to the sharpening stone. He sat in his father's bedroom on a wooden chair, the bare mattress stained and reeking of decay from the four days it took before his body was discovered, and dragged the blade across the rough stone. The stillness this task required of him calmed him out of the purposeful frenzy of activity enough to think as he sat still naked, the sweat and fluids of both his and his daughter’s bodies now dry on his skin.

His thoughts were slow and heavy with guilt as he thought of her. His Simone, hopefully lost to the weight of their sin in the oblivion of sleep, laid out on his childhood bed downstairs. His Simone, the distant star of his life burning his soul with each moan beneath him. His cock twitched at the fresh echo of her voice in his mind and he curled his lips into a snarl at the greedy monster under his skin. The blade sung with each swipe over the sharpening stone as his pace unconsciously increased, frustration twisting in him at his lack of self-control. He turned the stone over and buffed the edge of the blade smooth while he glowered at his foolishness. Years of calculated ministrations dashed after one heady moment in a simple kiss. He dragged the razor thin edge of the knife lightly against his thumb, the blade easily slicing a thin line into the skin so fine he could scarcely detect it if it weren’t for the red thread blooming open a moment after.

As he inspected the cut, he allowed a self-reassurance that he could manage the situation he now found himself in. He could direct this new dynamic between himself and his Simone. He rubbed his thumb along his lower lip absently in thought as he considered the many possibilities this event had opened to him, his blood smearing scarlet on him. As his tongue swiped at the warm liquid, his resolve to manage how things would progress hardened.

Simone wasn't sure if she ever fell asleep, but figured she must have as the next time she opened her eyes, it was to the gray light of predawn outside the box window. Her hair was still damp and her naked body still wrapped in the towel from the scalding shower she’d taken after lying on that small bed for hours, staring up at nothing and trying not to think. Now in the pale light of a different day, the previous night’s events lurked fresh in her mind and she felt the rise of dread at what she will have to think and feel about it. For now, fear overwhelmed any possibility of processing outside of that feeling.

She rolled stiffly out of the musty bed, the joints in her pelvis feeling oddly and painfully separated as she limped down the hallway to the bathroom, the green terrycloth clasped tightly over her shoulders against the morning chill. When she flipped on the light, it took her several dazed seconds before her eyes adjusted to the ghastly image of her reflection in the age-fogged mirror. Dark smudges of fingerprints formed patterns on her neck and chest in yellow and purple, her lips still swollen and dark, her skin a cast in a gray pallor that only highlighted the dark circles under her glassy eyes. Locking the door, she swallowed hesitantly before letting the towel drop and taking in further proof
of her sin. Her hips and the sides of her thighs were scored in dozens of arching red lines, most of
them inflamed and some beginning to scab where the skin was broken. The sight of her body so
abused makes her blood run cold, but the memory of wanting this, of hoping for scars to wear as
proof that her father loves her, makes her tremble.

In a fit of energy, she rifled through the medicine cabinet above the toilet until she pulled out a bottle
half full of rubbing alcohol. Deciding that it's not too ancient, she soaked a wad of toilet paper in it
until it's dripping then slapped it on the worst of her scars. Her hand gripped the counter and her
shoulders tensed into a shaking hunch as the burning pain flared from her hip, but it was a real pain
that she could control and the tears it brought made so much more sense than the situation she found
herself in.

Now that she was able to shed a few tears from the physical pain, the fear and shame came rolling up
from where she had buried them and she wept openly, crouching low on the tile floor and curling
herself tightly as her mouth opened in a silent and shuddering sob.

When she padded out into the kitchen on slow and cautious bare feet, it was closer to noon than
morning but her mother was sitting at the table with the remnants of breakfast still. Simone couldn't
bring herself to look her in the eye, opting to sit on the opposite side of the small table and busy
herself with eating an apple despite her lack of appetite.

“Leif told me you wanted to stay and help out,” her mother spoke, her voice haggard and head
leaned back in her obvious hang over. Simone froze at the mention of her father having said anything
about her to anyone. “Why you would want to stay out in this haunted house in the middle of
nowhere is beyond me. You sure you don't want to come back home with me?”

With horror, she realized that she had indeed agreed to stay here alone with him, but that had been
before. She cleared her voice and began, “Um, actually, mom, I uh-“

“Would love to stay in this haunted house;” her father's friendly baritone interrupted. Simone
flinched at the sound, wide eyes watching as he approached the table with two mugs and a wide
smile. She marveled at his appearance; he didn't look any different than he had any other morning.

He set one mug down in front of his wife who waved him off with a grumpy, “I told you, I don't
want to eat any of your dead dad’s food. That's fucking creepy."

He shifted the mug to his daughter instead, who stared at the it like it was the first time she'd ever
seen coffee, and responded gamely, “Well, I'm sure Simone is hungry enough to eat haunted food.
Would you like some eggs, darling girl?”

Simone's ears rang at the how Leif chose to address her; the same pet name he had used for her last
night. An echo of those same words whispered in her mind, low and husky, and she held her breath
in an unconscious effort to slow her rising heart rate. Her eyes snapped up to see him looking directly
at her, for all appearances waiting for her reply but the way he held her gaze felt as oppressive as a
challenge or command.

“Yes, Papa…” she answered lamely, the words falling from her tongue.

His smile widened, seeming all too happy to see the girl folding under his will. “Good girl.”

“You're in way too good of a mood. I'm leaving,” his wife groused, rising from the table with great
consideration to her pounding headache. She looked at her daughter, who sat stiffly with a faraway
look in her eye, and said, "Just remember when you're bored out of your skull: I did offer to save you. I'll see you in a week, sweetie."

Simone could feel Leif staring at her, the weight of his gaze heavy with expectation, but she kept her eyes focused on the mug in front of her as she said, “Drive safe, mom.”

She listened to the sounds of her mother hugging her father goodbye, unable to look as the older woman left the kitchen and left her alone with him. Her throat tightened at the distant sound of the car starting and rolling out of the long dirt driveway until only her frantic heartbeat and her father’s scraping around the stove remained. She flinched again when he placed a small steaming plate of scrambled eggs in front of her and sat down next to her with his own plate. The sight and smell of food made her nauseous, but he seemed to harbor no such difficulty eating. In fact, she considered, he seemed to harbor no difficulties at all. Simone tried to stop the tears from escaping, but each frustrated swipe of her hands at her eyes only seemed to invite more of them to trail down her face.

Leif watched her as he ate quickly. Those big tears wetting her cheeks reminded him of how she had cried underneath him last night and, with a twist of guilt, he felt his cock begin to fatten up when he heard her accompanying little hiccups of staunched sobs and sniffles. He’d never known quite what to do with himself when she cried, often just walked away until she finished or fetched her mother for her, but now the impulse to soothe came so naturally as his hands reached out and gently pulled her into a sideways embrace. To his delight, she nuzzled her face against his chest and clung to him, her acceptance of his touch encouraging him to pull her into his lap and wrap his arms around her properly. Her crying redoubled and she curled against him, her smaller body tucked under his chin and quaking from her sobbing.

“I… I’m so sorry,” she murmured wetly into his shirt. She sniffed again before she went on, her voice small and muffled against his chest. “I ruined everything, I’m such a fuck up. I’m so, so sorry.”

Leif stroked her back slowly, taking in this information and working out how best to use his daughter’s apparent self-blame before placing a kiss atop her head and softly saying, “What's done is done, pet. I’m sorry to say that there's no going back, but I'll never be sorry for taking care of my little girl. I want you to come to me when you're in need.”

She shuddered against him and he felt himself harden halfway, the material of his black jeans restricting his cock irritatingly. She felt so good against him, he didn't want her crying to stop. In the harsh light of day, without the buildup of arousal to soften reality, he was surprised she was affecting him this much and he became curious to see if he could coax a similar reaction from her. His hands slid lower on her back, rubbing in slow circles that dipped down to brush her tailbone and the top of her ass over the thin material of her summer dress. After a few languid strokes, her sobbing died down and he pressed on. His fingertips found the ridge of elastic of her panties and traced it, noting how her breathing deepened and she became very still. He realized, with a hesitant excitement, that she was waiting. His cock was now fully hard and leaking precum into his underwear, but from its position against his leg he figured it unlikely that she could detect it under her. His cock throbbed when she drew in a sharp gasp as his fingers splayed over the tops of her hips, her body tensing against him.

“Do they hurt?” he asked, his voice huskier now.

“What?” she choked out.

“From when… you asked me to hurt you,” he whispered. When she didn't respond, he pressed his hands into her hips and she gripped his shirt in a tight fist. When he spoke, he let his voice become
stern and firm. “Stand up, Simone.”

Slowly, she slid off his lap and stood before him, tear-stained face hung low and arms hung limply at her side. Embarrassed. Submissive. His cock ached.

“Show me. Lift your skirt.”

She winced, drawing back from him and saying, “I-I can't, Papa. Please!”

All gentleness gone from his tone, he commanded, “Simone, lift your skirt.”

She flinched, but grasped her skirt and hesitantly bunched the material at the sides until, inch by inch, her thighs and then hips were exposed. He had to control his breathing as he took in the dozens of angry red scratch marks, his marks, marring her beautiful skin. He noticed that she kept her skirt hanging low in front, keeping her crotch covered, and he took a long moment deliberating before speaking.

“I said to lift your skirt,” he reminded her firmly. “I had meant all the way, Simone.”

“No! No, I really can't,” she said, voice and hands shaking in panic. She hung her head lower and whispered, “Please don't make me, Papa.”

“You can and you will, or I will do it for you,” he responded, his voice quiet with warning.

Slowly, she lifted her skirt until only the bottom of her pale pink panties were shown, but he could plainly see how they were darkened with damp and her inner thighs glistened with the fluid that overflowed from her drenched cunt. He couldn't look away, wishing to etch this picture into his mind forever of her standing before him, mortified, baring his marks and her cunt soaking from his touch. Silently, he slid down from his chair to his knees, his hands gingerly gliding over her scratch marks while she watched seemingly too terrified to move. He loved that prey instinct in her that made her freeze up. She yelped adorably when he pressed his mouth gently to the side of her right thigh, planting soft kisses to the abused flesh. He kissed upward and by the time he reached the top of her hip, she was nearly panting and her legs were shaking.

He looked up at her face, almost laughing at how she kept her eyes scrunched closed, and moved to level his mouth to her cunt before whispering, “Let papa take care of his darling girl.”
Simone shuddered when she felt his tongue slide up her inner thigh, the warm muscle lapping up the wet skin in long strokes. She kept her eyes squeezed shut, trying not to panic or react to the fact that her father was tasting her for the second time, not sure how to react as her shame and confusion warred with her arousal. A surprised grunt escaped her and she jerked at the feel of his mouth pressing at the crotch of her panties but his hands were quick to hold her steady. His large hands kneaded her plush ass while his face wedged between her closed legs, trying to coax her open, and she began to pant in gulping breaths at the way his stubble scraped deliciously at her sensitive skin.

She was so ashamed of the way her body was responding, the way her pussy had flooded when he'd pulled her into his lap, that she was sure something was deep and fundamentally broken in her. She didn't want this, she assured herself even as she parted her thighs for this, she didn't want to commit this sin.

She gasped when he pushed aside her panties and put his open mouth on her, his tongue pressing on her clit and his pleased groan vibrating against her. She peeked and saw him staring up at her, his gray gaze dark and intense, causing her to close her eyes again from the inexplicable fear that spiked in her. Her hand gripped the table hard in an attempt to keep standing in case her wobbling knees gave out but his bruising grip on her ass was already mostly holding her up.

“Papa!” she gasped when his teeth scraped lightly on her clitoral hood, the contrasting pain and pleasure making her head toss back as the first ripples of orgasm approached. The groan he made in response pushed her over the edge and she bucked in his hands as she came, crying out in a thin high voice, “Oh god, Papa, fuck, fuck, oh fuck!”

He growled into her cunt as he sucked hard while she came, making her keen from the pain that only seemed to extend her orgasm. Her mind, having been overwhelmed with shame and denial, was a clouded blur of muted thought as she came down from her climax. Opening her eyes now, she looked down at him and saw that he was still watching her, his mouth and chin coated in her fluid and expression conveying only hunger and awe.

“You're so perfect,” he spoke softly, sliding his hands up her body as he rose to his feet. She leaned against the table, dazed and exhausted and immensely aroused as she tilted her head back to look at his face. They stayed like that for a long silent moment, her mind still buzzing in the afterglow that kept her worry and shame at bay, something warm growing in her chest as she stared into his eyes. His hands slid up her back slowly to cup the back of her neck, his head ducking down toward her face as he whispered in a languid singsong tone, “My sweet little Simone…”

The warmth in her chest seemed to bloom when his lips pressed into hers, the rich appreciative hum from his throat making her eyelids flutter shut and return his kiss. She found herself wanting to lean into this moment, forget about the wickedness and violation of her moral center and cling only to the way his attention made her feel so thoroughly wanted and special. As he tilted her further back against the table and slipped his tongue into her mouth, she shivered and forced her mind to be blank, existing only in the haze of arousal he stoked within her.

Never in her life had she had a lover that inspired such uncontrollable lust as he had in the past 18 hours. She could no longer blame the psilocybin tea she had drunken hours before their encounter last night. For whatever reason, he could cause her body to betray her own will, dragging out an animalistic urge to pleasure and be pleased. Her mind started to wonder at this, at how she could be that sick, so she pushed all thought aside and wrapped her arms around her father to caress his back as she deepened the kiss.
This earned another appreciative hum from him, the rich sound of his approval tingling in her ears. She rose to stand on her tiptoes, leaning heavily against his body when she felt the hardened length of him between them. Her hand slid, slow with hesitation, to the front of him and down to press lightly on the bulge down the leg of his jeans. He sighed through his nose, breathing hard and not breaking the kiss as she traced it. When she felt him throb under her palm, she rode the impulse to unbutton his pants.

Still locked in their kiss, he helped her undo his pants and pull them down just enough to free his cock. She finally broke their kiss to look down at him, the hot and smooth column heavy and thick in her hand. Her ragged breathing stuttered at the size of him, easily the largest she'd had yet, and she recalled with a wince how her pelvis had ached from the rough pounding he'd given her. A clear drop of precum drooled from his tip and she pumped him in her grip until she watched, mesmerized, as it dribbled down the underside of him and over her knuckles.

She could feel him watching her and she wanted very badly to make him happy, to earn his approval, so she leaned down and lapped up that dribble of precum with a long swipe of her tongue. She felt him throb in her fist and heard his deep inhalation as she fit him into her mouth, swirling her tongue around the head before sliding him further in. He tasted clean and earthy, the saltiness of him pleasant on her tongue. Being thicker than she was accustomed, she stopped when he hit the back of her throat and used her hand to follow her motions as she slid him out of her mouth. She heard him sigh raggedly above her as she gave him a couple pumps with her hand alone, getting him slick with her spit, and then slid him back in between her lips.

His fingers wove into her hair tightly, giving little tugs that sent tingles up her spine as she bobbed her head and hand to a steady rhythm. His sighs and grunts above her filled her with an addictive desire to hear more, pushing him into her throat until tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. She pulled down his jeans further with her free hand and gently cupped his balls, feeling them tense with the frequent throb of his cock and accompanying groan from his parted mouth when she sucked him just right.

Usually she performed oral sex as a favor to her lover but in this instance she found herself actively enjoying the act to the point she found herself moaning softly around his cock, earning her rougher tugs on her hair and the sound of him muttering something that was half sighs and half curses in another language. The texture and heat of his dick gliding over her tongue felt gratifying, but the way his breath hitched whenever she rubbed the underside of his head felt powerful.

She lost track of how long she'd been sucking his dick, but eventually his grip in her hair tightened and his muttering devolved into rapid panting, his balls tensing and dick twitching. She moaned around him, readying herself for his ejaculate, and he groaned loudly as he pushed her head down on him and came in the back of her throat. She willed herself to relax and not cough at the salty fluid spurting down her esophagus, swallowing harshly to avoid accidental asphyxiation of his semen. Knowing that she brought this reaction out of him brought a fresh wave of euphoria that left her head swimming.

His fingers detangled from her hair and she looked up at him, his softening dick sliding out of her mouth with a string of saliva that clung to her swollen lips. They were both trying to catch their breath, the only sound in the kitchen was their panting as they stared at one another. She observed his satisfied, exhausted expression and distantly thought on how she'd always admired his angular features, but now saw his handsomeness as always having been sexually appealing to her as well. The stray thought led her back to thinking on just how sick this all was and she withered away from his eye contact, his semen suddenly sitting like lead in her belly. His hand gently cupped her chin and tipped her face back up to look at him, his thumb running over her plump lower lip. She glanced up at him, seeing his grin and a strange darkness in his eyes that resurrected that inexplicable fear in
her gut.

He chuckled at her frightened stare, a low rumbling sound in his chest that made her cunt clench, and released her chin as he walked back to the stove. Confused at his abrupt change in demeanor, she licked her lips, surprised by the blood she tasted there.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

This is where the story begins to get dark. Content warning for rape.

Simone spent the afternoon trying to ignore the tremor in her hands, telling herself that it was from a lack of food rather than the maelstrom of thoughts and emotions she willed herself to push down as she kept busy. She washed the bedding in the little room, the ancient washing machine remarkably straightforward in a way she distrusted, and dusted all around the large old house while carefully avoiding her father. The way he had suddenly behaved as though they hadn't just had each other's genitals in their mouths unsettled her. She couldn't handle her own confusion over what to think of their recent experiences, let alone guess at what he thought of them, so she shoved it all as far down as she could. She was taking a dampened rag to a sticky stain on the dining room mantle when she heard the faint sound of her phone chiming. Dropping the rag, she ran into the little bedroom in the back, scooping her cell up and answering without even checking the caller.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Sibone! How's the fuck is Vermont?”

Where she would usually be aggravated at the unfortunate nickname, she was too relieved to hear anyone else's voice.

“Shen! Thank god, a real live human at last!” she exclaimed, masking her relief with sarcasm and sitting heavily on the fresh sheets. “I've been stuck in this haunted-ass house for three days and I think I'm cracking. Is there even anything left in the world but trees?”

“Hopefully not after the fucking apocalypse wipes us out,” her friend's voice crackled through the speaker, the less than desirable connection making him sound distant and tinny. “I thought you were coming back today? What happened, is there a big corn shuckin' down at the barn tonight?”

“I thought I was, but Papa- uh, my dad wanted me to stay,” she winced at her slip up, continuing to talk in hope that Shen didn't hear it, “Help with getting this place together for my grandfather's funeral. Probably gonna sell it. This house is huge! It has a parlor. I don't even know what you do in a parlor.”

“You court bitches in em, Bones,” he said. “You tell Papa that you're needed in Brooklyn. I've got like twenty cannapsules and everyone's out of fucking town this week. How dare you leave me to get high on my own supply while you go enjoy wholesome family bonding time in fucking Vermont.”

“You're more than welcome to come save me,” she hated how hopeful she sounded, hated even more when her friend cackled as though she were joking.

“Fuck you, I'm not gonna get stuck in some backwoods Deliverance town,” he laughed. “Hey, let me know when you make it back. Don't go all Amish on me now. I need someone who's willing to do shrooms with me here.”
Her stomach twisted at the thought of being under that particular drug’s influence ever again. “Uh, sure, Shen. So, um, what's going on over in civilization?”

“Couldn't tell ya, nothing but fucked up savages here. I gotta be out, so I'll fuck with ya later, Bones.”

“Oh…” her voice cracked in disappointment and she winced again, wondering if she'd always been this obvious, “Call me back whenever, it's dead out here.”

“Hasta luego, fucker.”

The line cut off and she stared at her phone, thankful to have gotten out of her head for a moment. It was so refreshing to be reminded of her life outside of being a slave to overpowersingly sexual impulses for her own flesh and blood father, even if that life was one of an art college dropout with druggie friends. With a sigh, she dropped her phone at the foot of the bed and stood up, ready to get back to her nervous cleaning when she froze upon seeing her father’s tall frame looming in the doorway. The cold expression hardened Leif’s features into something predatory and she instinctively cowered back a step from him.

“You shouldn't be so careless where other people can hear your conversations, Simone,” he said, his level tone belying the anger behind his veil of calm. He stepped into the room, keeping his stare on her even as he plucked her phone off the bed and pocketed it. “I don't think you'll be talking to anyone, at least until I decide what to do about your apparent recreational activities.”

Simone flinched, a burst of anger igniting her to respond. “You can't ground me like a child, Dad. I'm god damned 20 years old and I can make my own choices, regardless of you or mom's opinion.”

“Not anymore, you can't,” he muttered. She watched in mounting terror as he rolled up his shirtsleeves, revealing the thickly chorded muscles and dark blonde hair of his forearms. More than anything, a morbid curiosity kept her rooted to her spot and abated any demands that he explain his plans or stop, having never encountered him as the disciplinarian before. That role, along with any other parental duty beyond ensuring her basic survival, had always fallen on her mother who relied on stern talks and revoking privileges to tame any transgressions out of the girl. The scratch marks at the sides of her hips and thighs ached as she considered what he had been willing to do to her when he wasn't even upset, but seeing the cold anger turn his glare to steel had her mouth run dry in fearful anticipation. He sat on the edge of the bed and his voice was hard gravel when he ordered, “Come here and lay down on my lap.”

Her eyebrows shot up in realization of what was to be her punishment. “You're going to spank me?”

“I'll do worse than that if you disobey me, girl,” he ground out. The threat in his deep voice was palpable, snapping her into the moment and she wrung her hands nervously as she approached. He kept his stare on her and she found that she couldn't bring herself to look him in the face, instead focusing on his dusting of chest hair visible from the top two buttons of his shirt having been undone while he had been working. The sight made her realize that none of her previous lovers had had very much body hair and shame dampened her fear as she categorized him as a lover.

With that shame refreshed in her mind, she found it much easier to accept punishment and bent over his lap in deep embarrassment. His hands roughly fixed her position, laying her so her chest and pelvis were on his legs and giving her less mobility.

Heat bloomed in both her face and her crotch at being touched by him even under this circumstance, the humiliation of being ordered into such a vulnerable stance making her cunt begin to drool much to her confusion. She was thankful he couldn't see how she bit her lip when he pulled her skirt up, hoped he thought her sigh when he yanked her panties down was from it roughly rubbing at her
scratches. The air was cold against her pussy, making her worried at just how wet she could have
gotten in such a short amount of time, but the loud clap and excruciating sting of his open palm
striking her ass immediately derailed all thought.

“Oh fuck!” she yelped, immediately trying to launch herself off his lap, but his hand pinned her back
down and held her squirming on him. She’d had lovers spank her before, but this was nothing like
those slaps that only gave a brief sting and a little pink to her backside. Here, she had to pant with the
effort it took to calm herself and wait for the pain to subside.

He leaned over to her ear and in that hard gravelly voice whispered, “That was one. If you're good, I
will only administer fourteen more. For your sake, I recommend you be good for me, my Simone.
Now, count them out to me and don't try to get away.”

Stars danced in front of her eyes when he delivered a bruising slap to her other asscheek, her every
muscle tensing with the pain that radiated from there. She couldn't even think of disobeying him now
and she squeaked out in a tight voice, “Two!”

The next slap landed right on where the first had been planted and she jerked and let out a disjointed
cry, “Thre-ee!”

Tears were flowing freely down her face and her body barely had time to be wracked by her first sob
before his hand came down again, the crack booming in the small room and she didn't try to restrain
her short scream before gasping out, “Four!”

She was curled over his legs now, whole body trembling, not caring how pathetic she looked or
sounded as she began to sob. He didn't let up the force of his blow at all when the next strike came,
making her grab the edge of the bed in a white knuckle grip as she forced out the word, “Five!”

“Do you like to fuck your little friends when you're fucked up?” he asked, his tone conversational as
though they were discussing the weather. Bewildered at the contrast between his tone and topic, she
tried to turn her head to look at him but was interrupted by him bringing his hand down again.

She yelped, jerking hard, and shuddered violently before sobbing out, “Si-ix…”

“Is that what they taught you in art school? How to do shrooms and suck dick? Maybe I should send
them a donation for how talented your little mouth turned out though,” he said. She was momentarily
shocked to hear such filthy and accusatory words from her normally reserved and respectable father,
but wasn't given time to dwell on them or her bewilderment at how he knew about the drugs before
her vision blacked out for a second at the next crack of his palm.

“Ha-AH! S-seven!”

“You must have made a lot of friends judging by how greedily you gulped down my cum this
morning,” he mused. “How many cocks have you sucked, darling girl?”

Her legs kicked out from under her in a spasm when his hand cracked against the middle of her ass,
her cry a broken grunt that was barely human. “Eight!”

He chuckled. “No, I think a lot more than that.”

His next hit came sooner than she expected and she screamed, gasping for breath until she managed
to utter a hoarse, “Nine!”

She flinched when she felt him roughly palm her cunt, his voice sharp with disgust when he said,
“God, you little minx, you're practically dripping from this. How many greedy little punks have
made you call them ‘master’?"

“Wh-what?” she slurred confusedly, but was answered with another strike, this one somehow more painful than the rest and her mouth hang open in a silent scream. It was several seconds before she broke down with a sob, her body going slack across his lap as she cried, “Ten! Please, Papa, please no more! I'm sorry, so sorry, I can't take it!”

“Why shouldn’t I continue? I promised you fifteen,” he said, and she could hear the cruel amusement in his deep voice. His hand caressed her tender backside, making her shudder from the pain of just his light touch.

“I'll be good, Papa,” she begged, sniffing wetly, “I won't ever do any drugs again, I won't even talk to Shen, just please, please stop!”

His fingers drummed on her ass teasingly as he sighed and said, “That's not good enough, my sweet Simone. What else can you offer me?”

Her panicked mind raced, her panting breaths becoming rapid until he trailed his nails up and down the back of her thigh. Her stomach turned when she guessed at what he wanted, both hoping and dreading that she'd be correct.

Her voice hesitant and quiet, she said, “I'll be yours.”

Another chuckle from him, then she felt him lean over her to whisper in her ear, “Oh, my darling girl, you already are.”

She flinched when he hauled her around by her middle, a flurry of motion that ended with her on her belly on the bed, half of her body hanging off limply. Her mind was a blur of prayers for the spanking to be over, her arms locked and shaking over her head protectively when she felt him propping up her lower half to stand, ass raised in the air. A sharp gasp escaped her when she felt him grip low where her ass met her thigh, her fear paralyzing her from reacting to her revulsion and humiliation when he spread her pussy. She wanted so desperately for this all to be over so she can hide somewhere and cry, but when she heard the sound of his zipper coming down, an entirely new terror gripped her.

She started to turn her body and ask “Papa? What are you-” but yelped when he gripped her hair in a tight fist and pushed her head down onto the bed.

He grabbed her asscheek with his other hand, the pressure on her tenderized flesh making her gasp in pain, and said, “I had recommended that you be good during your punishment, Simone, now don't make me remind you again. Do you understand?”

“Y-y-yes, Papa!” she stammered, pain and panic making her voice shrill. When he let go of her, her scalp tingled from the abuse. Every instinct in her told her to submit and be still to this aggressive man, her fight or flight response giving way to the third option: freeze. Be good, she told herself, and survive. Her eyes screwed shut and teeth gritted against the fearful anticipation of pain, she stayed as still as her shivering form allowed.

Behind her, he hummed approvingly, the sound of moving cloth told her he was pulling his jeans off. Her knees had begun to shake at the sounds, her leg muscles burned in tension as she feared her joints might fail and earn his wrath, but there was only silence behind her for several agonizing minutes. Then a smooth, hot hardness slid against the outside of her cunt, slick from the wetness there she couldn't explain, and his hands came to rest on her hips as he sawed his cock between her labia all the way up into the cleft of her ass. She shivered at the contact, hesitant to react as she feared
he would bring her pain at any moment, and waited as he continued to grind against her.

“God, you're fucking soaking,” he groaned, pushing the underside of his cock against her pussy, the pressure pleasurable to her even despite the horrible circumstances. The strange disconnection she felt between her mind and body shocked her as her cunt clenched in response to this stimulation while her mind spun in fear and confusion. That sick, sad feeling welled up inside her even as she felt herself grow wetter against him.

“Papa…” she whimpered, her voice cracking and hoarse from her crying. “Papa, I don't feel okay with this.”

“Too late for that,” he responded. He started to move her hips and grunted at the slide of their flesh with this increased pace, the wet sounds from her cunt and the creaks of the bed springs louder now. She squeezed her eyes shut tight against another wave of pleasure, a small mewl working out of her that he answered with a low and raspy, “Ahh, there we are, now. Let papa take care of his darling girl.”

One of his hands left her hip to reach between them and she felt the tip of his penis press against her pussy, the broad head spreading her open and she gasped at how she pulsed at the contact. Her cunt ached in anticipation of being fed that cock, her lust at odds with how terrified she was and she regretted not just running from him when she was still out of reach. She knew that she was in pain, that she didn't want this, that she had voiced her objection and went ignored, so the urge to push back on his dick and fuck herself on it bewildered her. Before she had time to gather her thoughts, her mind blanked out at the stretch of him pushing into her and she cried out in a strangled groan.

“Daddy… please, please stop this…” she said in a small voice, muffled from how she pressed her face into the bed. She winced when she felt him hilt fully in her, his body pressing into the abused flesh of her ass. She shuddered at the overstuffed feeling pushing inside her with the difference in their size, the drag of his cock rearing back pulling at her inner walls with shocks of pleasure that had her panting once more.

“Hnngh, that's a good girl,” he groaned. She gasped sharply when he reached under her and pressed his fingers to her clit, the contact making the pleasure of him thrusting back in overtaking her. As he fucked her from behind, his fingers rubbed at her clit with consistent circular motions and soon her mind was foggy and all physical and emotional pain blurred together with lust.

“Please, Daddy, oh please… please…” she breathed, no longer sure what she had been asking for but the words bubbled out between her desperate breaths. The way he fucked her deep between her spread legs, the dutiful attention to her clit, and the knowledge that she was pleasing her father was enough to begin a slow ascent toward orgasm for her. He rocked into her at a steady pace, his cock twitching and his gravelly grunts the only response she could detect as her cunt clenched around him with her approaching orgasm. Sweat beaded on her forehead from the extended, slow fuck but she didn't try to increase the speed, the tempo lulling her into an ecstatic trance.

When at last she began to cum, her moans heightened in pitch until she was nearly wailing when she finally climaxed. He kept the same rhythmic pattern on her clit as she rode out her orgasm, her cunt spasming around his cock, even as he growled and pushed into her in a forceful final thrust as he joined her in release. She keened when she felt his cock throb and fill her with his hot semen, the feeling stirring a satisfaction she was finding to be unique to the moments when he had cum. A foggy, nonsensical notion of becoming addicted to having his cum inside her thrilled a primal part of her before all thought vanished from her mind once more when she felt him lean over her and place
his open mouth on her neck. She sighed as he sucked the sensitive spot between the side of her neck and shoulder, his cock still buried in her sloppy cunt.

“You'll always be mine,” his whisper, so close that she felt his hot breath ghost over her ear, was soft and loving but his words resurrected a glimmer of the fear she had all but forgotten in her lust, “because I'm never going to let you go.”

Her eyes reopened as that fear spread, forming a tight pit in her chest. “Dad…” she whimpered, her voice barely audible.

“You,” he continued, making her squeak when he bucked his half hard cock up inside of her and pressed his fingers against her clit, “are exactly where you should be. Do you understand, darling girl?”

She swallowed around the knot in her fear before whispering, “Yes.”

“Good,” he said, straightening up and pulling out of her, the drag of his cock giving her one last shudder of pleasure. Slowly, mindful of the many ways she ached, she rose from her kowtowed position and smoothed her dress back down. Her hands and legs were still trembling, her shoulders hunched close as she kept her arms wrapped protectively around her body, and she hid her face from him as she felt their fluids begin to dribble out of her cunt. She stood still facing the bed, feeling his eyes on her in that strange way he always seemed to watch her when she wasn't looking, that feeling at once familiar and dangerous to her now.

“I…” she started to say, but then the words were lost behind that choking knot in her throat. She considered crying but didn't feel the tears come, just a deep hollowness beyond the fear and confusion now. She nearly jerked back when she felt his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him, and he tucked her into a hug. She held her breath in terrified anticipation until she felt him gently press her head to rest on his chest, that hand petting her hair soothingly.

“It's normal for you to be unsure of how to think right now, Simone,” he said, his warm tone abating her fear that he would bring her more pain in this moment. She let herself relax into the hug, her tension rapidly relenting to the comfort of this compassionate affection. “Don't worry about that. I only want what you want, so just trust me and we'll both be happier for it. I had to do this for your own good, you must understand that. I love you too much.”

“I love you too, Papa,” she said. She felt so tired, she just wanted to sleep now, but his arms and soft words were so nice. Even though the fear was still there, she didn't feel as hurt now and her confusion seemed unimportant. She leaned more against him and he placed a chaste kiss atop her head.

“Don't make me hurt you like that again, dearest,” he said. She only nodded, closing her eyes and nuzzling against his chest.
Leif looked in the pantry, sighing at the arrangement of canned sardines, saltines and other mundane fare he had found his father had been reduced to subsisting on in his final days. He ran a hand through his graying hair, considered his options and, deciding he didn't like any of them, went to the little room in the back of the house. The late spring sunset poured in through the western window, painting his lovely daughter's sleeping form in golds and oranges as she laid atop the bedding on her belly, no doubt to be her sleeping position for the next few days.

His heart swelled in pride as he thought back to the previous day and how well she had taken her punishment, how quickly she had adapted to submit under his influence. She was breaking beautifully, almost as though she had wanted this for herself all along. He stepped closer to her, feet silent on the old carpet of his childhood bedroom, and observed the peace of her sleeping face. She'd hidden in this room since yesterday, apparently reading through one of the books she'd brought with her since he had yet to reinstate her phone privileges. He considered perhaps letting her rest, but thought better than leaving her alone here quite yet.

“Simone,” he said, brushing her hair behind her ear with a gentle touch. When she didn't stir, he smiled in amusement and tangled her soft hair in his fingers, admiring her dark swoop of eyelashes that surely didn't come from his Scandinavian blond-haired genetics. Yet there is much of my genetic material inside you, he thought with a chuckle. Her brow furrowed at the noise and he watched as her gray eyes fluttered open blearily, looking at him blankly for a moment before recognition hit and alarm made her lift her head abruptly.

“Papa! What- uh, what- what is it?” she stammered, nervousness rolling off her in waves. He had to stifle his smile at how easily she scared; truly, his groundwork was already mostly laid by virtue of her very nature before he had ever even touched her.

“We are going into town for groceries,” he answered her, straightening his back from his crouched position. “Five minutes. Get moving.”

“But I could just-”

“Five minutes, Simone,” he interrupted sternly, walking out of the room. He allowed his smile to spread when he heard her shuffle around behind him and then pad off into the bathroom. Still smiling, he walked upstairs to the bedroom he’d decided to sleep in, the one that he had occupied during his adolescence when he’d outgrown the small room downstairs. The room still had the trappings of his teenage years; various sports and academic awards, group photos of faces mostly forgotten, shelves lined with academic textbooks, the odd personal item that he'd left behind. On the full sized bed was his duffle bag, nearly emptied as he'd hung most of his clothes in the closet already, but he pulled out a small silver pill box from under his folded socks and pocketed it.

Facing the floor mirror propped up in a corner, he buttoned his shirt and tucked it into his black jeans, grabbed a vest from the closet and put it on, ran his hands through his hair, and inspected his profile before sitting on the bed and pulling on his tan suede oxford shoes. He shoved his wallet into
his back pocket and headed back downstairs, happy to find his daughter already waiting for him at
the foot of it. She looked a bit worse for wear with dark circles under her troubled eyes and her wavy
brown hair unruly from sweat, but she’d changed out of her rumpled dress and into a loose rose
sweater that did nicely to bring out the pink in her cheeks, a flowing patterned skirt, and tan sandals.
Not the style he planned to start dressing her in, but not unpleasant.

He watched her face as he approached her, noting how she watched him until he drew closer,
dropping her gaze to her feet in a move that would have seemed demure if not for her obvious
trepidation around him. He placed his hand deliberately on the small of her back, pleased to see his
effect on her by the way her throat bobbed with a nervous swallow and her eyes blinked more
rapidly. Walking together, he scooped up the keys from the accent table in the entryway and locked
the door behind them as they stepped out onto the porch. When he opened the door to his late father's
truck for her, she hesitated before stepping in and very gingerly contorting her body to sit on her hip,
her cheeks blushing in embarrassment all the while. He kept the smirk off his face with some effort.

The old truck rumbled to life and they rolled down the dirt driveway to the road, every bump making
her wince until he said, “Simone, why don't you lay on your side and put your head on my lap.”

“Oh, no, that's ok, I-”

“Do it,” he interrupted. From his peripheral, he watched her twist in the seat and carefully lay down
across it, stiffly placing her head atop his thigh. While she was no longer wincing every other
second, she was noticeably uncomfortable and yet did not speak on it or move away. He rewarded
her obedience by gently placing his hand on the side of her head, his thumb slowly tracing her
cheekbone. He felt her relax against him then, her responsiveness to his affection warming his heart
dangerously. He sighed at this, not liking the lack of emotional control she inspired in him. He had
dispelled the myth of any typical fatherly instincts in himself long ago, so this new trend of emotional
impulses she'd been causing in him was troubling. It risked his method and made him soft, maybe too
soft to go through conditioning her as necessary.

His negative train of thought was derailed when she nuzzled against his leg, moving her head to lay
more properly in his lap. That urge to be loving and kind toward her seemed less threatening now,
and even though he'd used it as a tool, he couldn't deny that it came from a place of sincerity.
However, he also couldn't deny that his cruelty had come from a place of sincerity too. His cock
 twitched at the fresh memory of her bent over, her raised ass welted red and bruised, her voice wet
from crying as she begged him to stop. His fingers carded through her hair, massaging her scalp, and
she made a sweet little sound of appreciation. He looked down at her and, seeing her eyes serenely
shut, allowed himself a moment of victory at how thoroughly he'd already possessed her. He
supposed he could afford to indulge wastefully in his softer urges.

It didn't take more than twenty minutes to reach the town, but the sky was darkening rapidly by the
time the truck pulled into the little shopping center. Leif took a moment to survey the area, noting the
many new buildings and remodels to the once quite empty main street of the town he'd grown up
near. It had expanded considerably even compared to the last time he came to visit his father six
years prior. This evidence of passed time made him restless. Not waiting for Simone as she
cautiously slid out of the truck, he fetched a cart and entered the grocery store.

As he quickly made his way through the brightly lit store, acquiring the various staples and spices the
pantry had lacked, he couldn't keep his mind off the last trip he'd made to his father's house. He had
been distracted by his career the entire time, barely taking the time to mind his wife and child or
really reconnect with his father. He recalled it was actually around that time that he began to notice
his little Simone despite her braces, bushy hair and late-blooming pubescent awkwardness. As he
compared the cuts of pork in the butcher section, he was surprised to remember the initial moment
that had sown the seeds of this forbidden attraction to his only progeny.

It was in fact during that past trip in the thick humidity of summer. He had been drinking a beer and working on his laptop in the kitchen when Simone had come bounding through the back door there, grabbing a popcicle from the freezer. She was wearing a loose tank top and, not yet seeing the point of a bra for her small bust, nothing underneath. She was also dripping wet from running through the sprinklers out on the lawn and her top clung to her like it was shrink wrapped on. His eyes had immediately attached to the gentle curves of her growing breasts, the clear outline of her hardened little nipples, and the slope of her defined waist before traveling up to see her looking right at him.

He was going to dismiss the moment as having been an accidental curiosity, just a casual observance of the changes in his child’s body, but the way she was watching him watch her struck a new chord in him. She had been waiting to see what he would do and in response he had wanted to do something. Time had seemed to slow in that moment. A drop of water had crawled down her neck until it disappeared into the low collar of her top. He had licked his lips unconsciously as his eyes followed it, wanting to trail its path with his tongue on her smooth skin. He saw her eyes draw to his mouth, that waiting look changing to one of wanting, and his cock had fattened up just from her reaction. He could almost feel a physical switch turn in his brain when he considered what having her might mean, the full implications of potentially ruining her emotional and psychological wellbeing forever versus molding her malleable young mind to suit the sexual cravings he had for so long ignored. When he had seen her little pink tongue slowly swipe the tip of her frozen treat without breaking her heated gaze from him, he was already formulating a method in how to transform her into his. Just as he was about to tell her to come to him, his wife’s voice had carried from the backyard to call for Simone and the spell was broken. The girl had bounded away as suddenly as she had come, leaving him with a hard cock and heavy guilt. That guilt hadn't prevented him from jacking off that night while imagining her crying and bleeding beneath him though, nor did it prevent the myriad of little touches and calculated manipulations he'd begun to work into their dynamic for years after that. And now he was finally getting started on the life he had wanted for so long.

With the cart stacked to nearly overflowing, he looked around for the subject of his thoughts, snapping out of his wistful mood upon seeing her talking with some gangly bag boy who had her cornered against the front windows. Despite his immediate desire to snatch her away from this interloper, he hung back, observing her interaction with the boy. Her body language was closed, arms folded and body not facing him, eyes distracted by her surroundings, her responses all short and half shrugs. The boy carried on idiotically unaware of her obvious discomfort, all too eager to engage the attractive young woman in a one-sided conversation. When she spotted Leif, her entire demeanor transformed. Her back straightened and her body faced her father, ready to go to him should he beckon. Instead, he walked to her, the younger man backing off sheepishly when he put an arm around her waist and kissed her forehead affectionately.

“Making friends, princess?” he asked, not bothering to hide the blatant glare he threw to the boy even though his tone was friendly.

“Are we ready to go?” she asked instead, leaning into him.

“We just have to pay and then we’ll be home in time to prepare a late supper,” he answered warmly, leading her away from the lad. He was aware that boy was watching as Leif squeezed her tender hip in a reckless display of possessiveness, but his jealousy over her was stronger than his logic in that moment and he gloated at the breathy little gasp she emitted.

When at last the final bag was brought into the kitchen, Simone asked her father, “Why are we
He didn't look at her as he reached into the pantry shelves, throwing out expired canned goods and opened cracker boxes to make room for their purchases, responding with a simple, “We are home, Simone. We're not going back to Brooklyn.”

She was silent for several minutes, until he heard her ask with a voice full of hesitant anger, “What do you mean we're not going back to Brooklyn?”

He smiled at her ire, glad she couldn't see his face in that moment before he wiped all expression and said in a level tone as he continued to organize the shelves, “Your mother and I discussed it and we decided it would be best if you stayed with me here.”

“With you? Mom's not going to be here?”

He sighed, having been anticipating this conversation under more favorable circumstances, but responded, “Your mother and I finalized our divorce while you were away at school. We had planned on waiting until after your graduation to tell you, but well... When we picked you up and saw the condition you were in, we decided to delay our separation. Then, my father passed and as I am to inherit this property, it seemed the best opportunity for all of us.”

Behind him, he heard her back hit the wall and slide down to the floor. He chanced a glance at her, saw her clutching her head in her hands, and he continued his task.

“And just what was I doing while you and mom were doing all this deciding?” she asked bitterly.

“You're still unstable, dearest,” he answered. “That's why we decided that you would be staying here in Vermont with me. Getting away from all the influences in the city would benefit your mind greatly.”

“How is…” she stammered, then nearly yelled, “How is any of this going to benefit my mind?”

“Simone,” he said, injecting stern warning into his tone as he straightened his back. He fished out the little silver pillbox from his pocket.

“Is getting fucked by my father supposed to make me any less insane?” she yelled, then barked out a mirthless laugh. “God, it's no wonder I'm ‘unstable’; I probably got it from you!”

He frowned at how she was behaving, at how that stubborn streak of rebelliousness in her refused to allow her to fully realize her role. He had, however, anticipated some resistance and had prepared for it to occur especially after the previous day’s severity. He approached her as she spoke and loomed over her with her hunched form under his shadow from the overhead light. He pinched the blue tablet between his thumb and forefinger as he said in a low and dangerous voice, “You're being hysterical. We're just trying to help you, Simone. I think you need a dose to calm down.”

“No, no I don't!” she hissed, balling herself tighter. “What do you think is going to happen? I'm just going to let you fuck me whenever you feel like it? I'm not your fucking sex slave! I'm-”

She yelped when he dragged her up by her hair, her hands grasping onto his arm to try and lessen his pull, and he slammed her back to the wall with his body. She screamed as he pinned her there and he grabbed her chin, forcing her mouth open and shoving the tablet against her tongue. He covered her mouth and nose while she writhed, trying to dislodge his hand, but her need for air forced her throat to spasm until she swallowed the pill. He had done this with practiced ease; she was never a match against his size and strength even in the worst of her hysterics, but it was a relief to not have to fake regret since his wife wasn't around to watch. He let her face go and she caught her breath in gasping...
coughs, her small form shaking against him. After a few minutes, she laid her head on his chest and sobbed, so he wrapped his arms around her in a full embrace and moved her away from the wall. He patted her back and hushed her, feeling her body begin to relax and eventually go limp.

“I'm sorry, Daddy…” she slurred. “I didn't mean it. Please don't hate me…”

“It's all right, dearest, you can't help it,” he said softly. “I told you that I'm never going to let you go. That was a promise. I will always take care of you.”

She weakly wrapped her arms around his neck, having to stand on unsteady tiptoes to do so, and looked up at him with sleepy wet eyes that made his cock stir as she whispered, “I love you, Papa.”

“And I love you, my darling girl,” he whispered back, leaning down to press their lips together. She tilted her head and kissed him more purposefully, making a soft purring moan in her throat when he obliged. Her hands began to slip from his shoulders and her head fell back, the fast-acting sedative finally overtaking her. He gathered her unconscious body in his arms and carried her upstairs.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Content warning for rape, choking.

The first thing Simone became aware of was the warmth pressing against her back. The second thing she became aware of was the urgent pressure of her full bladder, which accelerated her waking process and had her sitting up before she was fully conscious. Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, her bleary eyes frowned at the unfamiliar surroundings. This wasn't the small room she'd fallen asleep in. She rubbed her eyes, stumbling into the hallway on rubbery legs as the floor seemed to shift beneath her feet. Recognizing that she was somehow upstairs, she trudged to the bathroom and tried to pull down her panties only to find that she wasn't wearing any when her hands grabbed at her sides. After alleviating her bladder and drinking deeply from the sink faucet, she rinsed the bitterness from her mouth with the mouthwash on the counter, the sting of it waking her up further but her mind was just as foggy. There was something wrong or something she had forgotten, but she couldn't think of what it was. Not wanting to risk stairs with how woozy she still felt, she leaned heavily on the wall as she made it back to the room she'd awoken in. When she saw her father's sleeping form on the bed she'd just risen from, she stood blinking in the doorway for several minutes as she tried to make sense of it. Why did her father get into the bed while she was in the bathroom? Slowly, she realized that they had shared the bed last night. She looked down at her body, seeing that she was wearing a men's dress shirt that hung down to her thighs, and her brow furrowed at how strange this all was. Then it came back to her. The shrooms, the kiss, the sex, his cock in her mouth, in her vagina, the pain, the fear, all of it hitting her at once and she stumbled away from the room. Her back hit the wall and she remembered him pinning her last night, his face so frightfully devoid of anger or compassion or any reaction as he forced the pill into her mouth. She repelled from the wall, sinking to her knees and trying to slow her racing heartbeat.

There was a noise at the other end of the hallway, a door creaking open. A cold spike of pure terror ached in her chest as she slowly raised her head towards the sound. There in the doorway at the end of the hall, she saw a man's entire upper body leaning out of a room watching her. She froze, unable to do anything but breathe in short rapid pants despite her brain yelling for her to flee.

The man waved his hand to her and whispered, “God morgen!”

Leif was out of bed the moment he woke to the sound of a shrill scream, his feet quick to hone in on his daughter's huddled form in the hallway. Seeing his younger brother Anders reeled back from shock and her crawling backward near-paralyzed in terror, he almost laughed at the situation if he didn't know she would bolt the second she figured out how to work her legs again. He didn't want to spend hours searching through wilderness for her before dawn. She was also displaying her bare crotch to Anders and Leif definitely didn't want that. He approached her from behind, giving him the advantage of surprise to clap his hand over her mouth and drag her up in his arms. She bucked and writhed, screaming against his palm, her panic breaking through her freeze response and she fought him vivaciously. Anders watched on, his face conveying concern and mild horror at what was
happening in front of him.

She was much smaller and weaker than him by far, over a foot of difference in height, but her resistance was admirable in effort alone. He lamented not being alone with her at this moment, finding a potential for great amusement to be had while she was in this state of blind panic, not knowing who was restraining her. He pressed her front against the wall, preventing her from being able to do much but groan and try to kick feebly behind her. He leaned close to her ear, whispering low enough so his brother couldn't hear, "You're not going to get away from me, lovely. Keep fighting if you want to see how badly I could hurt you."

She froze at the sound of his voice, all her fight draining instantly when recognition registered. He wanted to pull her close and suck at the racing pulse point on her neck for being so obedient, but he was mindful to their audience. He nodded to Anders, who still seemed shocked, and took half a step back from his panting daughter. The way she crumpled to the floor at his feet and sat in a trembling hunch brought a cool wave of satisfaction to him.

"...I'm sorry... I'm so-sorry..." she stammered in a choked whisper.

Leif did laugh then, turning to the man and saying in his native Norwegian, "Well, brother, I see you get along with women just as well as I remember."

"I didn't do anything!" Anders hissed defensively back in Norwegian. "Is she all right?"

Simone shakily rose to her feet, bracing against the wall for support until Leif reached down and lifted her up by her arms. In a flurry of movement he found endearingly compulsive, she positioned herself behind him and clutched his shirt, keeping him between her and Anders. He felt a warm pride in how she clung to him, how quick she was to forget the torment he had brought to her when presented with an unknown threat.

Leif reached behind him and petted Simone's head affectionately, a wry grin on his face as though he were telling a trade secret when he explained, "My Simone has post traumatic stress disorder. Makes her scare easily, as you can see. She usually isn't this bad, but even a change in environment could make her more susceptible to panic attacks. That's why I didn't want to rouse her when you, Henrik and Vidar arrived. I occasionally am forced to sedate her, as was the case last night."

Anders ran a hand over his short-cropped blonde hair, his gaze heavy with concern as he said, "I'm sorry, Leif. Did I just make your life more difficult?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked, her voice still shaking and timid.

Leif's stroking hand curled into a tight fist in his daughter's hair, hidden from his brother's line of sight, and he chuckled at the way she whimpered from pain and yet pressed closer behind him. He always loved how pliant she became and he found himself wanting to get her alone as soon as possible. "Not at all. I know how to handle this little troublemaker," he said, crafting his sharp grin into a good-natured smile. "Let's all go back to bed. Don't worry about this, Anders, she'll apologize to you later."

The other man seemed unsure and perhaps regretful, but relented with a nod and trudged back into the room at the end of the hall. Leif waited until the door latched before grasping the sleeve of her shirt and pulling her roughly behind him. Her shaky legs stumbled to keep up, but in a few long steps they were back in their room and he threw her onto the bed. The small cry she let out when she hit the mattress in a boneless heap made him almost laugh, but upon turning on the light and seeing the way his shirt she was wearing rode up and exposed her bruised ass made him impatient. She was backing away from him, her muscles as uncooperative as they were when he had first descended
upon her in the hallway. He locked the door and began approaching her. The full sized bed didn't provide much space to retreat into before she was cowering against the wall, her gray eyes wide with the fear he found so endearing, but he could tell that she was no longer gripped in that feral panic. Now hers was the fear he had taught her: that knowing dread and helplessness.

"Plea... p-please do-on't..." she stammered as he leaned toward her over the bed, flinching when he placed his knee on the mattress. He let himself smirk, knowing how terrified of being touched she became after an episode, and crawled on his knees toward her further.

"That was your uncle Anders," he said conversationally as he grabbed hold of her ankles and yanked her toward him. Her eyes were wide and her whole body was stiff with fear, some residual from her attack and the rest fresh. "My brothers arrived last night while you were resting. You're going to have to apologize to him later."

He crawled over her body, pushing her back onto the bed as he loomed over her, and she managed to say, "Yes, Papa. I'm sorry."

"I said to apologize to him, Simone. Pay attention," he scolded. He began unbuttoning her shirt, keeping his eyes trained on his task while she stared at him.

"Papa... please don't-"

"You've met them before, you know," he said, interrupting her plea. He spread her shirt open, baring her nudity to him, and she shuddered at being so exposed and vulnerable. He grabbed her breasts, giving the soft mounds a hard squeeze when she reflexively tried to jerk away from the touch, and continued talking amicably as she groaned under him. "When we visited Norway. You might not remember because you were quite young at the time, but they remember you. You were so friendly then. It's a shame what happened to you."

"Please stop," she whispered. Her small hands came up to wrap around his wrists, but there was no real strength in her attempts to wrestle them away. He kneaded her breasts, rolling them under his palms and pressing his fingers against them roughly, making her gasp. He loved how sensitive and responsive she was, loved even more how he could give her both pain and pleasure whenever he wanted. He pinched her nipples and pulled on them, making her groan and shiver. Her cunt already glistened with her wetness, her skin was flushed, her voice was high and tight, and her body trembled all from a few minutes of attention to her breasts and he reveled in how he could bend her will so easily.

"Does this feel good, Simone?" he asked, barely keeping the self-satisfied amusement from his tone. She bit her lip and turned her head to the side, humiliation darkening the blush in her cheeks. He lowered himself to be propped up on his elbows and caught one of her nipples in his mouth, making her gasp abruptly. He fit a good amount of her between his teeth and bit down, holding her still with firm hands on her shoulder and hip as she arched and she writhed with a startled groan. When he lifted his head, she was huffing in controlled breaths to manage her pain and he rewarded her with a soft kiss to the breast he'd abused. His teeth marks were imprinted in dark pink indentations that framed her left nipple, not deep enough to bleed but sure enough to bruise. He stared at this new mark he'd bestowed on her body, his possessiveness both incensed and sated by this fresh sign of ownership.

"Papa..." she breathed. "I can't... not with... we're not alone here."

He lifted his head from his trance, seeing her eyes glistening with tears, rimmed in red and utterly pathetic. "What's wrong? Don't want it getting out that your father's cock makes you scream when you cum?"
She wilted in shame, muttering, "I just don't want anyone to hear..."

He started trailing light kisses across her chest, feeling her stiffen when his mouth opened onto her other breast. When he began circling her tit with his tongue, she sighed and relaxed halfway. He let her enjoy his ministrations, at the moment satisfied with having marred the flesh nearest to her heart, and she leaned up into his mouth when he still hadn't bit down after a few minutes. She was moaning quietly, her head thrown back and squirming under his suckling, obvious in her attempts to repress her cries until his fingers brushed her soaked pussy. He hid his grin against her tit when her hand shot out and latched onto his wrist, trying to push him away as he circled her clit with his fingertips. She struggled in her attempts to mitigate the ecstatic moans and sighs he was forcing out of her, biting down on her knuckles and tossing her head in her efforts.

"Papa..." she squeaked out, her urgency mounting, "I'm gonna- Ah!- ha, I'm gonna..."

"Hush now," he chided her, his lips dragging over her nipple as he whispered, "Let papa take care of his darling girl."

He shifted his weight to his knees, freeing his supportive hand to grab her throat and squeeze the sides of her larynx firmly. She jerked reflexively as he choked her, managing a shocked grunt before he squeezed harder and cut off her airway. Both her hands had wrapped around that arm in her frenzied attempt to escape his grip and her heels skid against the sheets impotently. No time to waste, he rubbed her clit in tight, quick clockwise motions and scraped his teeth over her sensitized breast. Her body spasmed stiffly from being choked as she came, her nails digging hard into his arm and her entire back arching off the bed, but no sound escaped her throat. When her full body tension began to wane, he let go of her throat and let her cough violently, her body shaking both from the effort of filling her lungs and the potent hormonal cocktail of orgasming through what her body had perceived as a near death experience.

"... apa..." she rasped, throwing her into another coughing fit. He patted her chest, his other hand pulling the waistband of his shorts down to take out his hard cock and stroke it while he waited for her to recover. He smiled warmly upon seeing the little crescent marks she'd made on his forearm, red with the slight amount of blood they leaked out, and he wondered with a detached curiosity if his brothers would link these wounds with the bruises he'd just put on her elegant little neck. Nothing he couldn't defend as a consequence of having to wrangle his "insane" daughter, he concluded with a gloating grin. When he figured she'd replenished enough oxygen, he held her down and moved to straddle her shoulders.

Admiring her bewildered wide-eyed expression, he tilted his cock down to poke at her slacked mouth and simply ordered, "Suck."

She obeyed, her moist eyes still staring up at him in awe and fear as she opened her mouth and craned her neck up to take him in. He groaned low when he felt his dick become enveloped in her warm, wet mouth. Her soft tongue worked to stroke him and her lips were wrapped firmly around his shaft without her hand to guide him in and out as she bobbed. Most pleasing to him, however, was just watching her take his dick. He doubted that he would ever come to lose his fascination with finally possessing his beloved daughter in every capacity; he was her family, her lover, her master, and eventually she would come to trust him as her confidant. In truth, she really didn't need anyone else but him and he thrilled at the idea of having her entirely to himself soon enough. His cock throbbed as he thought on this, already close to the edge, and he breathed out a rumbling sigh as his sack tensed in expected release.

He pulled out of her mouth and fist his cock, his strained groan closer to a beast's growl even to his own ears as he shot rope after rope onto his daughter's stunned face. He watched intently as his
semen coated her lips, the thick white load dribbling toward her chin and he marveled at how her little pink tongue scooped it into her mouth. That sight, combined with his post-orgasm high, made his heart swell with overwhelming affection for her.

"Oh, my sweet Simone," he breathed, carding his fingers through her mussed hair as he moved to lay flush to her side. She watched him, eyes hazy in the warm effect from her earlier orgasm but still carrying that ever-present fear and curiosity, as he gathered her up in an intimate embrace. He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, and then an extended kiss on her mouth that she leaned into. He smirked into their kiss at how she was always so greedy for his love and affection, just as he had designed her to be.
The late spring chill that slipped through the foggy single pane windows and withered insulation of the old house made Simone gravitate towards the warmth her father's sleeping body seemed to endlessly supply. She'd tried to remain awake long enough for him to slip into a deeper sleep so she could sneak away, but the sedative still lingered in her system and she had drifted off beside him, waking either minutes or hours later to find herself molded to his side with her arm and leg slung over his torso. Her thoughts trickled in muffled and sluggish, her mind too numb to feel the myriad of emotions that drifted through her rising consciousness like phantoms. She couldn't think about how she shouldn't be sleeping next to her father, so she thought about how the bed wasn't big enough for two people. She couldn't think about how degraded she felt to have been choked and forced to orgasm, so she thought about how sore her throat was. She couldn't think about how disgusted she was with herself for being so desperate for his approval as to lick up his semen, so she thought about how much she wanted to go brush her teeth to get that taste out of her mouth.

After a while of her thoughts still not becoming any less muddled, she let herself drift away from her mind and instead focused on her immediate surroundings. The sun seemed very far from rising still, but the light from the digital clock on the nightstand was somehow enough to paint the room in varying degrees of shadows. The time read 4:25 but she didn't trust that to be correct. The slightly scratchy quilt covering them was far too thin for the night temperature, making any area not near Leif's warm skin feel bitten by the chill. She tucked her face into the crook of his neck and hugged her body closer to his, savoring this contact that she could control and determine for once. His body hair tickled her chin and she indulged her impulse to run her fingers through the short downy hairs that spanned his chest and narrowed to a trail leading into his shorts. She admired the swells and dips of well-developed muscle that carved out his form. She nearly thought about how she came to know just how powerful he was firsthand but quickly pushed the thought and creeping fear aside. Her fingers wandered over the ridges of his serratus at the side of his chest before sliding up the firm hill of his left pectoral, laying her palm flat in the valley over his sternum. She watched how her hand rose and fell with the steady pace of his breathing in sleep, training her mind to remain quiet as her thoughts threatened to surface.

Her bleary gaze drifted towards his face, her head tilting back on the pillow they shared as she examined his features. His wide mouth had a slight downturn as neutral in sleep as he kept it in consciousness, but the slight crows feet around his eyes had relaxed and given him a less severe appearance. Even before the night they first fucked, seeming so long ago despite only being four days since, she had considered him to be perhaps too handsome for a father, often comparing him to the soft-bodied and dowdy dads of her friends and wondering with some sadness at why he was
nothing like those kind and outgoing normal fathers. To her, he was more like a Greek statue in a museum than a parent; a figure of imposing masculinity, an impressive and impassive representation so prominent in her life but not one she could really interact with. She could coax him only from the sidelines; waving him over with good marks in school and achievements in her art, but his approval was always too short-lived and uninvolved, his affection so token and cursory. Except for those awkward chaste kisses.

Her eyes sharpened as the memory of all those odd kisses seemed to twist with the knowledge of how eager his lust seemed to be for her now. Her skin seemed to crawl wherever they were touching as she couldn't suppress her wondering at just how long he had burned for her. She was aware that this dynamic hadn't popped out of nowhere, that they wouldn't have indulged in that initial night if neither had been wanting it on some level, but she didn't want to consider it and she still didn't want to even broach the subject. Too late, as her mind replayed every chaste brush of his lips over hers in the new light of what she couldn't deny now. The way his mouth would linger after a few drinks until she could taste the alcohol on her own lips when he pulled away. what she had assumed was just sluggishness now obviously was him pushing the boundaries of propriety. The sly glance around to ensure that they were alone each time he pulled her close, what she had once assumed was his own embarrassment at having to display fatherly affection now clearly was his protection against getting caught.

Worse, the thought extended and she wondered how long she'd been harboring these awful feelings she had for her own father. Every observance of his handsomeness now seemed far less objective, every wandering thought of him sexually less the fault of rampant hormones, every moment of subtly displaying herself in a risqué pose or outfit to see how he'd react now no longer a simple curiosity of the male gaze. The idea made her cringe, her stomach twisting into knots over the notion that she was so easily seduced by him because she had wanted this incestuous relationship with him all along. The guilt and self-hatred choked her, the tightening in her sore throat and chest disabling her from breathing deep enough and she felt another panic attack coming on. She squeezed her eyes shut and focused on drawing slower breaths, willing her mind blank until her thoughts were filled with the self-soothing mantra of I'm fine I'm here I'm fine. Her eyes snapped open at being torn out of her mantra from his fingers grasping her shaking hand.

"Sto-op..." she wheezed, her lungs aching with the effort to expel enough breath to vocalize her plea. She couldn't move anything below her neck with her arms and torso pinned under his, but her muscles fought almost involuntarily in her panic as her lungs began to burn with need. The pain and terror rapidly became overwhelming and her mouth gaped open, her chest convulsed as it tried to force out the air that wasn't there to scream. His hands grasped her jaw, fingers hooking into her open mouth until she realized she couldn't close it. Black spots danced and spread in the corners of her vision and her hearing had begun to muffle to the point that her own pounding pulse sounded distant.

She watched, unable to make a sound or move as his face descended closer, his own mouth parting over hers. He latched his lips over her mouth and lifted off of her chest just slightly. She reflexively inhaled right as he pushed his breath into her, the heat of it filling her lungs and she fought to keep from coughing; her ability to sense that it would displease him present even when coherent thought was absent. They traded breath, her desperation for oxygen not allowing her to think on the
strangeness of it, until that darkness receded from the edges of her vision and she was able to abate her eagerness enough to breathe through her nose. The meaning of this became clear as that haze over her mind dissipated: every breath she took was only because he allowed it. She felt his mouth shift over hers, not recognizing that he was kissing her until his wet tongue pressed against hers, but she still couldn't think through the thick fog of her mind to interpret the action emotionally. It took several more breaths before any further thought or feeling beyond the instinct to survive presented.

She broke down in tears and tried to turn away from his kiss. His hands, still at her jawline, brought her face back and held her in place as he kissed her. Her unresponsiveness didn't deter him, nor did her hiccuping sobs as he kissed and licked at her mouth. In fact, he seemed to pursue her with even more vigor. Her fear of him, her shame of herself, and her sorrow at receiving this strange abuse coalesced into an overwhelming despair and she found that she couldn't stop her sobbing fit. She jumped when she felt his hands slide down to wrap around her neck, her whole body began to shake and she was overcome with the need to please him to protect herself. Eagerly, she began kissing him back, not even thinking twice about it with those strong hands at her throat. Her movements were jittery and stiff but he purred in approval against her kiss. But then his hands tightened around her neck, his fingertips pressing directly over the arteries. Almost instantly, darkness once more encroached from the edges of her vision. She barely had time to panic again before that darkness overtook her.

She woke with a startled gasp, panting deeply for breath and scrambling out of the bed so violently that she landed harshly on the floor. Wildly, she looked around, bewildered at finding herself alone with sunshine pouring in through the opened window. Her heart was racing and her fear and despair invited hot tears to run down her face as though she were still suffocating under him. Shakily, acting only on instinct, she crawled under the bed and hid in case he or anyone came in as she let her sobs take their course. She didn't remember passing out, just being under him with her vision blacking out and the next moment she was alone and it was suddenly daytime. Her head was buzzing and felt as though it were painfully stuffed full of fluff, making the dark little space she hid in more welcoming than the overly bright room.

She became aware that she was drenched and a wave of mortification passed over her until she checked to find she was dripping head to toe in sweat. Confirming that she hadn't regressed to peeing the bed was a small comfort. Her brow furrowed as suspicion crawled over her mind, confusion confounding her hysteria to a terrible stillness as a new worry crept in. She wondered, with growing certainty, if she hadn't hallucinated her father suffocating her. A shudder rolled over her as she recalled the skull-like image of his face in the shadows. Her hands gripped the sides of her head, the pounding headache increasing as she tried to determine the truth but neither option was better than the other.

"He's either a monster or..." she muttered to herself above the clamor of thoughts crowding her mind, "I've lost my mind more than I thought I have."

She sniffed and swiped at her running nose, frustrated at the tears that wouldn't stop. Her father, for all his rough handling of her and violent methods of discipline, hadn't enacted harm to her without reason even if she often had difficulty determining that reason. That logic stuck in her mind, leaving her with the difficulty of accepting that she had hallucinated a monstrous image of her father suffocating her in the night.

"God, this is... I'm getting so much worse," she murmured into her hands, rubbing her face and trying to clear that cloud of confusion. "I can't lose it here, I've gotta get help. I can't let myself lose control."
Swallowing painfully, her throat dry and sore, she then took a deep calming breath and slid out of the narrow space under the bed. The sunlight was clear and bright, nearly mid morning by her guess, and she found her bags by the writing desk next to the door. With hands that shook from residual fear and physical weakness of having been deprived of food and water for over twelve hours now, she rooted around in her luggage to find it mostly emptied. Frowning, she went to the closet and sighed in irritation when she found her clothes hanging next to his. Her irritation spiked when it occurred to her that he had set her up to cohabit this room with him without even asking her.

His control and dominance over her during sex was something that, while disturbing, she could for the most part accept. But his controlling tendencies had been spreading outside of that realm and she was quickly becoming resentful of his presumptions and authority. More than that, however, she was angry at herself for always kowtowing to his demands and compulsively seeking his approval. She grabbed a pair of dark jeans and a low cut loose t-shirt, roughly yanking them off the hangers with the irate conviction she felt as she vowed to start standing up to him. Finding her underwear neatly folded in a row next to his boxer briefs in the top dresser drawer, she considered messing the whole drawer up but decided against it when the memory of his large hand spanning her ass black and blue came nearly unbidden to her mind.

She hastily buttoned her father's dress shirt she'd worn last night, the bottom of it nearly reaching her knees, and tucked her clothes under her arm before leaving the room. The sounds of her uncles speaking lively to one another in rapid Norwegian echoed up from the dining room, her father's deep voice among them and it spurred her to rush into the bathroom and lock the door behind her. Her hands carded roughly through her hair, tugging at the roots as she remembered with heavy embarrassment the way she had panicked and screamed at her uncle Anders and how she would have to apologize to him some point soon.

"God, I'm such a fuck up," she groaned, shoving the moment down and brushing her teeth using a glob of toothpaste on her finger. The knobs creaked and the old plumbing shuddered and clanked as the shower heated up, but she wasted no time and stood under the freezing flow as it slowly warmed. The cold helped clear some of that sensation of fluff crowding her brain, so she grit her teeth and hurriedly lathered her body. The thought of using a dead man's bar of soap was unpleasant to her, but not as much as the salty film of drying sweat that had covered her entire body. Her toiletries were still in the downstairs shower, so she selected what she recognized as her father's shampoo bottle. The familiar spicy and herbal fragrance stirred a confusing mixture of fear and arousal in her and she felt melancholy descend on her mood. While she still felt that familial warmth and drive to achieve his affection and approval, fear and arousal now overshadowed the way she had once thought of him.

She tilted her head forward as she let the water rinse out the shampoo, the slide of those suds over her sore breasts awakening her body. Her shame rose in tandem with her arousal but the rush of hormones buffered the pain in both her body and her emotions, so she pushed aside her self-hatred and focused on the warmth that filled her as she palmed her breasts. She tried to think of past exploits, of old boyfriends, of anything but her father but each time she imagined a scenario, it shifted back to him. Her cunt throbbed, slippery under her probing fingers as she pumped them inside, and she stopped trying not to think of him as she rubbed her clit with her other hand. His strong arms lifting her onto him like she weighed nothing, his rich voice whispering and moaning filthy and foreign words so close to her ear, his cock stretching her painfully and unmercifully...

"Fuck!" she groaned, trying to keep her voice quiet. Her fingers thrust as deep as she could reach, but it wasn't enough. She bit her lip hard as she thought it, her shame crashing down on her in waves of powerful self-loathing, but she realized that she wanted her father. The weak defense she'd held onto of just wanting a good fuck was crumbling as she was forced to admit that she didn't want just anyone to give it to her, but specifically and exclusively her father. She squeezed her eyes shut,
forcing back her revulsion as she imagined him thrusting into her from behind in that shower: his large hands gripping her hips painfully, the wet slap of their thighs, the deep taboo of it all. She barely stifled her cry as she climaxed, the fluttering release pale in comparison to the powerful orgasms he'd been forcing out of her, but it calmed her. After washing off the slick fluid from her thighs and crotch, she turned off the taps and wrapped a raggedy towel around her. Regret and revulsion charged into her mind, making her struggle to come up with excuses.

"He's just good at sex," she muttered to herself as she toweled off. "Of course I might think of him. That just makes sense. It's not like I think of him that way because he's my papa."

*Even though you came while focusing on how dirty it is to commit that sin?* her mind supplied.

She shook her head, rubbing the ragged terry cloth through her hair as she responded in an angry whisper, "I can't fully control what I think when I'm cumming. It's just weird random hormone stuff."

*Just because you're hot for him doesn't make him any less your father.*

"I know that!" she grumbled. She uncapped the men's deodorant that was on the counter, immediately recognizing from the scent that it belonged to Leif, and begrudgingly applied it to her armpits. "I know that, but I never wanted... this. Any of this. I just wanted to be closer to him. As a family. I never..."

*But you didn't stop this.*

"I tried! I told him no but-"

*But you never wanted him to stop.*

Simone shook her head, trying hard to focus on working the knots out of her hair, but that voice kept echoing in her mind. At first, it sounded like her voice, her usual internal narrative, but another, deeper sound spoke under it.

*You've been hoping he'd snap and fuck you for years. Always dangling yourself in front of him, teasing and testing with your body and your slutty antics.*

"Shut up," she growled, her grip on the brush handle tightening until her knuckles turned white. The voice shifted, no longer hers at all but now the gravelly whisper of her father.

*Now he's finally fed up from almost a decade of your mixed signals and you've got the nerve to claim the moral high ground? You're nothing but a sick, depraved slut.*

"Shut *UP!*" she yelled, squeezing her eyes shut and throwing the hairbrush in a fit of anger. The loud clatter made her gasp in surprise, eyes popping open to see a long crack in the fogged mirror. Her stomach felt like it dropped out of her. "Oh shit..."

Then, the sound of footsteps thumping hurriedly up the stairs made her heart feel as though it jumped up her throat. She threw the towel around her body, panic making her motions jerky as the doorknob rattled against the lock.

"Simone, are you all right?" her father's voice asked through the door. "Open up for me, darling."

Her hand shot out to the knob before she hesitated, looking back to the cracked mirror and grimacing. She wanted to at least get dressed before he saw that.

"I'll be out in just a moment, Papa," she called, moving from the door and hurriedly pulling on her
"No, you should open the door now," he said. She could hear the command and waning patience in his tone, but ignored it as she tried to rush in pulling her jeans up. Her skin was still damp and snagged on the material, irritatingly delaying the process. "Did you hear me, young lady?"

"Yes, I'm coming," she said, trying to keep her voice from wavering. Her shaking hands couldn't hook her bra, so she threw it off and just shoved her shirt on. She pulled her wet hair from under the collar as she swung open the door, attempting a smile that dropped from her face when she saw him. His eyes were narrowed, sharpening his gray gaze into steel as he frowned down at her and crowded her backward into the bathroom. She flinched when he shut the door behind them, a cold feeling spiking in her gut when she heard the sound of the lock clinking into place.

"Why did you disobey me, Simone?" he asked, his voice level in a way that screamed danger to her.

"I, uh, I didn't, I just-" she stammered.

"You did disobey me. Now you've lied to me, too," he interrupted. Her gaze dropped down, unable to look at the cold anger in his face, but his hand grabbed her chin and jerked her back up. "You will look at me when I address you. Now answer me."

"Answer you?" she squeaked, brow screwed up in confusion.

He sneered, his wide mouth curling up to reveal a sharp incisor as he repeated, "Why did you disobey me?"

"I wasn't dressed, I didn't want-"

"Listen carefully," Leif whispered, the venom in his tone making his words sound half growled as he leaned close to her and held her chin up uncomfortably. She tried to stand on tiptoe to lessen the tightness of his hold, but he squeezed her jaw painfully regardless. "When I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it. No excuses, no delaying. If you disobey, then that tells me you want to be taught a lesson. Do you want a lesson?"

"No," she croaked, her throat tight with fear.

"Good. And this..." he whispered, his free hand clutching her crotch through her jeans. She grunted in both surprise and a bit of pain at the pressure of his grip, holding herself very still. "... is mine to see whenever I want to, not whenever you want me to. Do you understand?"

Anger riled up a flash of rebellion in her, but the claw-like grip of his hands at her jaw and her groin combined with the callous scowl set in his face squashed it down.

"Yes," she managed to say. His features relaxed into his usual detached neutrality, but he still held her in that uncomfortable position. She shuddered as the memory of the skull-faced hallucination superimposed over him now, the pounding of her heartbeat getting louder in her ears with each stretched out second.

"Good girl," he muttered, releasing her. She staggered back a step, her fingers gingerly pressing against where her jaw ached. "Why did you break this mirror?"

She swallowed thickly, looking up from her dazed stupor to see him staring at the large crack in the glass. She considered lying to him, telling him it was an accident to avoid punishment, but a more pressing matter gave her the resolve to say in a carefully measured but shaken tone, "I'm not well, Papa."
He turned to her then and she waited, watching his face for any indication of his thoughts but, like always, he remained unreadable.

"You're never going to be well," he stated matter-of-factly, his tone stern with finality. She blinked, dumbfounded by his response, and he smiled dotingly at her. When he spoke again, his tone was friendly and warm. "Finish getting ready and come downstairs. Put on a nice dress and cover up those bruises. You'll find your makeup in the desk in our bedroom. Let me show my brothers what a beautiful young woman I've created."
Simone sat at the writing desk in the -their bedroom, the cosmetics kit her mother had gifted her for Christmas laid out on the wood surface and a small mirror propped up against the wall already. Sunlight poured in from the window behind her, making it difficult to gauge her reflection so she turned on the small table lamp and moved it close to her. The person in that bright square of glass blinked back at her, but she couldn’t see the collection of features as her face. The grey irises flecked with blue and brown were his, floating behind a mask she did not recognize. She glanced at her tools, opening the color correction palette that was still sealed in shrink wrap and looked back at that mask. She put her cut-short art schooling to use in applying opposing colors to the long bruises that smudged along the neck; yellow over the purple and blue, purple over the yellow and green. Blot over with concealer, mask the concealer with a powder, and the bruises were gone. She lightly applied concealer to the dark crescents under the eyes and almost instantly, a happier and healthier girl appeared in the mirror. She felt even more detached from that person she was working on; this girl looked so much younger than she was, so pretty and human. This girl on the other side of the glass didn’t have fangs in her mouth and insanity in her eyes. The dark brown pencil gave those eyebrows a more playful arch than the threatening snarl that always furrowed hers. That light dusting of blush on those high brown cheeks would look terrible on her gaunt and sharp face. The sweet-smelling swipe of plum-rose lipstick could never cover up the blood smeared on her mouth, but made those full and shapely lips look delicious. When she was done, the girl who looked back at her seemed familiar, like someone she hadn’t seen in years. Like someone she still hates.

She put the mirror down flat on the desk and ran a boar bristle brush through her hair over and over again until her snags turned to gentle silky waves of dark brown. Her mother’s hair, when she didn’t straighten it into newscaster layers of perfection. Islander brown hair from a beach so far away from Norway or Vermont. She wished, for the first time in her life, that she had islander brown eyes. She wished her mother had never slathered her so diligently with sunblock and yelled at her to stay in the shade wherever they went, chiding her for “ruining” her “pretty light skin”. She wanted to go lie in the sunlight until every pale drop of her father was burned out of her flesh.

She went to the closet and leafed through the clothes draped on the hangers. Her shirts and hoodies and dresses looked so small next to his suit jackets and dress shirts and vests, like children’s clothes. Her hands stopped searching when she found her short violet cocktail dress. She hadn’t packed that when they left Brooklyn. In fact, she hadn’t packed even half of these clothes. Her throat constricted with the knowledge that he and her mother really had brought her here to stay, that they really weren’t going to let her go home. She breathed in measured, slow breaths, feeling another panic attack down that line of thought and she could not lose control again. Not when he was expecting her. Not when he would come and find her.

Ignoring the tremor in her hands, she yanked out a yellow sundress with a sweetheart neckline. She stepped into it; the bodice clinging to her body and narrow waist but the flared skirt left her shapely hips and round buttocks nebulous. For once, she was pleased with her modest bosom. The effect of the dress made her look younger, more innocent. Her thighs, often the subject of catcalls, peeked out an unfortunate amount but she simply had no long dresses. Standing in front of the floor mirror, she
parted her hair into pigtails for good measure, but quickly took them out when she decided that it made her look like a fetishized mockery of childishness. Instead, she pulled the top layer of hair back into a clip and let it all fall down her shoulders and back. She assessed the reflection and was satisfied. Church-goer. Honor student. A young lady, not a young woman. Maybe even just a girl, she decided, after adding a cardigan and rubbing off the lipstick. She stepped into patent leather white flats and tied a quaint little gold heart pendant necklace on, but removed it when she thought it brought too much attention to her aggravatingly elegant décolletage. She grinned wryly at the notion that she had never recognized her womanly beauty until seeking to disguise it. Before this, she had considered herself a scrawny art nerd who was still more of a punk kid than a woman by any means. She snorted back a laugh when it occurred to her that her father was the first man to make her feel beautiful in the worst way. She had to laugh or the tears that burned in her eyes and choked at her throat would spill out.

Straightening her back, she stood in front of the floor mirror, the sunlight pouring over her as she breathed with deliberate slowness. She’d already broken one mirror and gotten away without punishment. Yet, at least. Her neck ached as she remembered how he could hurt her without letting her scream in a house full of people. She clenched her fist, nails digging painfully into her palm as she suppressed that line of thought, willing her heart to calm once more. Another wry smile curled her mouth as she considered that maybe she wasn’t so debilitated by her mental instability if she could manage herself like this all the time. All she would have to do is stay in empty rooms and never think. Another deep breath, hand on her chest, her mantra I’m fine I’m here I’m fine rolling to block out the noise in her mind, and she stepped out of the room.

The house was quiet. Slowly, silently, she walked downstairs and drifted through the long hallway. The living room to her right was empty as she surveyed the dingy decades-old maroon leather furniture and worn oriental rugs. She turned into the kitchen and her heart skipped when she found her father standing at the counter, large ceramic knife in his hand and shirtsleeves rolled up his muscular forearms. He turned to her, putting the knife down on the cutting board next to the sliced oranges and wiping his hands on a rag as he looked her up and down.

“Very nice,” he drawled, and her illusions of appearing innocent and girlish evaporated under his heavy gaze. She felt the heat of a blush work its way up from her chest to her face and she bit her cheek to try and stop it. He beckoned her to come to him with a crook of his finger and she stepped up to him before she knew what her feet were doing. His hands, the zesty and sweet scent of fresh citrus floating around them, gently moved her hair away from her neck and shoulders as he searched for bruises. He smiled at her handiwork and she glowed under his approval, her eyes lingering on that wide mouth and sharp jawline. Her mind clawed at her to remind her to stay away, to remember how much he has hurt her, but she never could resist the gravitational pull of his good moods. Those hands came to rest on her shoulders, sliding down her back as he slowly pulled her closer, and she could almost physically feel her mind fog over when she stepped into his body heat. He held her in a gentle embrace, his front so warm against her, and they just stood in the kitchen that way. His thumb rubbing slowly on her lower back where his fingers were interlaced, her cheek laid against his sternum, her mind a warm buzz of nothing but pleasantness. This was the father she’d wanted all her life, this kind affection and protection. A dangerous thought sprouted in her, a horrible whisper of price.

He stepped away from her, the loss of his hold almost making her groan disappointedly before his hand was cupping her chin and tilting her up as he leaned down. Her eyes widened when he locked their lips together, that pleasant fog of her mind dissipating into static, that gentle warmth growing into pulsing heat with the slide of his tongue begging entrance into her mouth.

“No!” she said, pushing herself away from him quickly. She stepped backwards, shoulders hunching defensively as she hugged her body, words spilling out of her when she saw his expression switch
from mild surprise to cold sternness. “We shouldn’t! Shouldn’t do… any of that.” He tilted his head, watching her with that detached curiosity that filled her gut with indescribable dread. She could almost feel the adrenaline dump into her system, making her clench her hands into her cardigan and she couldn’t stop moving so she paced. “I can’t- We can’t do that anymore. Okay? I can pretend it never happened- none of this ever happened- and we can be normal. I’ll never talk about it, I’ll never tell anyone- Ha! How could I ever tell anyone that I… I…”

“You what, Simone?” he asked, all cool and sinister poise that further unwound her already tenuous composure. He began to walk toward her, steps excruciatingly slow. Her mouth opened and closed, words jammed in her throat, and she felt that panic begin to spill out of her. “You begged for me to fuck you? You asked for me to hurt you? You orgasmed by my hand, mouth, and cock?”

She stood, feet frozen to the floor, as he stopped a few inches from her. His fingers carded into her hair at the base of her head, making her skin crawl and erupt into waves of goosebumps, and he yanked her back by the roots. She yelped in both pain and shock, her head craning backward and she was stumbling in her struggle to keep up as he dragged her into the hallway. He shoved her front against the wall hard, knocking a huff of air from her lungs and he planted her hands up on either side of her head.

“Don’t move,” he growled next to her ear. She could only whine like a wounded dog in response, thoughts racing until they jumbled together like so many train cars crashing over each other, squeezing her eyes shut as he kneeled down behind her. She felt him reach under her skirt and yank her panties all the way down, her feet stepping out of them automatically in her eagerness to not incite his aggression. Her heart was racing as fear pumped more adrenaline into her system, the acute stress response making her tremble enough to have her worry that her knees would give out, but she managed to spread her legs into a wide stance when he pulled her ankles apart and lifted the back of her skirt. Her mind wasn’t connecting any dots, just focused on what was becoming her new self-soothing mantra of submit survive submit survive, so she gave a small shout of surprise when she felt the wet slide of his tongue dragging up the back of her right thigh. She gasped harshly when his lick ended in a bite on the supple flesh of her asscheek, his sharp teeth sinking in enough to hurt but not break skin.

“You’re so wet already,” he said, his voice husky and deep, the rumble of it shooting shocks of pleasure right to her cunt. He kissed her pussy affectionately. “Your body is always a few steps ahead of you, darling girl. Don’t think about it so much.”

She cried out when he licked into her hole, his tongue darting in and out as his mouth enveloped her cunt. Her mind was noisy with static and the sound of her own wanton moaning as he tongue-fucked her, that wide mouth of his making her almost drool with how good it felt. She was still distractedly aware of his sharp teeth, those almost inhuman incisors occasionally scraping her in a way that made her tense with both fear and excitement. That spot where he bit her on her ass ached and she sobered slightly with the horror of realizing a part of her wanted him to hurt her pussy with those teeth.

A worry wormed its way past her lust and she had to focus to say between panting breaths, “Papa- ahn!- your brothers… won’t they-?”
He removed his mouth long enough to say, “Backyard.” before pressing his tongue against her clit and making her moan high and tight. Her back arched, her hips rocking just slightly against his mouth and that tongue held hard right on her clit, and she was only vaguely aware of the pathetic mewling pouring from her. She was just on the edge, her cunt bearing down and tightening, her whole body tensing when he suddenly stood up and clapped his hand over her mouth before slamming his cock into her from behind. She screamed into his palm, the painful stretch of his forceful entry pushing her into an intense orgasm and she kept screaming as he pumped inch after inch into her pulsing cunt. Her knees did give out then, but he held her up against the wall and pushed her harshly into it with his punishing thrusts. Her eyes were rolling back into her head when he filled her entirely, his cock bumping her cervix with each rock of their hips, and she could feel her wetness dribbling down her legs already.

“Do you understand yet?” he asked, his voice ragged and strained as he fucked her. She could only moan against his hand in response, unsure if she could manage coherent words at the moment anyway. “We’ve moved beyond sins and morals, yet you persist in trying to hold onto what you’ve been told is right and wrong. You can’t resist your desires any more than you can resist mine… and you know what happens when you disobey my will, don’t you, my darling girl?”

He thrust into her particularly hard then, punctuating his point by making her wail in the pain that translated so oddly into pleasure. Her cunt fluttered around him, quickly approaching another climax at this pace, and she was nearly sobbing in need. He removed his hand from her mouth, wrapped it in her hair and pulled, bending her backwards painfully. She did come then, forcing herself to stifle her scream into a choked moan as her cunt spasmed around his cock. He groaned rough and low, pushing into her deep and she felt him jerk and spurt hotly against her cervix. Her pussy felt overly full as his cock swelled in her while he came, the ache and tingling sensation of being pumped full of his semen making her whimper.

She felt all at once sick, numb, and euphoric once he slid out of her, a gob of his semen crawling down her thigh. Her limp body sunk to the floor weakly without his support, but he picked her back up again, maneuvering her like she weighed nothing. She followed his direction without resistance, hanging her head to the side to avoid looking directly at him as he helped her step back into her panties. Despite having just been manhandled by him, his hands now seemed to burn wherever they merely brushed her legs as he slid her underwear up to mold wetly against her sloppy cunt. She shuddered when the cold material made contact with her sore and throbbing vagina. The silence in the house rang in her ears, making the slight sounds of him tucking his dress shirt back into his slacks and zipping his fly seem deafening. She wanted to curl up in a small dark space and hide forever, but she had to wait for him to dismiss her or leave. He wrenched her cardigan off her shoulders, the garment already askew and stretched out from where he’d grabbed at it, and she grimaced in effort not to jump away as he kneeled in front of her and used it to wipe off the fluids on her legs. It was heavy when he dropped it on the hardwood floor.

His hands pushed her shoulders back, gripped her chin and tipped it up slightly, straightening her neck. She only realized he was adjusting her posture when she caught the critical crease in his brow that she’d seen him so often have as he would look over sheets of architectural diagrams in his office room back home. The same solemn slant of his mouth that she knew she also wore when she concentrated on her art projects, according to her mother’s sidelong smirked observation. You’re definitely your father’s daughter, her mother would say, a contempt in her tone that Simone couldn’t understand then and understood for the wrong reasons now. Her mother’s words echoed in her mind, repeating louder and louder as time seemed to slow, his (her) gray eyes following the gentle swipe of his thumb as he smoothed out the trails of her tears from her cheeks.

When he shifted his gaze to hers, a question in the quirk of his brow, she realized with a start that she had said aloud, “I am your daughter.”
“You are,” he responded, his guardedly neutral tone doing nothing to put her stammering thoughts at ease. He ran his fingers through her long hair, smoothing out the slight mess he’d made of it from pulling and dragging her, as he said, “You are mine; that is never going to change. I’ve made you and I will continue making you. That is my duty to you as your father and I’ve always taken that very seriously. I will always take care of you. You must always obey me.”

She stared at him as he spoke, her gut heavy with dread at knowing his words held dangerous meaning for her but not knowing exactly how or why. Tears had welled in her eyes again, blurring his sharp features, and she bit her lip with the effort of keeping them at bay. His hands came to rest on her bare shoulders and her eyes fluttered shut when she felt his lips press against her forehead, two solitary tears escaping down her cheeks as she let out a shuddering sigh. She recalled a fuzzy memory of lying in her old bedroom, two or three apartments ago in Los Angeles, the pink stars from her nightlight illuminated against a popcorn ceiling, and her father placing this same kiss on her forehead once he tucked her into bed. The memory fled from her mind when his lips moved over her mouth, hot and open and wet to suck in and nip her lower lip with those sharp teeth. Her aching cunt churned his semen inside of her, another hot glob leaking into the wet gusset of her cotton panties, and her whole body tingled. She could taste herself on his mouth and she sighed again, this time a breathless sound that dredged up through a shiver in her spine. She opened her eyes to see him watching her face and shame fell over her heavily, drowning out the warmth that had still smoldered in the cradle of her pelvis.

His thumbs smoothed away her tears again, a slight smile softening his features as he said, “That’s a good girl. Now then, go say hello to your uncles outside.”

“But, wait- I-” she stammered, but he was already pushing her along with him into the kitchen.

“You look ravishing, dearest,” he interrupted, one hand placed firmly on her lower back as he thrust a platter of fruit in her hands. The scent of fresh cut oranges made her stomach twist into knots, but she clutched the platter in her shaking hands. She tried to swallow her throbbing heart back down into her chest as he led her through the back door, her hips feeling disjointed and making her steps awkward and loose. The sunlight blinded her for a moment when they stepped onto the grass, causing her to blink tightly without her hands free to shield her eyes from the light. When her vision adjusted, she found her father leading her across the uncut grass to three blonde men, each sprawled out on dingy lawn furniture. The largest one, a rounded bear of a man with a full beard, spotted them first and her stride froze mid-step when she saw him rise from the plastic chair. A spike of fear hit her deep in her gut as she took in just how huge he was as he walked toward them, a wide grin peeking out from under that blonde beard.

“Se hvem det er! Baby Simone!” he called out, arms opening in the universal invitation for a hug.

To her terror, her father gingerly lifted the platter from her clutched hands and whispered to her, “That’s Henrik. Go hug him.”

She wasn’t given the option to go to him as Henrik scooped her up, her much smaller frame lifted against his meaty chest. She yelped in surprise at the sudden bear hug and also the dribble of semen being squeezed out of her by the motion, the squelch of wetness warm and threatening to overflow out of her soaked panties. Alarm quickly processed into action and she patted his back reluctantly.

“It’s so nice to see you again, uncle Henrik!” she rasped out, forcing her face into a smile she hoped would pass for something more authentic than a rictus grin. She tried to angle her hips away from him, but this proved difficult with her feet dangling a good eighteen inches from the ground.

“Se på henne! Not as baby,” a lankier but just as tall man said as he came up behind Henrik.
She glanced back to her father and he thankfully supplied, “That’s Vidar.”

Henrik let her back down on her shaky feet, allowing Vidar to wrap his arms around her shoulders in an embrace that felt conservative after the full body hug. He kissed her cheeks in that European greeting that she could never quite get used to despite having spent the last five years in New York City and being confronted with it near daily.

“Du ser så nydelig ut,” he drawled appreciatively to her as he stepped back and looked her over intently. Despite not knowing what he said, her cheeks heated in a blush at the way he blatantly leered and she could vaguely interpret the meaning. Her fingers tensed into claws and her breath quickened, a feral feeling welling inside her, but her mouth still held her smile. She blinked, confused at her racing heart and the oddly comforting emotion falling over her mind. A bubbling, hot hatred moved in her at that glint in his eye. Before she could sink any further into that tempting sensation, a hand grabbed her arm from behind and she turned her head to see her father looking at her with a frightening glare.

His eyes were still fixed on her even as he growled out to Vidar, “Ikke vær ekkelt, motherfucker.”

A flurry of motion from the corner of her eye caught her attention and she turned back to see Anders laughing and pushing a smirking Vidar away. She winced as she recalled the scene she’d caused in front of him early that morning, embarrassment eating up that feral sensation buzzing from the back of her brain. He turned to her, smiling as he wrapped one arm around her in a sideways hug that was thankfully far from the overly familiar manner in which his brothers handled her.

“Oh, uncle Anders! I’m so sorry about this morning! I was just spooked, you know, I didn’t mean anything personally. Not like that’s an excuse, but I apologize,” she said in a rush, her cheeks burning in mortification now. She barely even recalled the incident; it seemed so far away now and half of it was lost to the drug haze her mind had been in, but she wanted to get the apology over with as soon as she could. When she shut her mouth, she looked up to his boyish face to see him smiling awkwardly, obviously uncomfortable as he scratched the back of his head and glanced around.

“Hun er lei meg for denne morgenen,” her father said to him, to which Anders barked out a short laugh and nodded.

Anders faced her again and patted her head, saying, “Jeg er lei meg for å skremme deg, pen jente.”

Leif stepped up behind his daughter, wrapping his arms around her middle and resting his chin atop her head as he explained, “He says that he’s sorry to have startled you. None of my brothers are adept at English, so don’t bother speaking to them.”

“Oh…” she murmured, her smile faltering. She was surprised at how disappointed she felt by that. She’d been unsuccessful in finding her phone anywhere in the house and the satellite television had been shut off since before they’d arrived. She had no connection to the outside world and no one to talk with aside from her father, but he was hardly an option as she could barely handle her fear whenever he approached her. She never knew which version of the man she would encounter and the risk was too high just to fill the silence. She realized now just how deeply lonely she’d become if the loss of talking with near complete strangers who for all she knew were worse than Leif could depress her so thoroughly.

Simone was dragged out of her melancholy almost literally as her father moved her to lay nestled against his side while he reclined on a long plastic chaise lounge. She blushed anew in fresh embarrassment at the length of her legs showing and the close proximity of him, the narrow space requiring that she press herself to his side in a position horrifyingly similar to the one she’d found herself in during that horrible night terror or hallucination from that morning. The memory stirred a
cold, hard fear in her that she pushed down, her hand tightening into a fist in her father’s shirt. There were many things desperately wrong with her to the point that it was becoming difficult to think at all without being reminded, so she nuzzled against his shoulder and ignored the heavy feeling in her head as his arm snaked under her to pull her closer.
“You look so beautiful,” he heard Vidar say, the curl of his words lecherous enough to cut through language barriers even if his lingering stare and body language hadn’t told him everything he meant. Leif was already close enough to reach Simone, but he held back, curious to see her reaction. He saw the exact moment Vidar’s intentions struck her in the stiffening of her fingers and the squaring of her shoulders. He glanced to his brothers, but their friendly smiles had not faltered; there was no recognition at the change occurring in his daughter. Her shoulder and back muscles bunched and flexed, the tension in her body running high in that split second she changed. He’d never seen it, never actually witnessed this part of her even though he had expected to have been the target of it with each sexual encounter. Seeing it provoked so easily by a display so minimal assured what he had suspected: he would never be her target. The closest he’d come was from restraining her in the dark hours of that morning, but the moment she realized it was him, all the fight had left her. She swayed slightly, her body assuming a lower and more even stance, yet still no one registered what was coming. He longed to see her face, to know what burned in her eyes with this intriguing phenomenon, but instead he steeled his gaze and gripped her upper arm. Her muscles almost instantly relaxed into her usual tension of discomfort, that strange reaction leaking out of her as she turned to look at him, but he caught an edge of something truly strange in the glint of her eye before it fell upon him.

“Don’t be disgusting, motherfucker,” he warned Vidar, not deigning to even look at him as he let his irritation bleed into his tone. Anders and Vidar burst into laughter at having finally gotten a rise out of their older brother and Leif reconsidered the situation. He scoffed at how the fools assumed his grab was for her benefit and not theirs, but this was exactly the opportunity to display himself as the doting overprotective father he had hoped to project. As his mind worked on how to best perform this, his daughter turned to Anders, all adorable fluster and meekness. “Oh, uncle Anders! I’m so sorry about this morning!” she said, voice girlishly high in her unabashed nervousness. He considered stopping her to tell her that Anders couldn’t understand a word of this heartfelt apology, but he enjoyed watching him squirm awkwardly. “I was just spooked, you know, I didn’t mean anything personally. Not like that’s an excuse, but I apologize.”

Anders glanced to him for help, obviously eager to interact with his pretty little niece, and Leif considered letting him rot if not for her discomfort. “She’s sorry for this morning,” he relented.

Anders broke into a sudden laughter, placing his hand on the crown of her head in patronizing affection as he said, “I’m sorry I scared you, pretty girl.”

The overly familiar touch and compliment his brother bestowed on her was his cue to perform, so he handed off the fruit platter to Henrik and embraced his daughter from behind, trying to feign subtlety in the way he pulled her out from under Anders’ hand.

“He says that he’s sorry to have startled you. None of my brothers are adept at English, so don’t bother speaking to them,” he told her as he glared coolly at Anders. He nestled his chin atop her hair and indulged in a small victory when Anders’ smile vanished upon glancing up at his cold expression. This close to her, however, he could smell how she’d used his shampoo and deodorant. Knowing that she was covered in his scents thrilled some basic primitive piece of him and when he had caught on to her wearing them as he’d hugged her in the kitchen, he simply had to fuck her until she was filled with his seed. The drive to claim her, again and again, was addictive and gratifying and knowing that she stood still dripping with him felt powerful. It was sudden and reckless, but she often inspired him to defy his better judgment.
With greetings out of the way, the men sauntered back to their seats, so he took Simone to lay with him on a chaise lounge ten feet from their congregation of filthy lawn chairs around a cooler full of cheap beer. He felt it was still too chilly outside for beer, but tradition dictated that they spend the entire first day together throwing them back, preferably until they passed out. So, for the sake of tradition and making the rest of the afternoon more tolerable, he grabbed what was to be his sixth can on his way. He caught their eyes following her as she climbed into the reclined seat with him, her soft little body fitting against his side perfectly as he laid back. He pulled her closer against him, letting her short skirt ride up her shapely legs further, and saw them purposely face anywhere but in their direction, their glances quick and low. His Simone was a sexually appealing young woman but without full awareness of her distracting attributes; the perfect bait to orchestrate the scenarios he required.

“When do I get a turn to lay down with her, Leif?” Vidar jeered.

“You’ll sooner find yourself lying in a casket, dipshit,” Leif answered, cracking open the tab on his beer one-handed. His brothers erupted into laughter to which he sneered openly.

“She must be, what? 155 centimeters tall? I would bet that 100 of those are all leg,” Henrik mused. “God damn, look at them! If I weren’t her uncle…”

“You’d get your dick cut off,” Leif groused. He took a long draw of the beer as they whooped in laughter, the cheap domestic lacking any bite and allowing him to easily drink deeply.

“What are you talking about, Dad?” Simone whispered.

“Nothing important, sweetheart,” he smiled down at her.

“You can’t find an ass like that in Norway,” Vidar observed, gesturing with his beer to Henrik who nodded in agreement.

Before Leif could quip back, Anders reached over and slapped the back of Vidar’s head, scolding, “That’s your niece, shit head.”

“Ow! Fuck, dickwad, it’s not like she can understand us,” Vidar complained, rubbing his head while Henrik laughed at him.

“However, I can understand you,” Leif growled. “And I’d thank you not to eye-fuck my little girl.”

“Little she may be, but girl? No. Those hips are all woman,” Henrik smirked, waggling his eyebrows for effect.

“You want to go into the ground with father this weekend?” Leif asked. Henrik bellowed and slapped his knee.

“Rot with the devil,” Leif frowned, though he was glad that the subject of her mental instability was brought up. He reminded himself not to press the topic, not to seem too eager to paint her as debilitated.

“You know what they say about the crazy ones?” Vidar grinned.

“Too far, you insensitive pig,” Anders scolded. Leif felt his brow twitch at how defensive his baby brother seemed toward Simone, his mind working on how he differed from the instigative crudeness of his brothers.

Vidar laughed, saying, “What? There might as well be some benefit to being insane!”
“Keep saying that shit and I’ll make certain you’ll never experience that benefit with anyone,” Leif said coolly.

“Sorry, sorry, just joking around, Leif,” he apologized, his hands thrown up in mock surrender, but then he grinned, “They say that they fuck like animals.”

“Go fuck a meat grinder,” Anders snapped.

“Weren’t you just describing her vagina, Anders?” Henrik asked, his voice bubbling with barely contained laughter.

“What was that?” Leif growled, though he was quite aware of the full view his brother had gotten in the early hours of that morning when she was cowering on the floor in front of him. Still, he was curious to see how his baby brother would handle this. His hand unconsciously gripped her hip, but he didn’t miss the way she exhaled in a sharp huff.

Anders blushed furiously, his eyes wide and nervous as he ran a hand over his face and explained in a rushed voice, “It was an accident! When she got scared and fell over, her shirt, it just- I didn’t mean to look, but—”

“Anders,” Leif interrupted, but his brother kept rambling. The younger man was too apologetic, too flustered by the incident in a way that rubbed Leif the wrong way. Leif needed to guide the conversation into more casual territory.

“- She was right in front of me and I just happened to see it. It was only for a moment! I didn’t even really get a good look—”

“Anders!” Leif barked.

Anders finally stopped, looking at him and simply asking, “What?”

Leif frowned deeply at him, watching as his brother’s blue eyes stared in wide-eyed misery, waiting for his punishment. “How did you describe it?”

“What!” Anders shouted while Vidar and Henrik burst into raucous laughter.

Leif tuned them out as they traded insults, turning his attention to the girl who they both had and hadn’t identified as his weakness. He could feel that unbidden surge of affection well in him as he observed the tears that clumped her dark eyelashes damply and the slightly swollen redness of her lips from having been bitten and abused. The arm he had underneath her pulled her up and rolled her until she was laying halfway on top of him, the light pressure of her small form shivering when she settled against his chest and straddled his leg. Holding her to him with one arm wrapped around her waist and the other now stroking her thigh, he knew what it looked like. He wondered how much he could get away with in plain sight, how much he could defend touching her this intimately right in front of everyone with “just being that cuddly kind of dad”. Even better, knowing that the more he did it, the less anyone would question it. He needed feedback from this test audience though and being a few beers in provided him a decent enough escape should it fail.

“Dad…” she whispered, her voice tight with uneasiness and worry about their position even as her breathing deepened.

“Hush, darling,” he cooed back, giving her thigh a brief squeeze and a chaste kiss atop her head. He could see in his peripheral the way his brothers were staring, the awkward silence that had stalled their obnoxious ribbing. “You can relax, I won’t hurt you. I know you crave positive physical contact, so don’t be shy; go on and touch me however you please.”
“But… they’re watching…” she whispered lower. There was a breathlessness in her voice that didn’t match her hesitance and he smirked at how insatiable she was. In reply, he took her hand and interlaced their fingers above his chest, felt her sharp little intake of breath as his thumb slowly circled her palm. He nearly chuckled at how responsive she was; she was always so easy to react, it was as though her mind and body were a switchboard he could play with endlessly. Her hunger for his attention and affection never failed and she began to caress his hand back, hesitant little exploring touches that traced his fingers and knuckles like she wanted to memorize them. He glanced at his brothers, seeing Vidar and Henrik trying not to look and forcing a light conversation between them, but Anders was staring right at Simone.

A tinge of jealousy sparked in Leif, a dark possessiveness that made him want to sink his teeth into her breast right in front of his youngest brother, and he identified his uneasiness of the younger man’s defense of the girl from earlier: Anders was uncomfortable with Simone as a sexual being. That discomfort was far more dangerous than the easy objectification their brothers insincerely participated in; that discomfort was a reaction to something internal. Judging by the way he watched her hand move, Leif felt a curl of disgust at what he knew that internal conflict might be.

The hypocrisy wasn’t lost on him. He was repulsed at the idea of Anders harboring incestuous impulses towards his own niece. Objectively, that was far less uncouth than what he himself was actually doing. He held no illusions to his sins; he was fucking his only child. In fact, he was reveling in the thrill of taking the purity and wholesomeness of family and twisting it into something depraved and wretched. The guilt he felt at first was minimal compared to the jubilation of coming to thoroughly own every part of his Simone. But that was him and Anders was someone else, someone who existed within the constraints and rules of society, so the thought of him getting hard over his own flesh and blood niece made Leif sick.

“You want to just take a picture, Anders?” he asked flatly.

The young man startled, eyes snapping away and shoulders shrugging uncomfortably, but it was Henrik who spoke. “You’re full of shit, you know that?” he laughed, tilting back almost dangerously in his seat. “You only want to show off, like you always do.”

“Hey. Do you remember when Henrik got us kicked out of that bar in Paris?” Vidar’s slurred question popped seemingly out of nowhere.

“I remember the look on the barkeep’s face when you took that sword off the wall,” Leif grinned, to which Henrik bellowed and finally tipped out of the flimsy lawn chair. The brothers erupted into another laughing fit and Leif couldn’t stop the chuckle that shook his chest, Simone looking up at him from her daze. She seemed astonished by his laughter and he wanted to kiss her awe-slackened mouth, barely stopping himself from sitting up to do so. He tilted his head back, resigning himself to the possibility that he was a bit tipsy and had to guard his inhibitions more.

“That’s not as bad as when you got us kicked out of that brothel,” Anders laughed.

“God, I thought we were going to get killed for that!” Vidar exclaimed. “What the devil did you even do to that whore, Leif?”

Leif chuckled, his voice husky in a way he hoped passed for either jokingly coquettish or drunk, “She offered to do anything I wanted and then she disagreed with what I wanted.”

“Come off it, you sick bastard,” Henrik groused. “Not a lot was off the menu in there, so what did you do that got us yanked out?”

Leif shrugged, looked down at his daughter’s upturned face and smiled warmly at her as he said, “I
made her bleed.”

“You’re a fucking serial killer,” Henrik announced, his eyebrows raised high in astonishment.

“Fuck, Leif, no wonder your wife divorced you,” Anders laughed.

“Wait, Lisa’s not in some shallow grave around here, is she?” Vidar joked, looking around theatrically.

“No, it’s just Simone and I from now on,” Leif smiled. His hand, free from her exploring fingers as she’d moved onto tracing his collarbone under the unbuttoned top of his shirt in ways that made his groin stir, patted her bare shoulder in a hearty fatherly gesture.

“That’s pretty rough, brother,” Anders said, all laughter gone from him now. He took a deep drink from his can before continuing, “Do you think she’ll ever be normal again?”

“She wasn’t exactly normal to begin with,” Leif answered, trying not to let his irritation of his younger brother’s sincerity show.

“She’s got to go off on her own at some point, though,” Anders pressed. “She’s got her whole life ahead of her.”

“I’ll never let her go,” Leif said. “I don’t expect you to understand, but having my little girl need me is one of those things a father loves most, even if it means she’ll need me for the rest of my life.”

He felt something tighten in his chest as he spoke, some derelict piece of him that ached with the truth of his words even as he said them just to enforce his image as a doting father. He shrugged it off, telling himself it was the alcohol making him sentimental, and reminded himself that she was full of his semen and sore from his cock as he had said that sappy bullshit. He reminded himself that it turned him on and that he would fuck her again that night in the bed they now shared, whether she wanted it or not. He told himself that he loved making her cry. He had no right to feel guilt at this point.

“Well that’s just fucking precious, papa bear. I think I’m going to vomit,” Vidar sneered sarcastically, making the brothers laugh and the subject changed.
Simone wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but at some point into what she guessed was the second hour, she knew that she could stay like this forever. The leaves from the canopy of branches above them seemed to glow green from the backlight of the bright early afternoon sun and they rustled in the breeze with a soothing sound reminiscent of the ocean’s waves. The temperature was a bit chilly, but it made the radiant warmth of her father’s skin all the more pleasant to feel. She was sprawled mostly on top of him, his large solid body comfortably positioned beneath her in tantalizing closeness. With her head resting on his chest, she listened to the steady beat of his heart and breathing and felt the deep rumble of his rough, rich voice whenever he would speak. She spent most of the time with her eyes closed, just listening to his body and enjoying the sensation of floating away into nothingness until there was just the sound of his heart pumping hot blood around her. Occasionally he would catch a can of beer one of his brothers would toss him or readjust their position, but otherwise she was allowed to just drift in the calm of his embrace. At first, she was so unaccustomed to his gentleness that she tensed at each stroke, anticipating that deceptive kindness to give way to pain at any moment, but the pain didn’t come. It was all sweetness without cost and, eventually coming to trust that, she relaxed and accepted this affection. After being encouraged to touch him back, she greedily indulged, running her hands wherever they wanted. She could hardly believe he was letting her just feel him and she quickly lost any self consciousness at her uncles’ stares. Every ridge of bone and swell of muscle felt like a fresh discovery under her wandering fingers. Her mouth had twitched in a desire to participate, to taste and feel with her sensitive lips in chaste and childlike curiosity, but he had not given her permission and she did not want to risk asking. She was worried that the spell would be broken by any intrusion, so she soon limited her sounds to sighs and soft moans whenever his strong hands smoothed over her tender areas.

Eventually, he moved under her and she groaned in disappointment as he sat up and asked his brothers something. Their Norwegian was just beautiful noise to her ears, but Vidar must have said something that rankled Leif as he spat out a short reply and moved to stand. He took her hand and she slid out of the chaise lounge, her body relaxed to the point that her joints felt like they were made out of jelly and rubber. Her feet seemed to float as they made their way through the overgrown lawn, the long stalks scratching at her calves, but she paid no mind to it as they intertwined their fingers and her heart swelled. He wavered as he stepped up onto the back porch; an affect of the multitude of beers he’d ingested, she figured. Her mind unclouded bit by bit with each step into the house but she clung to her dreamlike state as much as she could, her entire body feeling so light and tingly still. When they passed her cardigan rumpled into a ball on the floor in the hallway, she swallowed in her suddenly dry mouth, her throat scraping like sandpaper with the reflex. He seemed to still be in a relaxed, almost sleepy mood however, his pace languid as he walked more slowly to accommodate her shorter stride and the line of his broad shoulders slack without his usual confident posture. He seemed, she realized with an unnameable hollowness in her chest, older, nearly weakened. To her, he had always seemed outside of age, always the form of masculine vigor with a power in him that seemed eternally unaffected by the exhaustion and malcontent that affected men even half his age. But as he gently directed her to sit in the overstuffed leather sofa in the living room, one shaking hand on her shoulder, he seemed beyond his 42 years.
“Stay. I won’t be long,” he said, his words warped by the stronger presence of his accent. She could only nod in response, not trusting her sore throat to cooperate. She watched as he retreated back into the hall, his tall and muscular frame seeming too large in the confines of the old house. Simone pressed her palm to her sternum, brow furrowed in puzzlement as she tried to place this almost physical emotion. She recalled that the psychologist she’d visited after her incident had given her a checklist to go through whenever she couldn’t identify what she felt, but that list was most likely still in her nightstand in Brooklyn. The reminder of her lack of control over her own life brought an unpleasant mix of self-pity and betrayal alongside that hollowness, funneled into the well of anxiety that constantly threatened to overflow. Breathing deeply, she forced her feelings back down, willing herself to calm before they overtook her.

“Don’t think about it. There’s nothing you can do right now,” she whispered to herself under her breath, digging the heels of her palms into her eyes and curling her legs to her chest. Her white shoes clattered to the oriental rug and she perched her bare feet on the plush leather of the sofa, letting her forehead rest on her knees as she focused on the sound of her slow breaths. When the clamor of emotions waned, she noticed a ticking sound and looked around the decorated room. Too quiet to be a clock, it took her a moment to hone in on the slight sound until she traced it to the fireplace mantel. Curious and looking for a distraction, she rose from the sofa and walked toward it. There, on the ornately molded stone surface, was a wristwatch. She picked it up, examining the tiny cogs on the face of it under the hands, the slight constant movement of it reminding her of a trapped insect’s flailing legs. The mental image of a bug-powered watch made her smile.

“That’s Bjørn’s watch,” Leif’s gravelly voice said from behind her. She cringed in surprise, clutching the watch to her chest defensively as she whirled around to find him looming behind her. The sudden thumping of her heart jammed in her throat and she swallowed hard to clear it, willing herself to calm once more as he spoke on, unperturbed by her usual jumpiness. “My uncle. He and my father came to this country to oversee the US branch of our architecture firm. They gave him that watch for working with them for 30 years.”

She nearly gaped at this wealth of information he volunteered, her curiosity making her fear more easily ignorable as she looked more intently at the watch. She turned it over, seeing an inscription written in Norwegian on the back. While she couldn’t read it, she was able to make out the number 30 and Bjørn Valstad.

He stepped closer to her and she could feel his body heat rolling off of him as he looked at the watch from over her shoulder, saying, “He was an odd man. Mostly kept to the drawings while Einar – my father – handled the social aspects of the business. He would have liked you.”

“Did grandpa get a watch too?” she asked.

“He did. I let Henrik have it,” he answered disinterestedly. He reached over her, his arms coming up on either side of her and she froze at the loose embrace, but he only took the watch and slipped it over her hand. He chuckled a bit when he latched it on her wrist, the click of the clasp sending a shiver up her spine. “Well look at that. A little big, but it fits. Bjørn was a very thin man.”

She examined the worn brown leather straps, feeling bashful at wearing something so personal to a man she’d never met. Leif’s cheek pressed against her temple and she felt her face flush as he gingerly turned her wrist to examine the watch himself.

His voice was quiet even as he spoke so close to her ear, “There’s a lot of similarities between you and him, you know. He had amazing artistic talent and kept to himself, but he wore his heart on his sleeve – even when he didn’t want to. Hmph. I guess that’s why he never liked people so much. Here, let me show you…” His fingers clutched the sides of the watch, his nail carefully pulling out a
tiny knob at the side. She watched his hands work as he spoke. “You have to keep mechanical watches like this wound. So, every day, you pull out the crown and twist it like so… until it resists. Then, you just push the crown back in. There’s no battery in it; it depends on you to keep it working. This timepiece probably hadn’t ticked in six years but it started up again like always after I wound it.”

“No battery… it just works without any kind of power?” she asked, unable to mask her astonishment at the little machine on her arm.

“Only the power you give it,” he answered. She smiled, admiring the timepiece for a moment longer, then moved to take it off. He put his hand over hers, stopping her and said, “I want you to have it. You have to keep it wound though, understand?”

“Oh, I- uh… Yes,” she stammered. A bright happiness flooded her, making her blush deepen, and she said more firmly, “I understand. I’ll take care of it, Papa.”

“I know you will,” he whispered. She turned her head toward him, seeing him watching her with a warm smile she rarely ever witnessed on his face, and his hands slid from their light hold on her wrist to gently cup her cheek and shoulder. For a long moment, they just stood together, her torso and neck twisted to look up at him as he leaned down close behind her. Then, he bent down further, his lips pressing tenderly to hers.

Her heart fluttered at the contact, a curious electricity in the kiss that was new to her, and she found herself closing her eyes and leaning into it. The languid tilt of his head slid their lips over each other’s, his mouth soft on hers as he latched them together with an outward pout that parted both of them open slightly. The slow and gentle pace they set was so different from how he would usually force her mouth open and all but devour her; she was quickly rediscovering that tingly floating feeling from cuddling on him earlier. It struck her as extremely peculiar that his touch could be her greatest source of pain and fear and yet at times extract such comfort and elation. This reminder of the complex and overwhelming power he held over her gave her another feeling she wished she could consult her chart about, but for now she allowed herself to bask unthinkingly in the sweet warmth of the moment. When she felt him dip his tongue at the wet center of her pucker, she whimpered a bit at the chills racing pleasantly down her spine and slipped her own tongue past his.

The low, gruff groan he hummed at this made her chest ache with pleasure, her head swimming in a rush that reminded her of being caught in an undertow. She let herself get dragged down into the depth of that sensation, chasing the taste of him just below the alcohol as they enjoyed the push and pull of their lips and the caresses of their tongues. His fingers slid into her hair, making her tense reflexively in fear he would grab and pull, her scalp still sore from his rough treatment not even four hours prior. However, his long fingers only massaged against her scalp, relaxing her and she let herself moan softly into his mouth at the sensual contact.

Slowly, he pulled away from her, the loss of his kiss making her open her eyes to see him just looking at her face. Her mind sluggish in its dreamy fog, she could only stare back, a mild curiosity sprouting in her at the strange furrow in his brow and almost pained look in his eyes. His nearly mournful expression also sprouted a dull, heavy ache around her heart that seemed to squeeze her lungs and flutter in her belly.

“Simone…” he murmured, his voice almost hoarse in how husky and low it was. Her eyes focused on his as they flitted distractedly about her face, the strange emotion boiling within her as she waited for him to continue. His lips parted as though he were thinking of how to phrase his thoughts and it took him a moment before he drew in a short breath and said, “People… experience neurological changes when they become parents. Humans are biologically triggered to react in certain ways from the moment our children take root in the womb. Not just mothers, but fathers experience a hormonal
Simone was used to his accent becoming much thicker and his voice becoming much more gravelly when he drank, so she couldn’t blame her bewilderment on mishearing him. He locked eyes with her, gray on gray, and held her gaze as he continued.

“I am still no exception. I’m not going to claim that I’ve ever been a good father to you; I know I haven’t been. But… I’ve always felt like your father. Always. Even now… No, especially now. So don’t pretend that you’re not my daughter. Do you understand?” he said, his fingers gripping the roots of her hair tighter as his tone became firmer with his words.

“Yes, Papa,” she answered, trying once more to physically swallow her rising nervousness down her sore throat. “I can’t pretend that we aren’t… who we are. But…” She couldn’t hold his stare as she continued, focusing her vision on the fringe of hair that hung over his temple, loosed from his usual combed back style in an uncharacteristic display of dishevelment. “I can’t understand, if you still want to be my father, how… how can you…” Her voice was shaking, instinct screaming for her to stop this line of questioning, but she’d been burning with the need to know since she’d slid out of her psilocybin haze that first night. “How can you fuck me and still consider yourself my father?”

The silence and stillness that followed her whispered question was deafening. She couldn’t look away from that lock of silver and dark blonde, too afraid of what she would see in his expression as she could feel his stare baring down on her. The skin on her scalp crawled where his hands were sunken into her thick hair, her breath catching as she tried to breathe calmly through her nose but the anticipation of pain had her on edge.

“Because you are mine,” he finally said. Her eyes snapped back to his then, seeing his familiar impassive mask in place but a constrained heat detectable in the sharpness of his gaze. She couldn’t help the tremor in her body that shook her deepening breaths, feeling suddenly like a mouse hypnotized into stillness by a serpent’s glare. He leaned down closer once more, his lips brushing against hers as he whispered, “In every way, you belong to me and I will use you as I see fit. There are no rules, no laws, no morals here to prevent me from taking what’s mine and I will never… ever… let you go.”

His lips sealed over hers in a wet, dominating kiss nothing like the sweet and gentle ones before, making her cry of surprise sound like a desperate whimper against his mouth. His teeth nipped at her lower lip as he pulled away, the sharp pain making her wince and grunt and he chuckled at her mirthlessly.

“You fill your role so well, darling girl,” he grinned, rubbing his nose against hers in a cruel mockery of fatherly affection. She kept her eyes scrunched shut, her body tense in preparation for whatever he might do to her as his hands slid down her neck and chest to roughly cup her breasts while he said, “You’ve been wondering how I could be so amorous to my own daughter, but what about you?” She gasped as he kneaded the sensitive flesh, rolling her hardened nipples under his palms. Every nerve in her body was electrified by this contact in both fear and arousal, those two feelings so closely linked in her now that she wasn’t sure which it was she was panting from. “You’re so sensitive, so reactive to my touch and so eager to please me. Think about it: you’ve always been mine.”

“That’s… It wasn’t like that…” she stammered, her voice tight. Her head ached, overwhelmed by a maelstrom of blurred thoughts and panic as he spoke, and she grit her teeth against it but he kept speaking and fondling her breasts almost painfully.

“When you strip away everything society has told you, everything you believe what we should be, what is it that you really feel?” he asked. There was a maniacal edge to his tone that frightened her
more than the anticipation of agony, but her mind heeded his demand even as she railed against the suggestion. That insistent curiosity rose above her own self preservation, wondering at that horrible fluttering fullness that ached in her when they kissed.

“What I really feel?” she breathed, the answer just at the tip of her mind and she shuddered in terrible aversion to it.

“Yes,” he hissed, his breath hot against her mouth. When her mind hit the white hot truth to the question, she blanched, twisting away from him and taking a few stumbling steps before collapsing into a well-worn armchair. Her shaking hands pressed against her face as she curled into herself, a sob wringing its way out of her despite her efforts to suppress them.

“I’m just confused! I… I don’t know what to feel, what to think and I…” she panted, groaning in frustration at her weakness and ineptitude at processing her own thoughts. “I can’t think right! I feel insane because I *am* insane, Papa. What I feel… it isn’t ever going to be right, so it doesn’t matter.”

His hands grabbed her shoulders and she startled, not having heard his approach. Her head shot up, seeing him kneeling in front of her, and she felt herself frozen under his glare once more.

“What is it in your heart that you revile so?” he asked, his softer tone mismatching the ferocity in his eyes. Her jaw clenched and unclenched, her words jamming together unspoken while hot tears spilled down her cheeks.

Her mouth opened, no sound coming out of her locked throat for a moment until she managed to whisper, “I am not *well*. I’m *sick*. There’s so much wrong and I’m just confused and so *fucked up* because I can’t be… can’t be… I’m not *okay* with this.”

“Say it aloud, Simone,” he said as he jostled her a bit by her shoulders, her hair falling over her face in soft brown waves that obscured her view of him. She sniffed back her tears, shaking her head and wrapping her arms tight around her cramping stomach. He leaned in closer and commanded firmly, “Tell me what is in you that frightens you so.”

Her voice was high and tight, almost a squeak as she kept shaking her head and said, “Dad, don’t make me-”

“Say it!” he growled.

She hung her head, hiding her burning face behind her veil of hair as she whispered, “I just… I can’t help it, when we start… touching… I just *need* it. God, I need help, Papa. I don’t want to be like this. What we’ve been doing is fucking me up and I-I am so confused, I… It feels like I’m… in love with you, but…” She broke into a nervous laugh, her hands pausing their wringing to wipe her tears before she babbled on. “That’s impossible. We’re just having sex, right? The kissing, the touching, the… pain, it’s all just for fucking, right? We’re going through something really weird and we’re fucking it out of our systems or something because why not? Why not fuck each other? Isn’t that what this is? I’m just getting my wires crossed because I’m crazy and of course I love you, you’re my dad! But in *love*, heh, that’s… I-I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have even said it, it’s-”

“No,” he interrupted.

She paused, thrown off by his response, and hesitantly asked, “What… do you mean, ‘no’?”

“No, we are not ‘just having sex’,” he explained. She glanced up at him, confusion overriding her trepidation for now, and gaped as he went on. “We’ve taken our relationship to a level more befitting our natural dynamic; one which enables us access to our carnal urges, but our intimacy is not limited
to merely the physical. The intercourse we share is also an expression and outlet for many things, including love. You’re in love with me because that is the nature of our relationship.”

Her stomach turned and the edges of her vision blurred. For a moment, she thought she was going to be sick, but once it passed she was left with a cold hollow in her belly that rapidly began to fill with shame and dread. Her eyes glanced around the room, not really seeing anything as she focused inward, trying to calm herself while also trying to process the full weight of his words. She quickly found that she could not do both at once.

Still, she couldn’t stop herself from asking, “And you… Are you… in love with me?”

Leif’s hands slid off her shoulders to wrap his arms around her in a hug, pressing her hunched and quaking form against his broad chest and laying his cheek upon her head. She squeezed her eyes shut once more, burrowing into the comfort his warmth and strength exuded. Every compassion he bestowed on her could be so fleeting, she couldn’t waste any kindness he might offer even as she still trembled in fear of his cruelty.

When he spoke, his voice was warm and rich in the deep rumble of his chest against her ear, “My sweet, darling girl, you have no idea what you do to me. No one will ever love you as much as I do. I promise.”

She pressed her face against his chest and allowed a quiet sob to shake its way out of her, helplessness and confusion overtaking any will to argue against how wrong she knew all of this was. The stress of the last four days was breaking her down and she hated how easily she crumbled, but she was merely too exhausted to confront her situation so she let herself weep in the arms of the man who had brought her so much anguish and confusion. His hands gently rubbed her back, his voice softly hushed and murmured meaningless words of comfort into her hair, and he let her weep against him until she found a stretch of numbness inside her to retreat into. The draw to feel nothing rather than the amorphous miasma of jumbled emotions and thoughts was so strong, but her mind churned with shame and anxiety even as she sunk from distress into a fog of depression. Once her sobs receded and she leaned boneless against him, he kissed the top of her head and gathered her limp body in his arms. She never felt smaller or weaker than that moment as he carried her upstairs, her arms hanging loosely around his neck and face buried in his shoulder.

There was no anticipation or regard in her for where he was taking her, no concern for the way he locked the door behind them in their bedroom, no thought to how he laid her down on the bed and peeled off her clothing. She stared up at the ceiling as she was aware of the wet pressure of his mouth on her breast, the sting of his saliva against the wounds there registering only as pain without the usual panic. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly, the sting fading into numbness. She could only feel the pressure of his teeth tearing into her, tugging her skin open with force that slid her prone body with his motions. There was no pain though she could feel her hot blood running down her side, pooling into the crook of her armpit and soaking the bedding below her. The sound of her ripping flesh seemed distant, the feel of his fingers crowding around her ribs and prying the bones apart only registering as an uncomfortable adjustment. The pressure in her chest when he fit his hands in through the hole he’d dug was unpleasant, making her open her eyes to look up at the mess of bright scarlet splattered all over his white dress shirt. His mouth was dripping with it as he bared his stained teeth in the effort and concentration he was putting into rooting around in her chest cavity. Her eyes trailed down his wet sleeves to where his hands were submerged in her up to his wrists and she noticed with curiosity that he was stuffing something inside. She craned her neck to try to see what it was but slammed it backwards hard into the mattress when all at once she was blinded by the immense pain that flooded her. Through the world that was her agony, she could hear someone screaming. Then, another voice floated into her awareness below those screams.
“-mone! Simone! Simone! Slutte å skrike!”

Her eyes popped open and she shot up, flailing against the figure who was shaking her by the shoulders. Her hands automatically gripped her chest to cover the hole and staunch the bleeding, only to clutch at the material of her dress and find the wound missing. Bewilderment now accompanied her mad panic as she looked down at herself to see no blood and find herself still clothed.

“What- what- what-” she panted, her hands searching her body, feeding her assurance that she was so undeniably unwounded. She noticed then that, aside from the pounding of her heart and the burn of her throat, the pain was missing as well. Bafflement overtook her panic and she gained enough self control to look up and see her uncle Anders watching her, his blue eyes wide and shocked as he kneeled on the bed and watched her warily.

“You are… good?” he asked, his English coming out slow and stilted, barely discernible in his thick accent. She stared at him, still panting, but managed to nod. Her whole body was shivering and damp with sweat, her skin dripping with it and she wanted to get away from the feeling of wet bedsheets beneath her. She stumbled off the bed, knees hitting the floor hard but she flinched and rolled away when he reached out to help her, her residual panic spiking at the sight of his hands.

“Hva i helvete skjer?”

Both of them turned at the sound of that deep, growled question to see Leif standing in the doorway, an angry scowl darkening his sharp features into a predatory snarl and his shoulders squared in a manner that emphasized his powerful frame. Anders shot up off the bed, his hands splayed in front of him in a placating and defensive pose as he spoke in rapid Norwegian. Leif took one heavy step towards him, making the smaller man cringe and cower backwards, but he turned his heated glare to her.

“Why were you screaming? Did he touch you? What was he doing to you?” he asked, his voice still darkened with anger.

Simone swallowed, her throat raw as she rasped, “Nothing! He didn’t do anything, I… I was… seeing things.”

His eyebrows twitched, his expression and posture deflating into pensiveness. He glanced to his brother and muttered, “Permisjon.”

Anders quickly left the room, looking back at Simone worriedly before closing the door behind him. She scrambled to stand as he approached her, but sunk back down to sit on the floor as he pressed his hand to her shoulder and kneeled in front of her. She stared, fixated on how clean and white his shirt was.

“Tell me what you saw,” he said. She winced, snapping out of her trance once she registered his words, and rubbed her face in her hands. Her head was throbbing to the loud beat of her heart, overcrowded with images of her father’s hands stuffing something into her chest, and she shuddered violently.

“Simone, tell me what you saw,” he repeated more firmly.

“I don’t remember,” she lied, the words burning as she forced them out. She could feel him staring at her, his disbelief palpable in the silence, but she felt too sick to care.

“Can you stand?” he asked.
“Why?” she croaked, her head pounding at the notion of moving at all.

“You’re covered in sweat. You need to wash it off,” he said. “Let me help you up and get you into a bath.”

“What! No! No, just- gimme a minute, I can…” she stammered, but he was already gathering her up.

“Don’t be obstinate, dearest,” he chided her, adjusting her squirming body against his torso. She noticed that he smelled even more strongly of alcohol than before and that his speech was even slightly slurred and it occurred to her that the sun was much lower than it had been just five minutes ago.

“Oh, god…” she whispered when it finally struck her that she had lost several hours.

“I’m going to need to bathe anyway,” he chuckled, unaware or uncaring of her distress. “It’s been too long since we had a bath together. This’ll be fun.”
“They know we’re in here… together,” he heard her say, her voice quiet and raspy from her prior screams. Leif turned to Simone, already smirking before he could stop himself; it was adorable how cautious and quick to embarrassment she was about their relationship.

“Is there a problem with a father bathing his own daughter in his house?” he asked. His deep voice reverberated off the green tiled walls of the bathroom and he caught her wincing. He quirked his brow at her pained expression and paused in unbuttoning his shirt to fish out a small plastic bag from his pocket. “Perhaps you would like something for that headache, dearest.”

“No, no pills,” she murmured, shaking her head. She winced again from the motion and pressed the heel of her palm to her forehead.

“No, no pills,” he repeated back to her, dangling the sandwich bag of a dozen long-stemmed brown-capped dried mushrooms. Her eyes widened when she recognized what he held, her mouth going slack before she slapped her hand over it. “Thought you lost this, did you?”

“H-how did you…” she breathed, her shoulders shrinking in a cowering hunch.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice your insistence on brewing a pot of tea the afternoon we arrived in this house? You never even had a taste for chamomile,” he grinned, trying not to laugh at how stricken she looked.

“Then you knew … that I was high…” she said. Her eyes seemed far away in thought for a moment and he realized his misstep, his mind racing to catch up with the implications of what he’d revealed to her. He schooled his expression to remain unaffected as he cursed himself internally for drinking himself this stupid. He watched her face carefully, seeing each thought play across her features until her eyes lowered to the floor and welled with tears. He could work with that.

“I did. It gave you a boldness that took me quite by surprise. You were so insistent,” he said, watching her deflate further with guilt. He stepped closer to her, letting his voice drop an octave as he whispered, “How could I say no when my little girl was begging me with such need? And now we’re free to explore our love fully. You owe a lot to this little fungus.” He was satisfied by the way she hid her face from him, so he straightened and cheerfully said, “Go ahead and run the bath to your preferred temperature. I’ll return shortly.”

She was silent, but moved toward the large claw footed tub and he waited until she turned the taps before exiting the bathroom. The relief he felt at maneuvering her predilection for internalizing blame and her increasing obedience gave him a giddy energy. The hallways were dark but a light spilled from the kitchen, so he wasn’t surprised to see Anders sitting at the table inside. The younger man’s eyes widened when he entered and Leif had to refrain from sneering as he rose from his seat.

“Hey, she okay?” Anders slurred, wavering as he approached him.
“In as much as she can ever be,” Leif responded coolly, filling the electric kettle in the porcelain sink. “No thanks to you.”

“I didn’t do anything! She was already screaming before I even went in there!” he protested. “I’m not perverted like Vidar or Henrik. God, they’re disgusting.”

“Mm-hmm…” Leif hummed uninterestedly as he plugged the kettle in. He had roughly five minutes in which to avoid conversation with his brother. He busied himself with pulling a clear glass teakettle from the cupboards and rinsing the dust from it before depositing the full bag of dried mushrooms inside. “Where are those other two idiots?”

“Passed out on the grass for the night, I think. Where is she now? I feel as though I should apologize. She looked so scared, I think I fucked up,” Anders groaned, leaning heavily against the counter next to him and squinting at the pot. “What’s this you’re up to? Broth?”


Leif couldn’t stop the chuckle the bubbled out of him at that. “Awful. How did you ever survive summers here?”

Anders grinned up at him. “I used to be much better at English when I was a kid. We didn’t get much practice when we went back to the farm.”

“Well, go ahead and mumble your broken English at her tomorrow. I’m giving her a bath and then it’s straight to bed after that,” Leif said offhandedly, glancing at him in his peripheral as he tested the waters with that information.

Anders frowned, chewing on his thumbnail as he knit his eyebrow in thought until he asked, “You have to bathe her? Does she… try to drown herself or something like that?”

“We’re just very close,” Leif answered simply, then at seeing his curious stare, continued, “When you have a child, you’ll bathe her too.”

“Ah…” the younger man trailed off, but turned to lean on his side to face him as he said, “But Simone isn’t a child and she looks… Well, doesn’t it feel weird?”

Leif fixed him with a firm stare, taking a smug satisfaction in how his brother looked away rather quickly, and said, “Normal people don’t experience arousal toward their close relatives, so no, it doesn’t feel weird to scrub her back and keep her company in the bath. Why? Does thinking of your niece in the bathtub make you feel weird?”

Steam erupted from the spout on the electric kettle and he turned away from him to pour the hot water over the mushrooms.

Anders pushed himself off the counter and paced, saying, “I’m not a pervert. You know, I think it’s great you’re that close. I just don’t know where you learned how to be close to your kid. Dad was never that caring to us.”

“I am not our father,” Leif replied. He grabbed a lemon from the fridge.

“I saw you in the living room with her earlier,” his brother said.

Leif’s hand paused mid-slice into the lemon, the knuckles on his hand that gripped the knife turning
white as he kept his voice level and asked, “Oh? And what did you see?”

“She was crying and you were holding her,” Anders said. Leif squeezed lemon juice into the steaming pot, the mushrooms beginning to expand in the water. “It was just nice, the way you were comforting her like that. You’re the scariest person I know but you turned out to be the best father I know too. I just think that’s really… I don’t know. I’m really drunk.”

Leif nearly laughed at that, either from his relief or the irony. He grabbed two mugs down from the cupboard, the tight coil of nervousness in him unwinding but his relief was stunted by his self-admonishment at his carelessness.

“Well, I hope it hasn’t softened my image. I’d hate to become the second-scariest person,” he said dryly, placing the hot teakettle and the mugs on a tray. “Use the upstairs bathroom if you need to piss.”

“Fuck off and die,” Anders grumbled in slow, heavily accented English as Leif carried the tray into the darkened hallway.

He saw Simone flinch when he opened the door to find the mirrors and window glass already fogged with steam. He placed the tray on the white marble counter, nudging his father’s complex shaving kit to make space and stirring the scent of sandalwood from it with the motion. The traces of bergamont and fir hitting Leif’s sensitive nose brought memories of the late man to his mind unbidden. Specifically, the violence he experienced by his fists before Leif outgrew him. He blinked back the stale childhood fear, a frown tugging his brow together while he searched the cabinets on either side of the fogged mirror until he found a remedy to his ailment: bath oil. The bottle was unsurprisingly unopened, no doubt a gift left forgotten as soon as it was placed on the shelf by his utilitarian father. He inhaled the scents of rose and blackberry musk to chase away the oppressive aftershave as he drizzled a liberal amount into the steaming bathwater. He unbuttoned his shirt the rest of the way, letting it fall to the white marble tile floor and his gray slacks and underthings joined it a moment after.

Aware of Simone’s nervousness rising as she adorably tried not to look at his nude form standing unabashedly in the center of the bathroom, he gestured to her with a flick of his hand, saying, “Hurry up, now. You’re not going to bathe with your clothes on.”

“But they’re going to know,” she whispered. He saw her hands clutch at her sides, fists bunching the yellow material of her thin dress. He turned his body to face her, indulging in the rush of power he felt when she stiffened in fear.

“Would you like some assistance then?” he offered. The widening of her eyes when she detected the underlying threat in his voice was endearing to him and she shook her head quickly, her fingers working the white buttons of her bodice in poorly concealed franticness. Her light brown cheeks were tinged with pink while she wriggled out of the dress. Her thumbs hooked on her white panties as she dragged them both down the generous swell of her hips and thighs. She kicked her clothing to the side and wrapped her arms around her now bare torso, legs pressed together tightly. He admired her shapely form, his gaze lingering on the elegant bow of her collarbones and the inward slope of her waist, then turned his attention to the teapot. The mushrooms had become much plumper and the water had browned significantly within the ten or fifteen minutes of steeping.

As he poured the steaming concoction into the two mugs, she hesitantly whispered, “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“You didn’t think it was such a bad idea on Sunday,” he remarked, stepping into the hot bathtub and placing the mugs on the flat edge of the porcelain. He could see her biting her knuckles from the
corner of his eye, the old nervous habit resurfacing from a time before her mother had disciplined that out of her. As he gingerly sunk into the scented bath, he grinned genially at her and said, “Come on in, the water’s fine.”

She obeyed, taking short, stiff steps and fixing her gaze on the mugs as she stepped into the tub. Standing knee-deep in the hot water, she deliberated how to fit in there with him for a moment before turning her back to him and sinking down between his legs.

He watched her submerge her curvaceous ass into the water, every movement slow with either hesitance or adjustment to the heat, and leered at the pink stripes of healing scratch marks and fading plum and red bruises that decorated her creamy brown skin. He gently pulled her backward by her upper arms until she was leaning back against his front. Her soft skin felt tantalizing against him and the dampened ends of her hair curled flat against his chest like the greedy arms of a brown octopus.

“There now…” he sighed, reaching for their mugs. “Doesn’t a hot bath feel so good on a cold night?”

He held a mug in front of her until she took it with both of her hands and he couldn’t resist looking down at her frightened expression as she just stared at the liquid. She turned halfway and met his stare as he sipped the steaming brew, the earthy bitterness of the mushrooms and the tart of the lemon not unpleasant on his tongue. He doubted he would ever tire of admiring the look of fear that widened her silvery eyes, slackened her pink little plush mouth, and furrowed the gentle arch of her brow. Tipping his mug to her in a silent cheer, she looked back to her tea and pursed her lips before sipping delicately at the hot liquid. He watched the slight bob of her throat, the oval bruises from his fingers visible on the smooth column of her neck since she’d sweated off any trace of concealer. He blessed his brother’s lack of observational skills for not noticing them when he’d barged into their room.

“Finish your tea, dear,” he chided her when she leaned forward to put her mug down. “Maybe you’ll feel like telling me about what made you scream upstairs once you relax a little.”

She paused, mid-reach, but leaned back as she whispered, “I haven’t eaten anything today, I shouldn’t… do it all.”

“Hm. I would have thought you’d want to keep up your strength around me,” he mused. He felt her muscles tense against him and he smiled. “Finish it.”

He joined her in downing the rest, the tea still too hot but she seemed not to care as she forced her throat to gulp it all. He plucked her now empty mug from her loose hold, depositing them both back on the edge of the tub before sliding down further into the water, forcing her to lay more heavily on him.

She glanced up at him, tilting her head backwards to view him upside-down, and bit her lip nervously before quietly asking, “Have you… done this before?”

“No,” he answered plainly. She sat up suddenly, the water splashing a bit over the rim and splattering on the tiles with the motion, and stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

“Why are you doing this?” she hissed.

His eyebrows quirked up, interested in how uncharacteristically direct she seemed at this moment, but he retained a casual tone as he said, “I wanted us both to be relaxed for a pleasant evening bath and a chat, dearest.”
She only stared at him, her gaze shifting from disbelief to dreadful acceptance as the long moments crawled by. Leif considered easing her trepidation by correcting her perception that he had no idea what he was getting them into, but he was being truthful by this being his first experience ingesting psilocybin and she was so enjoyable in her fearful states. After a few minutes, her shoulders began to slack and her gaze wandered down to the water. He sat up, reached over to the bar of soap on the rim of the tub and rubbed it vigorously between his hands until it worked up a hearty lather. She startled a bit when he began rubbing the lather on her chest, her little grunt of surprise stuttering into a full gasp when he twisted his hands down to slide over her breasts.

“What are you—"

“Hush your squealing, darling girl,” he teased her, pinching her nipples to make her groan and twist away from him. “You don’t want to make your uncles think I’m doing anything untoward to you in here, right? Now pull your hair up so I can wash you properly.”

Her jaw tensed, a flash of anger sparkling in her eyes before dissipating in the calmness she forced over her features as she gathered up her wet hair and straightened her posture. He hummed in approval and began to scrub the suds over her wet skin, watching her calm crumble into that troubled worry she often wore when she was resisting her own pleasure. Her skin felt incredibly soft and smooth under his rubbing hands as he pulled her into his lap to reach behind her and scrub her shoulders and back. He glanced to her face, finding that uncertain pout of her mouth particularly irresistible, and he leaned forward to catch those full lips into his mouth. The small noise that she made as he kissed her sent a fission of pleasure straight to his groin.

“Stand up,” he rasped against her mouth, suddenly breathless. His plans of playing aloof were quickly giving way to his hunger for her. She obeyed, taking a moment to steady herself before rising, the rivulets of water running down her body as she stood. He found his mouth suddenly dry as he admired her standing wet and bare to him as though she had just emerged from seafoam wholly formed. His soapy hands travelled up her thighs, fingers digging into the pliant flesh as he ran up her quadriceps and around to grip her round ass before sliding down the backs of her thighs. She moaned softly as he lathered her up, her eyes scrunched shut and face pink in a fierce blush, his cock throbbing with each high feminine sound. Her little yelp and flinch when his fingers dipped into the crease between her thigh and crotch made him give a breathy chuckle, but she surprised him by parting her legs wider. Watching her face contort in her attempts to stay quiet, he gently rubbed his soapy fingers between her folds, her little cunt already slippery as he slowly and deliberately slid her clit between his fingers. Her head lulled back and she let out a long sigh as he did this, her skin erupting into goosebumps and thighs tensing.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he breathed. Her eyes slit open, her irises just a thin ring of silver from how blown her pupils were, and he chuckled at how quickly the tea had taken hold of her. She shivered at the low sound of his laughter but didn’t look away from him, even as her sighs spiked into a hitched groan when he slid his lathering fingers up the sensitive cleft of her ass.

“Da-ad,” she sighed while he pressed against the tight pucker of her asshole.

“Just being thorough, darling girl,” he grinned, his voice huskier than he thought it would be. “Go ahead and rinse off.”

She lowered herself back into the water and gripped the sides of the tub as she submerged entirely. He watched as her long brown hair swirled around her. The swirling motion spreading to the gray veins of the marble countertop and floor at the edges of his vision was his first realization that the tea was beginning to take effect. He reached into the water and hauled her out by her torso, watching as she blinked curiously at him and allowed him to maneuver her to once more straddle his lap while he
stretched out beneath her. The slide of their skin seemed to buzz wherever they touched. A slightly queasy elation bubbled up in his belly as she slid her crotch more purposefully against the hardened length of him.

“Can you feel it?” she whispered.

“I think so,” he answered. His arms snaked around her middle and held her to him as she kissed at his throat, tongue and teeth dragging across his skin as though she were mapping his neck with her mouth. His own sensitivity caught him off guard and he groaned, feeling the water begin to pulse back to him in a feedback loop of sensation.

“What did you put in me?” he heard her ask. He was still caught in the loop, but her voice was clear and so very present.

“I haven’t put anything in you yet,” he chuckled.

“Why can’t you just tell me?” she whispered, her voice tight with frustration. The soft scraping of her breath against his ear sounded like ice cracking down his spine. He felt a strange sensation of being lifted at a disconcerting speed, the sensation stretching out into a brief eternity until he felt torn out of it suddenly. He only realized he’d had his eyes closed when he opened them.

“Well,” he sighed, loosening his grip and smiling down at her tingling form. “This is interesting.”

She didn’t seem to have heard him, apparently in the grips of her own world as she lapped at his chest with all the simple satisfaction in the task of a dog licking at a bone, if that bone shivered and stroked back. He knew she was lost to the psilocybin, her mind and her secrets too far out of reach by mere words. He gripped her face, thumbs hooking under her jawline, and she growled indignantly as he pulled her up into a searing kiss. The water and air moved around him, everything still swirling against the grain of him in an overstimulating shower of sparks. The cool oasis of her soft mouth beckoned him to search with his tongue inside her. His sweet Simone, the mad core of his own madness, his squirming little ouroboros. Eventually, she managed to squirm out of his grasp, her slick body sliding down him into the water and he whispered a string of filth when he felt her take his cock into her mouth. The floating tendrils of her hair tickled his legs as they wandered over his skin like her feather-light touches from when they were laid out in the backyard together mere hours ago. For a moment, he felt as though they were still there, almost touching the material of her dress until she wrenched him back with her nails dragging down his torso. He gasped as she worked him with her tongue under the water, every sensation spreading in waves throughout his entire body from wherever she touched him and being sent back almost as strong. Tactile echolocation, his mind supplied. That’s asinine, he supplied back.

All at once, he was worried by how long she had been underwater, worried that she was somehow damaging herself through oxygen deprivation. He pulled her off his cock in a frenzied motion that sent a splash of water spilling over the edge. She struggled against him as he sat up, holding her in a tight embrace, their splashing noisily bouncing off the smooth tiles that made up the floor and the walls. When at last his anxiety abated, he noticed that Simone was biting down on his bicep and he looked curiously at the thin trail of blood leaking down his arm and clouding the water. That would not do. He sighed heavily, resigned himself to the necessary task of disciplining his wild daughter, and gripped her throat with his other hand. The elation of his high was unaffected by the necessary violence he chose to bestow on his beloved child; she would love him despite his cruelty. That knowledge of how deep his conditioning of her already ran gave the drug’s effects an edge of his permanent rapture.

She released her bite almost immediately but that short moment of deliberation earned her an open-palmed slap across her jaw. Her head snapped sharply to the side with the force of his hand, a brief
shout of surprise and pain echoing in the small room. When she turned her head back to him, her hair clung to her face and her cheek beginning to redden, he was somewhat surprised at her raw expression of hunger. Her lips were smeared red and full, parted with her panting, and her pink tongue dragged across that pouted lower lip to pull his blood into her mouth. More blatant than that, however, was the darkness in her eyes as she stared up at him, the animalistic voracity and reckless challenge in them.

“God damn,” he murmured. The strong connection he could feel to her through the network of water molecules was overwhelming despite his efforts to retain an appearance of control. He switched in and out of Norwegian and English as he ran his hands all over her irresistible skin and whispered, “A foolhardy thing to bite the arm of the man who feeds you. Trying to refresh your venom in me? You’ve already rotted my heart black without even needing to break skin.”

She writhed, growling and snarling at him in her nonverbal state, her movements less a struggle and more of a convulsive reaction to his overwhelming touch. He pushed her until she sunk down onto her back as he loomed over her between her spread thighs. She fought to keep her head above water and he laughed as she thrashed beneath him.

“Can you taste yourself in my blood?” he asked, his voice shaking with laughter and glee. “The part of me I gave to make you? I gave you my humanity and you’ve turned me into a demon for the favor. Hahaha! Well, that’s what I get for making a deal with Mephistopheles himself. I won’t squander my bounty, however.”

His cock rubbed the inside of her thigh, brushing against her slippery cunt, and they both flinched at the electric pulse when his tip slipped into her. Unknowing if he was pressing into her or if she was pushing up onto him, he became only aware of the softness of her cunt enveloping him. The slick molasses velvet of her snug cunt sucked him in until she was flush to his hilt. When he moved inside her, he could no longer tell where he ended and she began. The pulsing hot pleasure that connected their flesh urged him to fuck her, that electric current pulsing through them and growing with each thrust. Water bounced around him, lapping at his skin like a hundred hands trying to drag him down where he was submerged up to his waist as he drove into her.

The sensation of his climax was distorted through the sting of burning remorse and melded together with the psilocybin haze, leaving him gasping from the effort it took just to withstand the feelings crashing through him. Wave after wave of ecstasy and guilt wracked his body and mind as he pumped his semen into her. Flooded that forbidden core of his daughter, he was at last released from that crest and descended back into his own mind. It was at this moment when he was reeling back into himself that he opened his eyes and saw her submerged in the water, eyes shut and terrifyingly still while her long hair swirled around her. The panic that seized him had him pulling her up and shaking her before he made any conscious decision to act.

His mind racing, he acted before thinking once more. He held her to him to fit his mouth over the slope between her neck and shoulder and bit down hard. She jerked in his arms and her agonized grunt filled him with relief at last, the hot metallic tang of her blood filling his mouth. He sucked instinctually at it. He swallowed two mouthfuls of her blood, drawing it out of her along with her ragged gasps, before he was able to stop himself. His hand gripping the back of her head, he pulled away from her and stared into her pained and astounded face, certain he was mirroring the expression. With her blood still dripping from his lips, he pressed his mouth to hers in a needful, greedy kiss.

“You wretched bitch,” he rasped between ardent kisses, her teeth baring at him in an enraged snarl at him all the while, “God, I would drag you back from Hell if I must. I love you so much, Simone.”
He needed her close, to feel her moving and alive, so he held her while she struggled against him until the bathwater turned tepid. His mind looped on the same train of thought throughout those fraught minutes: his guilt for ruining her on purpose, his need to have her completely, and the necessity that he continue conditioning her to need him. A dream drifted its way into his consciousness as he stroked her back and hushed her; a futile and dangerous question of what she would have been like now had he not done all he had to ensure her dependence on him, had they been a normal family. He could see a happy, well-adjusted Simone living her own life while he sat sidelined in his role as her father; a man she would regard with the same reserved affection he afforded her over holiday visits. She would allow him a condensed and tailored version of her life whenever he’d ask how she’d been, keeping him as far from the truth as he’d kept his truth from her, never able to close the distance between them. He didn’t even know what his life would look like without her. His passion, obsession, and purpose had been tied to possessing her for so long that everything seemed gray and meaningless without her. Now that he had her, he knew he couldn’t let her be anything but his.
Chapter 12

The jumble of noise struck Simone as particularly annoying at this late hour of night, even for living above a busy Brooklyn block. She scrunched her face in irritation and turned away from it, but startled when this motion alerted her that she wasn’t lying down. Her eyes blinked open in bewilderment, certain she was just asleep in her bed. She then recognized that not only was she standing, but she was in a dark hallway, looking through a doorway into her grandfather’s kitchen and the noise that had awoken her wasn’t traffic-- it was crickets. In nervous habit, she bit her lip but quickly released it when she found it sore. Her eyes trailed down her body, seeing that she was wearing one of her father’s shirts and nothing else. No wonder she was freezing.

“Simone?”

She turned her head toward the voice, finding a blonde man standing behind her. His hand was outstretched toward her as though he seemed unsure if he should touch her or not and his blue eyes were wide with concern. She stared at those sky-blue eyes as a tickle of recognition burst in her mind.

“Anders? What are- why am I…” she rasped, her throat so painfully dry that she couldn’t finish her baffled stammering.

“Jeg beklager! Du var søvngjengeri og… ah…” Anders blurted out hurriedly, then stopped himself to close his eyes and take a deep breath before asking, “You are good?”

His words didn’t quite reach through the thick tangle of thoughts that raced in her fogged mind, but she found herself nodding slowly. Her eyes turned back toward the kitchen. Her mind worked on how she came to be standing there in the freezing dead of night but finding her last known memory was proving to be slippery. She recalled standing in the bathroom with her father, then being in the water, but then nothing. There was something important, something frighteningly important about the water but she just couldn’t remember. She gasped aloud when Anders’ hand touching her arm brought her out of her head and she whirled around at him.

He put his hand back up in that placating gesture he’d assumed with her father earlier. Slowly backing away a couple steps, he softly and haltingly said, “No problem. No problem… Want… help?”

“Help…” she croaked, interrupted by a coughing fit. As she hunched over trying to recover, she noticed him slip hurriedly past her into the kitchen. He returned a quick moment later with a glass of water in his hand and she looked up to see him smiling, holding it out to her. Not trusting her throat, she nodded in thanks and took the glass, drinking deeply from it in careful gulps. He smiled on, apparently pleased with himself.

“You are good?” he asked again, taking the glass from her when it was emptied.

“I am good,” she whispered, nodding for good measure. Her arms wrapped around her body, the cold making itself more apparent now that her thirst had been slated. She smirked at how quickly her body transitioned its focus according to its hierarchy of needs, then quickly wiped that smirk off her face. That was a thought that belonged more in her father’s head than hers. Anders’ hand once more pulled her out of her head, but this time she let him gently grasp her wrist and lead her into the living room. Her feet felt numb but with his considerate slowness, she managed not to stumble. He led her to sit on the sofa, the same one she’d sat in with her father earlier that day. She fixed her stare to the floor with the shame that crawled up her neck as she recalled that afternoon in terrible clarity. Her
fingers gingerly touched her sore mouth as the memory of how he’d bitten her lower lip in that abusive kiss replayed. Something about his teeth struck her as peculiar. A throbbing ache in her shoulder made itself apparent to her then and she remembered how he’d bitten her open and sucked her blood from her there. The shock of the memory made her mouth slack and eyes open wide. She jumped a bit when Anders draped a woven throw over her shoulders, snapping out of her disturbing thoughts once more at his touch. He smiled down at her, giving her shoulder a friendly pat that made her bark at the pain. He didn’t seem to notice as he took a seat next to her.

“You feel good?” he asked. She swallowed thickly, nervous at being alone with him so near and so late at night, but admonished herself for thinking that way. He was not her father.

“Yes, thank you,” she answered, attempting a smile. There was something genuinely comforting in his childish grin and eagerness to help. She felt a new kind of guilt for having assumed any possibility of danger from him even as a part of her warned her not to let her guard down. She saw how his gaze lowered from her face and his smile gave way to a look of uneasy curiosity. It wasn’t until his fingers gently pulled at the collar of her shirt that she realized he’d seen the bruises on her neck. Before she could consider how she should react, she wrapped the collar high around her neck and reeled back from him, heart stammering in dread. He stared at her, eyes wide in surprise at her sudden movement. She couldn’t bare those concerned blue eyes one moment longer. Still clutching the collar tightly around her neck, she stood up, the blanket falling off her as she hurriedly scampered away.

"Vente! Jeg beklager!" he called after her, but she was already bounding up the stairs.

Bursting into the room she shared with Leif, she hurriedly locked the door behind her. She leaned her cheek against the smooth wood as she tried to calm her pounding heart. He had seen, without any doubt, and she had let him in her utter carelessness. Her hands wrapped lightly around her neck, caressing the mottled skin as though she could rub the damning bruises off. In the darkness of the room, everything was outlined in shadow with only the thin light of the alarm clock to reveal her father’s large form sprawled on the bed. After a few long, terrible minutes, her eyes adjusted to the low light and she walked toward their bed. Their bed. Her father, but their bed. She felt queasy.

It feels like… I’m in love with you, but…

Her hands threaded into the roots of her still damp hair, tugging on them roughly as she tried to burn the memory out of her mind.

No one will ever love you as much as I do.

God, I would drag you back from Hell if I must.

She growled against the sound of Leif’s rich voice echoing such sweet, sick sentiments in her mind. Her hands rubbed her face, jerking when she pressed against a fresh tenderness along her jaw. Memory sparked of the taste of his blood on her tongue and his strong slap across her face. The shrooms had hit her differently this time, had reduced her mind instead of expanded it, until she was little more than a snarling animal. Not far from her new normal, she considered bitterly.

Or maybe you’ve been a monster all along, Leif’s voice suggested. She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, hunching until she curled up on the balls of her feet on the hardwood floor as she willed that intrusive voice to stop speaking, but to no avail. You’re no victim. You love that daddy is finally paying attention to you; paying the only kind of attention you’re good for.

“Stop it,” she muttered under her breath. She tried to conjure the sound of her own voice, tried to return her inner narrative to normal, but his deep gravelly chuckle rumbled clear and loud above her
attempts.

Just give in like you always do. You’re never going to be a normal person. Hahahah! Not now that you’re papa’s little fuck puppet! Really, it’s going to either be this or finger painting in the psych ward for you. Take your pick: incest or incarceration.

“Shut up!” she hissed, then froze when she heard the real Leif stir.

“Hva er klokka?” he murmured as he sat up and rubbed his face. He turned to the empty side of the bed, his hand reaching out for the other occupant and grabbing at nothing. All at once, he slung his feet off the side and stood. His rigid alarm slid into a fatigued slouch when he saw her huddled on the floor. She could only stare up at him, his silhouette huge and menacing in the dark. “What are you…”

“I’m still hallucinating. From the shrooms,” she interrupted quickly, her voice cracked and panicky. She winced at the sound and the level of truth to her words, clinging to that as the reason for the voice in her head and her sleepwalking.

Liar.

He wavered for a beat, then bent at the waist to pat her head and muttered, “G’back t’bed, sweetie. Be right back.”

While he walked past her and into the hallway, she crawled on her hands and knees into the bed. The warmth of where he’d lain soothed her like a balm on both her cold skin and fraught mind. She greedily soaked up that residual body heat under the blanket. However, as the numbing cold left her, the aches and pains of her body became more pronounced. The bite wound on her shoulder seared and throbbed especially, making her unbutton her shirt and pull it off that arm entirely to relieve it of even that slight pressure. Reluctantly, she left the warmth and crawled over to her side of the bed, the chill there telling her she’d been away from it for quite a while. A hard pit of fear warned her not to think about it. She buried her face in the flat pillow and held her breath until the urge to scream left her.

The sound of the old pipes clanking with rushing water alerted her that her father would be returning soon, so she curled up on her good side and tried to quiet her heart enough to feign sleep. She heard the door creak open and closed and felt the mattress dip where he lied down. Her traitorous heart still pumped hard and circulated unnecessary adrenaline despite her constant reassurance that nothing was happening. His hand brushed down the curve of her curled spine under the blanket. His freezing touch made it hard to resist a shiver but she was determined to feign sleep in hopes he would leave her in peace. No such luck. His hand continued its descent down the side of her thigh, his nails dragging across her bare skin as sharp as claws.

The sound of the door opening again made her jerk up. The dread of her father’s inevitable anger at being interrupted by one of his intruding brothers made her glance back to see which one would be the cause, but she recognized that tall silhouette stepping through the doorway as Leif. A shot of shock ran through her and she sat up to see who was in bed behind her, only to see no one at all. She stared, frozen and wide-eyed, as her anxiety and bewilderment yielded to the terrible proof that she was losing her mind in a new and horrible way.

“If you’re going to keep dreaming, you might as well sleep,” he whispered, his arm wrapping around her ribcage and dragging her down against his chest. She let herself lay with her back curled against him. The span of his powerful body tuck
“Dreaming…” she murmured, clutching onto the word and shutting her eyes. “I’m just dreaming…”

He stroked her hair away from her face soothingly, his fingers as warm and real as the rest of him. She grasped his hand and held it against her chest. His lips pressed to her still damp hair in a few chaste kisses, the gesture tingling on her scalp, and his thumb slowly rubbed back and forth over her knuckles. The soothing affection spread a peaceful salve over her fretful state that, in combination with her fatigue, allowed her to relax. That longing for him to always be a sweet and caring father ached in her chest, but the bittersweet desire was a vast improvement from her raw fear. Whatever man he might be outside of this moment, he was being a father to her right now, so she pushed any outside thoughts as far away as she could to enjoy this. His stroking thumb slowed to a stop as his breathing evened out in unconsciousness. She lay awake, feeling surrounded in his protection and warmth until sleep weighed too heavily on her eyelids to keep them blinking in the darkness.

Listening to the steady push and pull of his breath in sleep, Simone let her eyes rest for a moment and then opened them to the orange light of sunrise cast over the living room. Her breath caught in her throat. She resisted the impulse to jump off the sofa, steeling herself to remain still as she tried to determine what happened in that five seconds she’d shut her eyes. Dismay and helplessness crawled into where she needed her mind clear to think and she frowned at the intrusion. The sticky emotional reactions painted everything in thickening shades of fear and sadness. She tried harder to focus on observation and analysis of her surroundings.

The woven throw Anders had draped over her last night was wrapped around her curled body, further muddling the wavering certainty in her memories. She wondered what could have happened instead of her panicked flee that led her to wake up on the sofa. She came to two conclusions: the night had either progressed as she had remembered it and she’d simply gone into the living room at some point, or she had never left the living room and had conjured up a false memory of being in the bedroom. Either choice left gaping holes in her memory where anything could have happened. Anxiety seized her thoughts as she tried to recall anything that could have led her to here, drawing her mind again and again to the dreadfully vague possibilities of what could have happened in those holes. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them repeatedly, trying to wake up in the bed she knew she was just in. All that met her open gaze was the heavily ornate dark woods and complicated oriental rugs of the living room.

She forced herself to stop that senseless impulse by sitting up and rubbing her face. The leather adhered to her bare skin from how long she supposed she’d been laid out on it. A sound alerted her to snap her bleary gaze to her right, finding Anders slumped in a faded armchair with his feet haphazardly sprawled over an ottoman and a quilt falling off him. She stared at his bare feet peeking out from that quilt, knowing it was unlikely he’d have chosen to sleep in an armchair if the sofa wasn’t already taken. It was thin but it was nonetheless evidence toward the theory that she’d stayed downstairs last night. Her hands continued rubbing small circles over her temples as she willed away the fear to think further back. She tried to fill in the hole of time between drinking the shroom tea and coming to in the hallway with Anders. The bite on her shoulder seemed real, much to her disappointment. She slipped a hand into the loose collar of her father’s shirt she wore to graze her fingers over the wound near her neck. She both wished and dreaded to assess it in a mirror as it burned from just that slight touch. Being able to feel evidence of that memory provided a cold comfort.

In her efforts to recall, she felt the vague impression of having experienced strong emotions during that time. Those emotions proved harder to define in the vacuum without any context. She recalled the slap he’d given her, but couldn’t place when it happened. Anger. Frustration, maybe. She could remember the feral state of her mind but it was like it happened to someone else in a dream. Her constant anxiety. Fear, so much fear, but amidst that was acceptance. Hope? She gnawed at her knuckles, brow knit tight in concentration as she tried to piece together what any of that could
possibly mean, but was interrupted by the sound of Anders stirring.

She immediately looked over to see him watching her through hooded eyes, his sleepy countenance obviously not quite fully aware even as he whispered, "God morgen, kjære."

"Anders! Anders, you gotta help me!" she blurted out, scrambling out of her blanket cocoon.

He straightened in his seat, his surprise at the girl stumbling toward him awakening him quickly, and asked, "Hva er det?"

She fell to her knees, her hands grasping his quilt in a white-knuckle grip. She attempted to slow her speech as she asked, "Anders, what… happened… last… night?"

He wrinkled his brow, his uncomfortable expression revealing her failure to communicate. She yanked at her hair in frustration and wracked her brain for a solution, but only came up with frustrated tears stinging her eyes. She flinched when she felt his hand pat her head, but his touch persisted.

"Ikke gråt, pen jente," he said softly.

His petting over the wild mess of her hair and his gentle tone only made her heart hurt. It didn’t take much to push her over the edge in the constant state distress that was her life lately, so she didn’t even try to fight the tears that fell down her face. He reached out with his other hand, making soft shushing sounds that broke her down completely. He was being so sweet, his calloused hands so gentle and offering such comfort and affection so freely without even knowing why she was crying. She felt overwhelmed with how badly she needed this. He smelled like stale beer and sour sweat but she laid her face against his chest and wept. After a moment, he awkwardly embraced her, holding her head against him as he continued to pet and hush her. There was no question of cost in her mind with him, no waiting for him to hurt her or force her arousal.

"Good girl," he murmured warmly, his accent thick but his tone conveying more than the meaning of the words. "Good girl, good girl…"

"I’m sorry," she croaked, even as she moved to sit on the edge of the chair and wrap her arms around his neck. He felt so safe, she couldn’t get enough. His arms wrapped more firmly around her middle and she trembled with the ache that felt nearly bursting in her chest at the comforting affection.

"I help you," he whispered into her hair. The warm bloom of his breath against her scalp felt so soothing. She nuzzled her face into the crook of his shoulder and sighed when her weeping shuddered to a sudden stop.

"Thank you," she breathed. She was afraid of closing her eyes and opening them to find that this was another dream, or hallucination, or anything other than warm and friendly human contact. She wondered if anything would ever feel real to her again, but this moment was real enough to matter.

"Very good girl," his soothing tone whispered as she clung to him, but he didn’t move to disengage their awkward embrace.

She didn’t know what to do with her gratitude, so she just murmured, "Thank you… thank you, Uncle Anders…"

He only shushed her, his hands smoothly rubbing over the back of her shirt, never sliding down to touch her hips or ass. Just a chaste, familial touch that she needed to trust. She leaned into it, but quickly stopped herself when she remembered how little she actually knew him. Embarrassment wormed into her, making her slowly pull away. He seemed to hold no bashfulness in him as he let
her disentangle, his blue gaze only holding concern. Her throat constricted at his compassion and she found herself wanting to weep again, barely holding herself together when he gently smoothed away her tears with his thumb.

They both startled at the sound of a loud snap behind them. They turned toward it, dread dropping her stomach right out of her upon seeing Leif’s leaning in the doorway. She couldn’t stop herself from cowering back when she saw his stern impassive mask in place. She noticed her uncle watch her questioningly as she fearfully backed away from him, but she couldn’t work to conceal her mounting terror.

Leif stepped toward them, muttering something gruff to his brother as he snatched her upper arm and dragged her to her feet in a less than gentle tug. Anders seemed to protest or give some correction in response, his Norwegian coming out in a rapid placating tone. Whatever it was he had said garnered no response from her father as he hauled her out of the room. She stumbled to keep up, looking back to see Anders watching her. Their eyes met right before she was turned past the doorway and her heart ached at the pity in his stare. She allowed herself one last indulgence in the warmth his kindness before fear overwhelmed it.

Leif shoved the girl into their room, locking the door behind them while she stumbled away from him skittishly. His anger boiled in him in an unruly maelstrom, yet it only sharpened his focus. He took a towel out of the hamper and stuffed the crack under the door with it to help contain the noise they were soon to make in the room. Then, along that vein of thought, he pulled out two long gauzy scarves from her drawer in the dresser. Pulling one taut in his hands and balling the other in his fist, he watched uncertainty mix with the fear in Simone’s expression as she stared at the length of fabric.

“I think it’s time for another lesson,” he said calmly, turning to face her.

“Wh-what are you…?” she stammered breathily as he stepped toward her. Her shocked grunt when he pressed the balled fabric to her mouth was cut short, erupting into a yelp as he gripped the back of her hair roughly and forced it past her lips. Her hands reflexively reached to pull out the intruding cloth and he backhanded her. The strike was more to shock than to hurt and it proved affective as her hands immediately dropped. The way she cowered, squeezing her eyes shut in expectation of further violence and whimpering like a dog, made for a pleasing picture but he wasted no time. He wrapped the other scarf over her mouth and tied it behind her head to secure the gag. With her oral airway cutoff, she was forced to breathe through her nose and she seemed to struggle with filling her lungs as quickly as fear demanded.

He moved behind her, locking her arms behind her back with one hand gripping her wrists, and reached around her front to pinch her nostrils closed. Immediately, she began to try to twist away, so he opened his hand to span the bottom of her chin and tilt her head back awkwardly until she was pressed to his chest. Holding her tightly against him, he shut her nostrils again. He dragged her to the floor mirror and watched as her struggles devolved into spasmodic jerking. The steadiness of the decline of her muscle control as she suffocated fascinated him, almost as though he could see her life drain out of her just from restricting such a small part of her. He wanted her to feel how easily he could end her, how he held her life between his thumb and forefinger in a simple pinch. When she began to sag in his hold, he released her face and she drew in as much air as she could before her breaths began to stutter into muffled sobs. He grabbed her chin again after letting her breathe for a moment and she groaned through her nose in fear, but he only forced her to face the mirror.

“Look,” he commanded. She obeyed, opening her eyes and he watched as she stared at her tear-
streaked reflection. She grunted when he tore open her shirt, the buttons on the long garment popping open down to her navel.

“Do you see this?” he hissed as he shoved her forward by his hold on her wrists, jerking her whole body. “This belongs to me. You don’t have the authority to offer it for anyone to touch. Do you understand?”

When she didn’t respond, only blinking at her fearful reflection, he let go of her chin to grip her neck firmly and growled, “Understand?”

She whimpered, the sound barely audible beyond the gag, but nodded fervently. He let his grip linger on her neck a bit longer, enjoying the pleading look in her wet eyes as she met his gaze in the mirror while he tugged on her shirt until it unfastened entirely. Still holding her stare in the reflection, he parted the garment until it hung open, exposing her nude form standing in the mirror. She looked away from him as he gently dragged his fingertips down her middle, his touch lightly caressing from her neck to her cunt. He just barely grazed over her clit but it was enough to make her breath come out in a hitched huff.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered, half lying between the thrill of wielding such power over her and the quiet echo of a guilt he knew he should feel. The way his hard cock ached at the sight of her wet tears glistening and clinging to her eyelashes helped clear his conflict for now. He pressed his fingers against her cunt gently, rubbing slow circles over the impossibly soft outer flesh and making her whimper and tense as he continued, “But you keep making me punish you. I just want to keep you safe, darling girl. How am I supposed to keep you safe when you run off while I’m asleep to cozy up to men you hardly know?”

She shivered, her hands giving a little involuntary jerk at the pleasure he was giving her, but he still held her wrists tightly. His circling fingertips dipped down to her opening and he couldn’t stop his slight gasp of delightsment at finding her so wet. Her thighs flinched shut, her cheeks burning a deep blush and brow furrowed in shame, but he wedged his hand between her closed legs. He spread her fluid up her cunt and slicked her clit until his fingers could glide over it in a sawing motion that had her knees nearly buckling and her head hanging low in mortification at the unwilling pleasure.

“Do you want to come, Simone?” he asked in a hushed and husky tone. The broken, muffled whimper and shake of her head in decline made him grin. “Good.”

He sped up his languid ministrations, his rhythm more insistent against her as her cries became muffled groans through the gag. Her legs pressed together tightly, her body twisting in the limited range his restraint on her arms allowed, but he wouldn’t let her wriggle away. After just a few more strokes, her thighs tensed around his intruding hand and her cunt rocked against it even as fresh tears spilled down her face and her chest heaved in shaking sobs. The stifled sound of her muted scream when he rubbed her through her orgasm made his cock flex and drool precum onto his pajama pants. Her sobbing continued as she seemed to come down from her forced climax, her thighs trembling and wet against his fingers as he slid his hand to grope at her hip.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Your punishment isn’t over yet.”
Before Simone had a chance to react, Leif gripped the back of her hair and pushed her down. She crumpled easily under his pressure, lowering to her knees and then lying on the cold hardwood floor. Her joints were already weak and muscles were uncooperative from exhaustion, but more than that, she didn’t want to risk angering him with the promise of further punishment already known. He pulled her opened shirt off her shoulders, the material dragging painfully over the bite, and wrapped the material around her wrists. She tried to glance backward to see what he was doing, the material drawing taut over her skin as she saw him knotting it tightly to bind her hands behind her back. Trying not to draw attention, she tugged subtly at the bind and couldn’t get it to budge. She gave it a bolder jerk but the motion unfortunately succeeded in drawing his gaze. Squeezing her eyes shut, she prayed yet again to wake up to find this had been a bad dream, but the floor was still under her bare front and her father still loomed over her exposed back when she opened them.

She flinched when he brushed her unruly hair away from her face and said, “You’re doing so well, Simone. You know I’m only doing this because I love you. One day, you’ll thank me for it.”

The thick wad of cloth that filled her mouth had prevented her from telling him that she wasn’t offering anything to Anders and that he didn’t see her as anything but his troubled niece. But there was a growing doubt in her as well; she couldn’t trust her judgement anymore. As the punishment had drawn on, her drive to state her case grew stale.

“You’ve been hiding things from me,” he said as his cock brushed between her parted thighs. “I need you to learn what harboring secrets from me will get you.”

She winced as her cunt throbbed in aftershocks of her orgasm, shame flooding her again at having come against her will. Through her terror and pain, her body had betrayed her so thoroughly, getting so wet and needy for her tormentor. It made her feel sick and wretched. She had no control of both her body and mind. The temptation to give her father complete control over her if she couldn’t control her own self held an appeal she had never hoped to find. Horrified at that thought, a thought she knew didn’t belong to her mind, she shut her eyes and once more tried hard to wake up anywhere else.

He turned her to lie on her back. Her arms dug into her back uncomfortably, but she could more easily see what he was doing. She wasn’t sure if that was any better. He kept his stern stare on her face as he hooked his hands under her calves and brought her legs up to rest straightened against his torso with an ankle in each of his hands. Then, he leaned forward, stretching her flexible hamstrings to their limits until she had to groan audibly to make her discomfort apparent. Her tailbone was lifted off the floor to try to alleviate the burn on her hamstrings and she burned with fear and shame at how it presented her cunt as more accessible to him.

He let go of her right ankle to reach between them and she felt the head of his cock line up to her entrance as he whispered, “Don’t hold back your screams.”

The spike of apprehension that sparked in her was quickly set ablaze into panic when he drove his cock down into her in one powerful thrust. She did scream, the sound pathetically muted by the gag, as her cunt stretched painfully around him. He gave her no time to recover from the searing pain as he pulled back and slammed into her again, setting a brutal pace that kept her screams constant. His hair flopped over his eyes and his muscles rolled and flexed with the force he put into fucking her, his teeth bared with each low grunt he growled out. She writhed under him just trying to manage the bruising and burning impact of his thrusts. Her tears flowed freely from her grimacing eyes as she fixed her stare to the ceiling and tried to calm her panic. Her hyperventilation between screams
demanded more oxygen than she could take in with those short rapid breaths and her horror increased as darkness crept in from the corners of her vision. He could reach much deeper in this position and each slam against her cervix sent a shock of blinding pain burning through her.

“Are you sorry yet?” he growled above her, not faltering in his rhythm. She nodded eagerly and moaned, desperate to appease him and end this onslaught. Her slight hope fizzled into dread when he grinned down at her and said, “No, I don’t think you are. You haven’t learned your lesson yet.”

He reached between them again, this time pressing the pad of his thumb against her clit and her eyes squinted shut in a grimace when she felt – *Oh, god*. Her mind echoed the lamentation her mouth couldn’t speak as she felt the sparks of pleasure begin to intermingle with the searing pain. Confusion rolled over in her panicked mind, complete bewilderment at the rising pleasure in her suffering cunt. With eyes wide in shock and bafflement, she gawked up at him to see the filthy smirk on his face. He knew what was happening with her even though she didn’t. Her cunt clenched. The tightening of her muscles around that already too-large cock sent a lightning strike of pain and pleasure that forced her head thrown back and a long, muffled groan ground out from deep in her. The power and advantage he held over her was never more obvious than in that moment and it made her feel so small and helpless. She wondered if she really had no will of her own at this point as he dragged whatever sensation he wanted out of her.

“Come for me, darling,” he commanded breathlessly, his thumb pressing harder against her clit. “Come on your father’s cock like a good girl.”

The increased friction on her clit made every nerve in her cunt come alive with pleasure that mounted over the pain as her hips involuntarily twitched up to meet his thrusts. Horror, shame, and a deep sadness flooded her mind as ecstasy flooded her body. Her broken, muffled cries sounded distant as that crest crashed onto her, dragging her through another forced orgasm that had her vision black out. She heard his low guttural groan and felt him push hard and deep into her, the head of his cock mashing agonizingly against her bruised cervix as he filled her cunt with semen. He stayed in her for several long, delirious minutes as he panted above her. His eyes were shut, freeing her to watch as his sweat dripped down from his furrowed brow and soaked his fitted white undershirt to the point it became nearly translucent. Her cunt throbbed, both in soreness and aftershocks, his semen stinging in her rubbed raw skin. He pulled out of her slowly, almost considerately, but she still gasped through her nose in how it pained her.

“*Fy faen*…” he muttered. He delicately moved her legs back down to the floor on either side of his crouched form, his eyes locked in fascination on her aching crotch as she felt some of his semen dribble out. “*Jeg elsker deg, dear girl. Stay there.*”

She let her head fall back and eyes close when he rose to his feet and stepped away from her. She just wanted this to be over so she can go hide, maybe forever. Her brief relief from this horror was interrupted by a snap and flash of light. She looked up to see her father standing over her with her Polaroid camera, the white square of a photo held gingerly between his fingers as he watched it develop. Her strangled groan of humiliation brought his gaze once more to her.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he grinned. “I probably won’t be showing this to anyone. You just look so lovely, I had to capture this moment.”

Hot, fresh tears followed the wet trails of her previous weeping down her cheeks and her frustration at them doubled when he clicked his tongue at her chidingly. He placed the camera and photo on the desk behind him, then knelt down next to her. She flinched when he reached for her, but he only gently maneuvered her to sit up. His touch, even when gentle, felt corrosive on her bare skin and she rushed too quickly to stand just to get away from him. Her hip joints ached sharply before her legs
gave out entirely, sending her crumbling to her knees before he caught her by her arms and hauled her up onto the bed.

“You were so well behaved this time,” he beamed, his pride sincere in his voice despite the grotesque context. His hands worked to untie the knot of the scarf at the back of her head, the slight tugs making her twitch involuntarily in nervousness. “I almost wish I didn’t have to unbind and ungag you. Isn’t life so much simpler when your abilities have been reduced?”

The scarf fell into her lap. She once loved the gray and purple leaf pattern of it, but now it repulsed her. His fingers pressing against her mouth made her rear back and he moved quickly to grab the back of her hair. Holding her still, he pulled out the wad of fabric that filled her mouth, the material heavily soaked through with saliva. Her eyes were scrunched shut against the strange sensation of the second scarf being pulled from her mouth, the thing having been there long enough to feel almost as though he were removing a piece of her. She swallowed the excess moisture in her mouth and flexed her freed tongue in relief when it was finally extracted. Her hand released her hair and she leaned forward to clear her throat and make a slight sigh to test her voice. Vocalizing vibrated loudly in her skull without the gag to keep her noises low in her throat or high in her nose.

Her breath stopped when he tipped her chin up and turned her towards him, his eyes assessing her fearful face closely before whispering, “I did miss that soft little mouth, though.”

Her voice was hoarse when she abruptly rasped, “Can you untie me please?”

“In a minute,” he said dismissively as he leaned forward.

She kissed him back when he pressed his lips to hers, wanting to show him how good she could be for him so he would free her arms at last, and he hummed in approval at her eagerness. A shiver ran through her at the slide of his tongue against her tender lower lip, but he pulled away with a satisfied smile and reached around to her back. Having tightened due to her struggles, the knot took a few minutes for him to undo. Her eyes trained to the wet spot on the floor that marked where he fucked her so painfully and made her cum against her will for the second time that day. Seeing that trite and tiny evidence felt cruelly incongruent to the impact it had on her. She wanted to see this house ablaze in a torrent of flame or flood with a river of blood from what had happened, or at least something more out of place than a trivial dribble of fluid on hardwood. When he gave the shirt knot a final tug and her arms were given slack at last, she hugged them around her front. They felt heavy and tingly from having been asleep, her shoulder joints aching like the joints in her hips and pelvis. It seems that my retribution would be yet ongoing. That thought entered her mind in Leif’s voice, unbidden and alien. She shook it off.

“… Marius Larsen, Arvid Halvorson, Fredrik Hauge, and Svein Myrhe made it to their hotel. Did you ever work with them?” Henrik asked over the screen of his laptop on the kitchen table.

Leif didn’t pause in his task of chopping parsley as he answered, “Just once. That was more than enough. I’m glad father’s generation of architects are finally retiring.”

“One way or another,” Vidar smirked.

The herb’s sharp fragrance mingled with the pungency of the minced garlic next to it on the cutting
board. Anders sat at the breakfast bar that separated the cooking area from the rest of the kitchen, his silence irking Leif even more than his usual talkativeness. Leif glanced at him and sighed when he saw that he was still sulking.

“I thought you never got hungover,” he said as he bundled the bits of parsley together with the flat edge of the knife.

The youngest brother straightened from his slouch with a frown and muttered, “I just couldn’t get much sleep.”

Leif glanced at him again to accidentally meet his stare briefly before returning his attention to preparing the sauce. He schooled his features to not react to the probing look in those blue eyes, but his mind was turning over what could have sparked such a curious look. Suspicious, even.

“I feel like I slept for days and I’m still exhausted,” Vidar groaned. “Thanks for letting me stay passed out in the backyard by the way, assholes.”

“I thought it was a refreshing experience,” Henrik grinned.

Vidar put his phone down and tossed his older brother a sneering, “Not all of us are half gorilla, freak.”

“If I’m half gorilla, then you’re also half gorilla, you dumb shit,” Henrik jeered, earning him a raised middle finger from the other man.

“What kept you awake, Anders?” Leif asked, ignoring the brothers as they continued to trade insults at the kitchen table. He watched from the corner of his eye as Anders shifted in the barstool uncomfortably, his brow slightly furrowed and gaze downcast in consideration.

It was another minute before he turned his back to the bickering brothers and quietly said, “Can I… talk to you later? Alone?”

Leif crafted an expression of mild concern as he answered, “Of course, brother.”

Anders gave a curt nod in response, then slipped out of the stool. Leif watched as he disappeared into the hallway and up the stairs, allowing his jaw to tense as he mulled over the possibilities for the younger man’s withdrawn solemnity and request for private inquiry. He worked backwards through his mental catalog of observations as he kept the garlic from burning in the pan of olive oil and scraped the zest from a lemon with small nicks of the knife. Anders had left after obtaining his answer, which explained part of his reserved attitude if he was biding his time until finally asking. But he was careful to hide, or at least attempt to hide, frequent glances at Leif that he did not bestow on his other brothers. He was not sheepish in his withdrawn pensiveness, instead seeming almost shrewd in a way that told Leif he was perhaps expecting to broach a sensitive subject that he did not feel in the wrong about. Perhaps even looking for a conflict, but that didn’t match up with the Anders he knew.

Leif whisked the zest and lemon juice into the pan as he planned how to direct the scheduled conversation away from his sexual relationship with his daughter. His reflexive defensiveness wanted him to outright deny any such thing could ever occur between him and Simone, but at this point it would be obtuse to suppose no one would ever wonder at their close physical contact and frequent seclusions in their shared bedroom with only one bed. He chose to hide in the sun, so he couldn’t resent it for occasionally burning him. His jealousy wanted him to blame Anders of projecting the perversion he harbored towards his niece by grounds of his envy of the close relationship he held with his daughter, but attacking his brother’s character directly would open him
up to suspicion from their other brothers. He would need more time to lay the groundwork for that accusation to have any hope of sticking without having anyone examine the counterpoint. There was no time like the present.

“Hey, has Anders been like that for a while, or just since he got here?” he asked the other two men in the room, interrupting their sneering quarrel.

“That kid’s always been weird,” Henrik scoffed.

“I think dad’s sperm had expired by the time he was conceived,” Vidar said speculatively.

“Has he been having trouble getting a woman or something?” Leif asked.

“He’s been having trouble getting other men’s wives, if that answers your question,” Vidar grinned slyly.

Henrik snickered into his hand, adding, “I think he’s better off staying in the states if she confesses to her husband.”

“Fuck that. He’d be better off fleeing to Antarctica if Louis finds out,” Vidar said.

Leif orchestrated his next sentence with a passive hesitance in his voice that belied the impression of poorly concealed concern. “That sounds complicated. It’s just… I saw him with Simone this morning and—I’m not saying he was doing anything, but… You know, forget it.”

He caught the gravity of his implication descend over their jovial mood even as Henrik’s brow hitched incredulously while he asked, “What, you think Anders is the creepy uncle? Did you see Vidar with his ‘oohhh you’re sooo beautiful’ shit to her?”

“What, I can’t compliment someone without wanting to put my penis inside them? She’s objectively attractive, shit head!” Vidar protested. He turned in his seat toward Leif and pointed accusingly at the bearded brother. “This from the guy who said she has, and I quote, ‘an ass fit for a feast!’”

“Objectively fit for a feast,” Henrik remarked, tilting his head in mock propriety.

“I should gut you both with this knife right now, but look,” Leif said, putting an edge in his tone that he dispelled with a weary sigh before continuing, “The way he was touching her… Just tell me I’m being a crazy, overprotective father, okay? I think I just need to hear it.”

“Well, you are a crazy, overprotective father…” Henrik trailed off with a shrug.

“I’m sure he was just being oafish Anders,” Vidar said, waving his hand dismissively. An awkward silence filled the room for a moment, then he asked, “What was he doing with her?”

Leif suppressed his smug smirk by pursing his lips in the image of a conflicted thought. He had hooked them successfully. “I’m sure I’m just overthinking it. It was nothing. I just saw her in father’s armchair with him when I went downstairs this morning.”

“Whoa, in the same chair? Like on his lap or what?” Henrik interjected, scrunching his face in distaste.

“Do you think he was still drunk?” Vidar offered.

Leif ran a hand through his hair and shrugged, then said, “I don’t know. Just… I don’t want to accuse him of anything, but seeing how he held her on him… She’s very suggestible, understand?”
He watched as the two men frowned in the tense silence that followed. They had taken the bait, now he just needed to start reeling them in. A plan began to come together in his mind now.

“Look, Leif, I’ll keep an eye on him just in case,” Henrik offered.

“Yeah, Simone’s a pretty girl and he was probably still drunk,” Vidar said, then quickly followed it with a nervous, “Not like that’s an excuse, but it happens, right? I don’t think he would’ve done that sober, is what I mean.”

Henrik gaped at him in disgust and when Vidar responded with a shrug, said, “What the fuck kind of horse shit is that? Getting drunk doesn’t just magically turn you into a molester uncle!”

“I said it wasn’t an excuse!” Vidar argued defensively. “It happens!”

“Yeah, it happens if you’re a rapist, you mud-dicked bumpkin,” Henrik sneered.

“You knew what I meant, butter-fucked,” Vidar sneered back.

Leif tuned out the chorus of their insults and returned to the task of cooking, satisfied at his success of stage one in his contingency plan.

Simone startled at the knock on the bedroom door, hurriedly pulling her jeans up before calling out, “Yes?”

“Lunch time! You want to come?” Henrik’s bright voice came muffled through the solid oak.

The idea of lunch made her stomach turn despite not having eaten anything since… she couldn’t recall, but her physical weakness and lightheadedness demanded sustenance. “Uh, okay! I’ll get it in a bit!”

While his heavy footsteps descended the stairs, she examined the wan-looking waif in the mirror. She’d worked out the snarls from her hair after having applied three palmfuls of conditioner in the shower and had painted over the bruises meticulously, dressed in her comfortable ripped jeans with the most art project stains on them and a t-shirt she’d purchased at the last concert she went to. She looked more like the art punk she used to be just less than a week ago. But putting on the trappings of normalcy didn’t quite bring about the feeling of it, even as she focused on the memory of every stain and recalled the ironic synth-pop sound of the band. She turned to check that the paper towel wrapped around flattened cotton balls she’d folded in her underwear hadn’t created any odd bumps in her jeans, but the abrasive material rubbed uncomfortably at her abused privates.

She sighed heavily and muttered, “Can’t arts-and-crafts your way out of this one, can you?”

Taking another deep breath, she steeled herself to step out of the relative safety of the bedroom. Her father had been almost sweet to her after her punishment, helping her to the bathroom and blessedly allowing her privacy once there, but he’d promised a talk would occur later. The weight of the word had struck her that this would be a conversation that she would most likely not want to have and she dreaded encountering him out there. Limping out into the hallway, she flinched at the sound of a door opening and turned to see Anders exiting the room he was staying in.

He smiled sheepishly at her, eyes glancing downward shyly as he walked toward her in three wide steps of his long legs, and said, “I am sorry. You… trouble in Leif?”
“Oh!” she blurted, closing the door behind her in consciousness of the wadded scarfs on the floor inside despite how little they would mean to anyone else. Her hands wrung nervously as she tried to find the simple words he might understand. “Yes, but it’s ok. No problem! Um, I am sorry for…” she trailed her fingers down her cheeks “…crying. On you. That must have made you, um, uncomfortable? Sorry, I’m sorry.”

He smiled that uncomfortable smile of not quite understanding, but squeezed her good shoulder in a friendly gesture and softly asked, “You are good?”

She hesitated, knowing she should say yes or just nod, but the tightness that pulled in her chest wouldn’t allow her to do either. Watching the growth of genuine concern wilt his nervous smile, she found that her answer wouldn’t leave her throat until she whispered, “No, I am not good.”

The hand at her shoulder gently pulled her into a slow hug as he stepped forward and embraced her with his other arm wrapping around her back. She felt that tightness in her chest draw taut and then release with a burst of relief at the delicate care he handled her with and the affection he gave so freely. The temptation to weep once more was coming on strongly, so she was forced to disengage the hug with a smile up at him she could only hope was reassuring. He looked down at her, mirroring that uncertain smile, and she flinched when she felt him swipe his fingertip along her neck. The shock and shiver from the unexpected contact on that sensitive spot instantly brought every accusation and warning her father had made about what Anders really wanted from her to mind. Betrayal and some strange, primal anger began to spread over that sorrow and gratitude he’d stirred in her before she noticed him examine the stripe of brown he’d dragged off her on his pale fingertip. Fear overrode her confusion when she interpreted the knowing glint in his eye as he rubbed the tacky texture between his thumb and forefinger. He’d seen the bruises and now knew she was covering them with makeup. Dread and a sliver of hope bubbled in her as she wondered if he knew why.

“Det kommer til å bli bra, kjære,” he whispered.

Words couldn’t make it past the thick wall of dread, so she swallowed thickly and nodded in response. Trying and failing not to limp as she began to walk toward the stairs, she forced herself not to flinch when he came up behind her and intertwined their fingers. She tucked her mortified grimace away and smiled politely at his helpful grin. His willingness to seemingly always help made her feel both extremely grateful and so incredibly pathetic. She resented that little glimmer of hope in her that wanted to be rescued, knowing she didn’t deserve to be saved from this hell she helped make of her life.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Content Warning: Referenced underage rape

Gripping the railing to not so heavily rely on his hand for assistance, Simone walked with Anders down the stairs. Her insides ached with each step and she focused on the pain, letting herself feel every twinge and burn as her makeshift sanitary pad slowly dampened with the blood that oozed from the tear her father had made in her.

As they walked down the hall and passed the kitchen, she was beginning to suspect that she might have hallucinated the call for lunch but soon heard the clinking of utensils and baritone drone of male conversation from the dining room. Her mouth tugged into a frown, having anticipated being able to just grab a plate and retreat to the safety of seclusion to eat. Instead, she found herself stuck between Anders’ good intentions to see her safely to their destination and the expectant delight of Leif’s smile upon seeing her in the doorway of the dining room. Panic gripped her and she tried to disengage the handhold but her uncle seemed intent on leading her all the way to the end of the ridiculously long table the men had congregated at.

“So glad you could join us for a meal, dearest,” he beamed. She saw his eyes move toward the hand Anders held and then to the man himself, her dismay rising in the nearly imperceptible change in his expression. Numbly, she kept her gaze fixed on the sheen of the polished wood table as she cautiously sat in the chair her uncle pulled out for her. Terror chased away any slight appetite she had managed to garner.

“How are you today?” Vidar’s heavily accented tone asked her slowly. She snapped out of her dread of a second punishment session to see him and Henrik smiling across from her, her father to her left and Anders to her right. She didn’t remember anyone putting the plate of pasta and green salad before her and she hoped she hadn’t been checked out of reality long enough for them to notice.

“I’m fine,” she blurted out, forcing a smile and gripping the fork. The silverware dug into her white knuckle hold and she took a discreet breath to will calmness over her before asking, “How are you guys?”

“Hvordan å si…” he murmured, pale blue eyes glancing toward the high ceiling before finally saying, “Ah! Drunk.”

The men laughed and Simone grinned along with them, proud at her imitation of lightheartedness and feeling a little more confident that she could fake her way through this. She twirled the thin strands of pasta around the fork and began the process of slowly pushing food around her plate to make it seem that she will have eaten more than she had.

“You like here?” Henrik asked as he speared his salad, his stilted English a little less clear than Vidar’s.

She glanced to her father, seeing him watching her with interest in his eyes and a mask of a smile on his face, before answering, “It’s beautiful. I’ve always wanted to live in the country.”
The moment before a reply came stretched longer than it otherwise would and she worried that she may have overestimated his English before he nodded and said, “It is peaceful.”

“These hooligans used to come every summer break and disturb that peace,” Leif said, placing a glass of white wine next to her plate. She looked at it dubiously, then at his smiling mask, and decided not to risk declining it. He didn’t look away from her until she sipped the cold fruity liquid, the alcohol stinging where her teeth had dug into her cheek from the slaps he had given her. Despite the feeling that he was testing her for reasons she hadn’t figured out yet, her desire to know more about her father’s mysterious past was still as strong as it had ever been and she couldn’t resist the rare chance to peer behind the curtain of his privacy.

“But you stayed here with grandpa all year?” she asked.

“I did,” he answered. When he didn’t expand on his response, she wilted a bit in disappointment, knowing any further prodding would be deflected.

“Father wanted Leif to learn uh…” Vidar said, gesturing at the air while he searched his mind for the words.

Simone turned her full attention to him and eagerly asked, “Grandpa wanted him to become an architect like him? Did he come to America with grandpa and Bjørn or did he come over later?”

Vidar furrowed his brow, his face screwed up in thought as she could practically see his mind working to translate, before Leif interjected to answer, “Einar had me come to the US once I turned thirteen, but yes, he wanted me to follow in his footsteps and I did.”

“So you went to high school here?” she asked. He never tolerated her questions and she could tell he was becoming annoyed, but she was in a room full of those who might be able to answer them and she brightened when Henrik picked up the question.

“Ja, he played basketball,” Henrik said. He leaned forward with his elbows on the table and said to her in a stage whisper, “I show you pictures later.”

She smiled at him, a smile that she was surprised to find came from genuine happiness at the cheerful offer. “I would like that. I don’t think I’ve seen any pictures of Papa from when he was young.”

“Let’s keep it that way. Henrik, Ikke gjør det,” Leif said firmly, shooting the burly man a stern look that shot a familiar fear into Simone but Henrik merely scoffed at.

He shot back a surly response in Norwegian that Leif dismissed with a disdainful wave of his fork. Anders asked something now that the conversation was in his language and Vidar replied in a sarcastic tone that made Henrik spit something obviously insulting back at him. Simone returned her attention back to her lunch now that the discussion had shifted out of English. Her heart raced with a surprising amount of elation at simply having had a nice, lighthearted talk with another person after so many days without one. While she would have liked to ask further, the pressure of her father’s calculating stare gave her already shaky social anxiety a much unneeded edge so she settled on just being glad that it hadn’t gone badly. The jovial atmosphere that the brothers’ juvenile bickering created relaxed her enough for her to eat without feeling ill and she was able to take in a few bites before she was startled by Anders’ arm draping over her shoulders.

She flinched, dropping her fork thankfully quietly on the napkin next to the plate, and reflexively looked toward Leif to gauge his reaction before she could think to do it more discreetly. Strangely, he didn’t seem upset while his youngest brother leaned more intimately toward her. She quickly looked away, bewildered by the amused smirk he wore, until Anders drew her attention by gesturing
toward her while he argued with his brothers. Her brow furrowed, wondering what they could possibly be arguing about regarding her.

“Simone,” her father’s voice brought her gaze back to him. He leaned toward her in his chair, a warm smile softening his features as he glanced toward the distracted brothers before whispering to her, “Nuzzle up on his chest like you did this morning.”

She blanched, certain this was a test. “I-I don’t want to, though…”

She stared, caught between the obvious order and the obvious test, confusion warring inside her until he reached under the table and gave her thigh a warning squeeze. The threat was clear even through the denim of her pants, so she swallowed her apprehension and leaned against Anders’ side. Face burning in mortification, she felt him tense as she pressed her cheek to his chest. His arm hesitantly wrapped around her as though he was unsure what to do with it suddenly.

The lively conversation in the room stopped until he said in a tone tight with nervous laughter, “Hun er veldig kjærlig…”

“She is quite loving,” Leif responded sternly. “Simone, clear the table, please.”

Only too glad to get away from her embarrassing display of forced affection, she uncurled herself from her uncle and kept her gaze fixed on her task as she quickly gathered the empty plates. Once she made it to the kitchen, she was able to place the dishes in the sink before she leaned heavily on the counter and panted through the throbbing pain in her pelvis and mind.

“She really seems taken with you, Anders,” Leif said coolly, careful to hide his amusement at the tense frowns of his brothers as he took Simone’s half emptied wineglass in his hand. He leaned back in his chair and focused his impassive stare at his confused youngest brother.

“I’m going to go see if baby Simone needs help with the dishes,” Vidar announced as he stood up from his seat.

Henrik rose immediately at that and said, “I’ll come with you.”

Anders gave the two an incredulous frown as they avoided looking at either of the seated men on their way out of the dining room. Leif was impressed by their quickness to judge Anders as suspicious from the moment he walked in with Simone, surprised at how eager the seeds of distrust he’d sown in them sprouted. They knew the young man more than he did, however, and that the familiarity did not work in Anders’ favor told Leif that his accusations might not be simple paranoia. He wondered, not for the first time, if underneath that outward cheer and magnanimity lurked the same darkness in Anders that guided him. He knew for a fact that the apple never seemed to fall far from the tree in their family and they’d both dropped from the same rotten branch.

“Well, we have achieved privacy for the moment if you’d like to engage that conversation you’d requested,” he said.

Anders turned to him with a bewildered shock that melted into resigned recognition as he muttered, “Oh, yes, ah, well…” He cleared his throat and began again, an uncomfortable smile on his face as he navigated the words. “Before we get into that, I want to make something clear. I have no intentions to do anything… strange with your daughter. My niece. I don’t know what I did to cause them or you to think that I would, but it’s all been…” He gestured with his hand as he searched for
the term before abandoning it and giving Leif a level look. “She’s a very lonely girl. It’s hard not to reach out to her. I can definitely see how you’ve become so… protective of her, because I feel it too. And like you, it comes from a place of familial love. I have no designs to uh… take advantage, or whatever.”

“Familial love…” Leif murmured, a wry smirk cracking through his façade at the irony. He downed the rest of the wine in one gulp in response to the aching twist in his gut, that twisting feeling wringing out something corrosive onto his mood and composure. The temptation of guilt surprised him, but he pushed it down and focused on the moment. He didn’t believe Anders’ cover, but watching him squirm uncomfortably with the topic was at least amusing.

Anders seemed to have not noticed the change in his state as he continued, “I think I speak for everyone when I say that we were not expecting you to become this good parent, no offense. You’ve given up your marriage and now you’re moving here to the countryside to take care of your daughter.” He pursed his lips for a moment in deliberation, gaze falling to the side as he went on in a quieter voice. “If you don’t mind me asking, what happened? What made you choose to sacrifice so much?”

Leif couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled out of him in a dry chuckle, devoid of humor. His throat felt like sandpaper as he couldn’t stop the truth coming forward. “What made me choose to do this? Hahah! I have no choice! I am driven to do whatever I can for my daughter; I am completely out of control.”

“So it’s like some fatherly instinct thing, huh? What, like, ‘you’ll understand it when you have kids’?” Anders asked.

Leif ran a hand roughly through his hair and sighed, trying to regain his composure, before he said, “I won’t bullshit you, I didn’t get it for a long time. There were aspects of fatherhood that I simply couldn’t sympathize with while Simone was growing up.” His gaze focused on the painting of a lake hanging behind his brother, his words more to himself than the other man. “It wasn’t until she started showing symptoms that I began to have these strong compulsions. Maybe because that’s when I actually started to feel like she needs me. Lisa was a great mother, but she just had no idea what to do with the girl once she stopped being a kid and started being a problem. It feels so natural to take care of her, even when she hates me for it. But that feeling… that she’s so undeniably mine and nothing could ever change that… It’s a terrifyingly powerful thing.”

“It’s that strong just because she’s yours?” Anders asked, bringing his attention back to their conversation. Leif sat up straighter, blinking out of his thoughts and nodded. He then noticed how troubled his brother seemed and he worried that he may have revealed too much, given him enough information to connect the dots. He didn’t expect the confession he received in Anders’ whispered, “I… I think I can understand that… because I am about to become a father.”

Leif’s laugh came out as a harsh bark that tore through his throat before he could even cover his mouth to stifle it. Anders’ wide-eyed bewilderment at him only brought forth a torrent of more laughter until Leif was doubled over the table, hitting the smooth surface of it as he attempted to regain control of himself. He couldn’t believe the absurdity of their situation.

“You’re asking me for advice? On being a father?” he asked, his voice high with restrained laughter. The confused nod he received in reply almost made him lose it again. He sat up, dragging his hand over his face and crossing his arms as he drawled, “Oh, God, if I’d known that’s all this was…”

“It’s not that simple!” Anders protested. “She has no intention of letting me be part of my child’s life. I just didn’t expect to care this much. When I first heard…” Leif watched, barely able to suppress his grin at the anguish in the young man’s eyes. “I didn’t know what to think at first. But seeing her belly
get bigger with my child and knowing that kid might never even know about me... I just can’t stand it.”

“That sounds like less of an internal conflict and more of a court problem at this point, little brother,” Leif said, giving him a reassuring pat on the shoulder that brought a slight smile back to his face. “You’ve already accepted becoming a father. There’s no going back on that at this point. You’ve got a lot to work out, but that’s one thing you can count on as fact. For what it’s worth, I’m sure you’re going to be a much better father than I am.”

“I doubt that,” Anders smiled. Leif could only shrug.

Leif could feel Simone flinch in pain when he pressed between her legs, the thickness of her jeans frustrating him as he sought out more contact with the soft skin beneath her clothes. His mouth searched for the sensitive spots along her collarbones as one of his hands stretched her shirt collar low enough to give him access and his other hand had disappeared beneath the hem of it to greedily wander along her torso. The sketchbook and pencil that were in her lap had tumbled to the rug when he had pushed her to lie on her back on the sofa. His erection had come on quickly and with such an incessant need when he had found her alone in the parlor that he couldn’t bother with words to convince her. He bit down wherever his tongue laved over a spot that made her whimper, driving her meek little sounds into gasps.

“Papa, what are you-”

“I love you so much,” he nearly rasped from how ragged his voice came out, his wandering hand slipping under her bra and gripping her impossibly soft breast. The hardened pebble of her nipple dug into the center of his palm as he kneaded, dragging out a shivering sigh from the writhing girl beneath him. He watched, mesmerized, while she struggled between trying to push him away and weakening to his touch.

“W-Why are you- What are you doing?” she stammered. Her voice was rushed with nervousness and he brought his mouth to hers once more to stop her questions. His kiss was perhaps too hard as she winced and grunted into his mouth, but she obediently opened for his insistent tongue. His other hand was slipping under her shirt when he heard footsteps approaching down the long hallway.

“Fuck,” he muttered, moving off her quickly and pulling her to sit up next to him. He watched her as she attempted to recover from his rough and sudden attentions, running her shaking hands through her mussed hair and blinking blearily. Her full lips were even more plush and reddened from the rough treatment of his mouth and her cheeks were tinged in a pretty pink. He folded his hands over the bulge of his impatient erection before Henrik entered the parlor.

“We were going to drive into town in the rental car, do you want to come along?” he asked.

“No, you go on ahead,” Leif answered, hoping that they would leave soon so he could fuck his daughter. The thought of not having to gag or choke her this time made him even more eager.

But Henrik pointed to Simone and asked, “You want to come town with us?”

She answered a quick “Yes!” just as Leif said a firm “No.”

Henrik burst into a giggle as she turned to Leif and explained, “I have to… buy something in town.”
“I’ll ask them to pick it up for you,” he responded flatly.

She frowned in embarrassment and leaned against him to whisper, “I’m still bleeding… from earlier. I need to buy pads. Please, please don’t ask them to buy pads for me.”

That burning, twisting guilt contorted in him again when he realized what she was referring to but a flash of anger quickly rose ahead of that deep well of regret.

“Did I fail in teaching you to not hide things from me? Do you perhaps need a second lesson?” he asked sternly. She shook her head emphatically with her deer in the headlights look that he adored, so he sighed heavily and said to his brother, “Give us twenty minutes. We’ll come.”

“Awesome!” Henrik grinned, backing out of the room with both thumbs held up. Leif waited until he heard the man’s heavy footsteps fade into the hallway before he dragged his daughter onto his lap, smiling at her small yelp of surprise.

“Now then,” he whispered, tilting her chin up and leaning down to her nervous face. “Where were we?”

They both jerked when Anders’ voice asked behind them, “Have you seen my wallet?”

Leif closed his eyes and took a calming breath before standing, lifting the slight girl in his arms with him. He walked past an increasingly bewildered Anders, not deigning to look at the young man as he walked down the hallway and turned into the bathroom. He placed Simone on the counter next to the sink and locked the door. When he turned back to her, she was staring at the bathtub, a faraway look in her eyes that he’d seen before and hurried to break her out of.

“Fucking hell,” he hissed as he grabbed her by her jaw and forced her to face him. Her half-lidded eyes looked at him but with the bleary unfocused stare of the unseeing. He kissed her unresponsive mouth in chaste affection, an unspoken apology passing through his lips onto hers, before taking a step back and raising his hand. He slapped her just enough to sting, the sound echoing off the tiled walls of the spacious bathroom. Her head was turned slightly to the side from the force of his strike, a reddening splotch blooming on her cheek, but she continued to simply stare in her daze. His jaw tensed in rising nervousness. Though he knew it would begin happening more frequently under such a duration of high stress, he couldn’t let her continue dissociating so sporadically. At least not while there were people around.

He leaned down and whispered close to her ear, “Simone, describe out loud what you are seeing.”

At first, she seemed still completely lost in the trance. After a moment, though, her mouth started to move and her blind stare darted around at seemingly nothing. He waited, patient with the process of her mind splitting between two worlds.

“Water… but… everything is so dark…” she murmured, breath barely scraping her vocal chords enough to make the words audible. Her eyes searched through nothing. “Someone in the water…”

“There’s no one in the water,” he whispered quickly. “Close your eyes.” Her eyelids drifted shut on her slack face, looking for all appearances to be completely asleep. He stepped between her spread knees and began unbuttoning her jeans. “I’m behind you. Don’t look. Step backward. Don’t look. Are you out of the water?”

“Out of the water,” she parroted back under her breath. He slowly pushed her backward, her shoulder blades and back of her head leaning against the large mirror behind her. He yanked down her jeans, lifting her slightly to get them out from under her and repositioning her when she slid off to
the side limply. He examined the bloodstained paper towel wadded up in her underwear before tossing it into the wastebasket, a heady combination of worry and power wrinkling his brow in a frown.

“There was no water,” he said as he peeled her pants and panties all the way off. “Don’t look. Keep walking backward, I’m still behind you.”

Her rhythmic, calm breathing began to hitch and stutter but her eyes remained closed with her face and body still slack. He lifted and bent her knees until her heels were on the countertop, positioning her legs splayed wide and pelvis angled forward to provide him easier access to her vagina. It was still red and swollen from her punishment and smears of dried blood stained the bruised skin, a thin line of brighter red marking the slit of her entrance. He swallowed in his dry mouth, unable to tear his stare away from the sight of her bloodied and abused cunt.

“Keep walking. Don’t look. Go slow,” he commanded softly as he gently parted her labia with his thumbs. The skin inside was inflamed, making it difficult to pull open and see inside. Her rattling breaths were beginning to quicken as he slowly sunk his fingers into her snug cunt and pried her open. Though her small size didn’t allow for him to open her as widely as he truly needed, he was able to assess with great relief that she lacked any significant lacerations. His erection strained distractingly against the front of his slacks and he considered replacing his probing fingers with his cock, but he doubted he had the self-control at that moment to not cause her more significant damage. Sighing deeply, he pulled his hands away and washed them in the sink next to her splayed and slack body.

She exhaled a slight purr of pleasure as he gently wiped the blood from her with a washcloth dampened with hot water and he smiled at the sound. He adored how pure her subtle little reactions became while she was in this state; so free from the burden of knowledge and fear, completely unselfconscious and unfiltered. Seeing her like this again brought a wave of nostalgia to him as he recalled those shame-filled dark moments of first having indulged in taking advantage of her highly vulnerable state. Those first hesitant touches that had him so paranoid that she would wake up and scream or remember later seemed so silly to him now with the power he held over her. He nearly laughed aloud at the man he was, at how pathetically guilt-stricken he had been even as he had watched like a circling vulture for any opportunity to tip her into one of her catatonic episodes or administer a sedative. All the ridiculous rules he had set on himself only to break them over time: over her clothes became under her clothes became unclothed, just one kiss became countless, touching became tasting became fucking. Throughout all of it, the assurance that she would never know had satisfied his guilt until that too broke as she responded more and more strongly to his manipulation. Now that he’d finally had her so aware and awake and vivid, he knew he’d never be satisfied with just having her as his doll ever again.

“Simone,” he said more firmly, holding her lolling head up in his hands and leaning close to her. “It’s Papa. I’m here with you now. You can hear me. Can you feel me?”

He smoothed his thumbs over her cheeks and her brow twitched. “… Yes,” she breathed.

“Good girl. Simone, how old are you?” he asked.

She inhaled shakily, eyes moving under her lids for a moment before whispering, “Eighteen.”

“No, you are twenty. You haven’t been on campus for nineteen months. You’re in Vermont at your grandfather’s house and it’s 7 in the afternoon. Your uncles are here. Remember hugging your uncles?” he said, keeping his tone certain and even.

Her brow furrowed as she seemed to struggle in thought, the confusion a good sign of her rising
consciousness. “Uncle Anders…” she muttered.

His lips pursed against the flash of undeniable jealousy and he swallowed the pointless reaction down before saying, “Yes, Anders. Where are you, Simone?”

“Grandpa’s house. He’s dead,” she answered.

“Very good, Simone. Grandpa is dead. You’re ready to open your eyes,” he said.

Her eyes blinked open, though he knew it could be anywhere between several minutes to several hours before she would fully emerge from her stupor. Having her conscious and moving would have to do. He pressed his lips to her mouth, smiling when she automatically puckered into his kiss. He was amused with how reactive she was to him, to his voice and to his conditioning, that she could adapt to such recent stimuli to the point where she could respond nearly unconsciously. Though she lacked any finesse, he was pleased with this unexpected sign of his power over her.

“You ready yet?” Vidar’s voice called through the door. Leif grabbed Simone’s wrist and checked Bjørn’s watch, both surprised that twenty minutes had already passed and impressed that he was able to pull her out in such a short amount of time. Hurriedly, he slipped her feet through the leg holes of her panties and jeans.

“Ready,” he called back as he pulled his daughter off the countertop. He steadied her for a moment, checking her dazed expression for any sign of change, and pulled her jeans up the rest of the way when she stood unwaveringly. Leif smiled politely at Vidar’s uncomfortable expression when he stepped out with Simone dragging her feet after him.

“Is she well?” Vidar asked, looking at her drowsy face skeptically.

Leif took her hand, leading her toward the front door as he said, “Clearly not. Let’s grab our coats and go.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Content warning: Underage rape

“…rer… dritt…”

Simone heard the distant voice in the darkness, but it was too far away to understand. All feeling seemed muted as she drifted through a foggy awakening, the world around her becoming more aggravatingly noisy even as she tried to dive back into the merciful oblivion of sleep. The sensation of movement made her cling to the firm bundle she was leaning against. Her palm smoothed over the warm fabric and the stimulation of those fibers running under her hand brought her further out of unconsciousness. A perplexity stirred in her sluggish mind, a thought that worked to unbury itself from that thick haze until it rang clear in her head.

I was not asleep.

She opened her eyes and the world crashed into her all at once, light and noise and smell overwhelming her. She sat up quickly and her head swam but she swallowed her initial panic and tried to catalog her surroundings. She found herself to be in the backseat of a moving car she didn’t recognize, surrounded by men. Unfortunately, these observations only served to fuel her rising terror. Familiarity tickled her brain until she connected the blur of their features as people she knew. Her father was driving with Henrik in the front passenger seat and she was sitting between Vidar and Anders in the back. Looking in Anders’ direction, she noticed that she had been gripping his thigh, the material of his slacks bunching under her tensed hand. She immediately jerked it away from him.

“I’m sorry…” she murmured, trying her best to not convey her horror and confusion as she attempted an awkward smile. He didn’t appear to have minded as he gave her a fond grin and ruffled her hair, his nonchalant good cheer helping to calm her racing heart and burning embarrassment. She only realized he had his arm slung around her shoulders when he pulled her to him and she flopped against his side, the position reminding her that she had likely been leaning against him while she was in her twilight trance. She swallowed nervously as she glanced to her father. The way he watched them in the rearview mirror made her blood run cold instantly.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Simone,” he said, the creasing of his crow’s feet telling her he was smiling but that did nothing to ease her fear. Nothing was ever as it seemed with him. Her brow twitched in curiosity at his wording, wondering if she really had been asleep or at least seeming asleep in that block of time that was missing. She could only hope she wasn’t doing or saying anything odd and that worry left her anxious. She found that she couldn’t move away from the same embrace that had brought her such punishment just that morning, but not because of the temporary comfort Anders brought. He held her to him firmly, not responding to her slight buds and twists as she tried to signal that she wanted to sit up. The accusations and warnings her father had expressed to her about his brother’s intentions invoked a gut-twisting fear in her as the hold only tightened. She looked to her father, seeing his eyes set on the road, and then at Vidar to find him thoroughly distracted by his phone.

“Don’t tell papa,” Anders whispered, the rumble of his voice in his chest dark against her ear. His other hand reached out and grabbed her chin, tilting her face up forcibly. Seeing the friendly smile
still on his face, she willed herself to calm and consider that she was overreacting. She didn’t know her breathing had become shallow and quick until she forced herself to take deep and slow breaths. He kept their eyes locked as his hand slid down the side of her neck, his nails dragging along the sensitive skin gently and sending chills down her spine and goosebumps across her skin. That hard-won calm in her dissolved as his hand dragged lower, her body trying to jerk away from him reflexively as he slid his fingers over her breast and caught his nail over the tiny bump of her nipple under her shirt.

“Please stop…” she mumbled through her tight throat, but his hand kept its slow descent. Tears welled in her eyes from the tremendous betrayal and disbelief and spilled over her cheek when he just continued smiling down at her like nothing at all was wrong.

“Ssh, kjære,” he whispered softly. She looked quickly to her father, both hoping and fearful that he would see, but he didn’t turn his attention away from driving and Vidar was still deep into his phone. Anders unbuttoned her jeans and she shuddered in revulsion as he slid his fingers under the waistband.

“No, no, no, please don’t do this,” she murmured as she felt him push under her panties. Her hands clenched into fists when she felt the first slow roll of his fingertips over her clitoral hood. Unable to stand that benevolent smile, she pressed her forehead against his chest. Her stifled sobs shook her when her body began to respond despite the pain of betrayal and loathing.

“You feel good?” she heard him ask. She shook her head and tried to squeeze her legs together, but that only pressed his hand closer and she flinched at the contact. To her horror, he sped up his pace and pressed harder, sending shocks of pleasure through her body while her mind reeled in panic and sorrow. She felt like such a fool to have considered trusting him instead of her father. She realized with a disturbing twist in her chest that with her dad, she had felt loved in some sick, strange way. With Anders, there was no love, no bond, just assault. She scrunched her eyes shut as she felt the tension of her orgasm approaching.

“STOP!” Simone shouted, making Leif jerk his hands away from the front of her jeans in surprise at the sudden outburst from the dazed girl. He watched warily as she looked around the grocery store’s restroom. Her breath came in short and rapid gasps and her eyes were wide in fear and bafflement at the gray tiles and dingy porcelain fixtures. When she lowered her stare to his kneeling form before her, her hyperventilating stopped altogether. He waited, ready to spring back or spring forward and restrain her if necessary, but the tears welling in her big eyes told him he needn’t do either. Letting out a shaking sob, she fell to her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Papa! Thank god, oh thank god!” she sobbed against his shirt collar. His arms encircled her and held her to him gently, petting her back as she shook against him.

“Are you feeling all right, Simone?” he asked. She only burrowed her face further into the crook of his neck in response. He was relieved that she came to while he had her alone but she hadn’t recovered from an episode with such a dramatic reaction since her incident. The way her breaths hitched and shook her soft little body felt good against him and made it easy to slip into the role of caring father. He slid one hand up and cupped the back of her head as he schooled his voice into something gentle and warm to say, “Tell me what’s happening with you, dearest. No more hiding. Let me help you.”

He could feel her body tensing as she suppressed her sobs, but it didn’t take more than a minute
before she stammered, “I’ve been… seeing things again. Losing time and blacking out… I’m sorry. I thought I would get better, Dad, but I’m getting so much worse again. I don’t know what to do anymore…”

He squeezed her gently and pressed several small kisses into her hair as he said, “It’s going to be okay. You’re going to be fine, sweetheart. I promised I would always take care of you.”

“I don’t think this has been good for me,” she whispered. “The… sex. I don’t think we should be that way with each other.”

He kept the same warm, caring tone even as his hand brushed her hair away from her neck. “I’m sorry that I had to hurt you today but look at the progress it’s already brought. You’re being more honest and letting me help you.”

“That’s not what I…” she whispered, trailing off when he pressed his open mouth right below her ear. Her hands gripped his shirt tight as she sighed and then tried to continue, “It’s… everything. We’re family, we shouldn’t… ah…”

He lightly nipped her earlobe and then dragged his tongue over the outer shell of her ear, making her gasp and hold him tighter, before he whispered, “Don’t you want me to love you as much as I do, my darling girl?”

She shivered and he kissed her temple, slowly leaning her back as he kissed his way to her mouth. She practically melted in his arms as he coaxed her tongue to caress his, her meager resistance disintegrating when he moaned into her and then she was soft and willing for him. He was almost giddy with how easy it was to bend her will with the promise of a little love and affection. Years of subtle conditioning and manipulation lead up to this exact dynamic and he allowed himself the satisfaction of gloating in the payoff. As he pulled away from her mouth, he watched her face and admired the effect his affection had on her. Her cheeks were pink with the flush of arousal under her drying tears of distress and her eyes glittered as she slowly opened them to look at him with such an expression of adoration and uncertainty.

“You don’t want to stop,” he whispered. He leaned forward again, smiling when she let her eyes fall shut once more and turned her head a bit to deepen the kiss. Her mouth was hot and open to him, her little huffs and sighs making his cock strain against his pants impatiently. Between the wet sounds of their kisses, he whispered, “I know you may be confused right now, but there’s nothing wrong with what we have. It’s this easy to give into it because this is the way it’s supposed to be; you were made to be mine. I could love you so much, Simone, if you just let me.”

Her hands caressed along his broad shoulders, nails dragging over the material of his shirt as she parted the kiss and looked up at him with shame and lust written all over her. He pressed the tips of their noses together, that mockery of parental affection bringing a cruel curl to his smile as he asked, “Don’t you love me, darling girl?”

“I love you, Papa,” she answered in a whispered voice cracking with sorrow.

“Good girl,” he smiled and hugged her to him, the sound of Bjørn’s watch ticking next to his ear counting the dozens of seconds while she held onto him tightly.

“Dad?” he heard her ask nervously.

“Hmm?”

“How did we get here? Where are we?”
He let out a breathy chuckle and then answered, “Henrik drove us in their rental, sweetheart. We’re at the market I took you to the other day.”

“Henrik drove… Did I sit next to Anders?” she asked tightly.

His brow quirked in curiosity and wariness at that and he asked, “Why are you asking such questions? Did Anders do something to you?”

“No, no, he didn’t…” she answered absently. She buried her face against his neck and muttered, “It’s getting hard to tell what’s real anymore.”

“Then let me hold the end of your thread as you wander the labyrinth of your mind. I will always guide you back to reality,” he said. He rubbed her back reassuringly and nuzzled her soft hair, the scent of his shampoo on her filling him with prideful ownership. “You trust me, don’t you?”

She flinched away at the sound of a rapping on the door and he gave her a quick squeeze before disengaging their embrace. He took hold of her arms and helped her up, kissing her mouth once more before grabbing the plastic shopping bag from the floor and leading her out of the restroom by her hand. The woman waiting outside the door looked at them and he smiled genially at her open disgust at seeing them exit the restroom together. It was refreshing to see someone assuming the worst of him after days of nearly rubbing his sexual relationship with his daughter in his brothers’ faces.

As they headed through the exit, Simone tugged on his hand and stuttered, “Wait, uh, c-can we get the, um… the pads?”

He lifted the plastic bag in response and continued walking as he offhandedly explained, “That’s why we were in the restroom, darling.”

“… Oh.”

The early evening sky was already pitch black with a smattering of stars across it that even in the lighting of the small parking lot seemed impressive compared to the murky skies of the city. There were no people wandering the main street of the sleepy little town, no movement of cars or sounds aside from their footsteps. It was easy for Leif to imagine that he and Simone could be the only living people in the world, a thought that made him yearn for his meddling brothers to return to Europe and let him transform his daughter in peace.

Almost as though she had read his thoughts, he heard her quietly ask, “Are they still in the store?”

“It would seem so,” he answered. He leaned his back against the side of the car, tilting his head to watch the stars and the steam of his breath bloom in the chill of the night. He was aware of Simone wandering off, the sound of her shoes crunching through the gravel becoming distant, but he figured she couldn’t find too much trouble with no one around. He ran his thumb over the antler handle of his dead father’s folding knife in his coat pocket and savored the cold air drawing into his heated lungs.

“Come here often?”

Simone whirled, feet scraping noisily across the gravel as she turned to the sound of the voice. In the shadow of the awning above the backdoor to the store, away from the orange glow from the bulb
hanging from the roof, she noticed the red glow from a cigarette before the figure stepped out into the light. She also noticed, perhaps with more surprise, that she didn’t feel the panic that she’d come to expect when caught off guard by someone lately. This benign boy with his wiry frame and crooked grin was too far removed from the man she feared.

“Sorry, I didn’t know this was off-limits,” she said, turning on her heel and beginning to walk back.

“Hey, wait now, I remember you!” the boy said. Simone cringed as she heard him clear the distance between them and she turned back around in preparation for polite small town small talk. He tossed back the long sideways fringe of his hair and wore that crooked grin as he said, “You came in here the other day, right? You visiting around here?”

“Sort of,” she muttered, feeling awkward at this boy’s overt friendliness. But she was lonely and he wasn’t a threat. She straightened, giving him a smile as she spoke, “I’m staying at my grandpa’s place about twenty minutes out. He passed a little over a week ago.”

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, grin faltering.

She shrugged. “It’s fine. I didn’t really know him. You work here, right?” He nodded, holding the straps of his apron exaggeratedly, and she breathed out a polite chuckle before extending her hand. “My name’s Simone. You’re probably going to be seeing me around pretty often, unless there’s anything else to do in this town.”

He shook her hand, laughing a bit as he did so and she wondered if that was perhaps she made a social misstep in offering a handshake. She wasn’t sure how people her age socialized and all her friends back home were either unfitting examples of normalcy by any standard or much older than her.

“No, I’m afraid Jay’s Grocer and General is pretty much the most entertaining place if you don’t count church,” he said. “Simone, huh? I like that. I’m Bryce. You smoke?”

“No tobacco,” she half-murmured, glancing back to the corner she’d walked around from to make sure her father wasn’t nearby.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Oh, uh, I mean, no. I don’t smoke,” she smiled. She stuffed her hands into her hoodie pockets, the jacket not nearly thick enough for the chill that night. This was pleasant, she decided. Having a normal conversation with a normal boy was something that would have given her mild anxiety just a week ago, but normal seemed so comforting and safe to her now. Even if she couldn’t ever be normal again after what she’d been through, she wanted to soak up as much as she could where it presented itself. “So, Bryce, did you grow up around here?”

“Well, I wouldn’t move here by choice, so yeah,” he nodded. He took a drag off his cigarette, the smell abrasive to her sensitive nose. “Where are you visiting from?”


“Yeah, no shit,” he drawled. “Hey, that older guy you were with the other day, is he like your boyfriend or something?”

She tried not to examine the odd feeling that question brought up in her or let it show in her expression. Slowly, she shook her head and said, “No… no, he’s my dad.”

“Oh! Ok, cool, cool,” he said, nodding again and looking away as his grin widened. “So are you in
high school?"

“No, I’m twenty,” she chuckled. “Why did you think that? How old do you think I look?”

He laughed and she giggled at the way he shifted on his feet in his embarrassment. “Ohh, no, no, I’m not falling for that one!” he joked.

“Are you in high school?” she asked.

“Hell no, I’m older than you are!” he said, mock-defensively.

That surprised her. She took a harder look at him, but his smooth skin and soft features only spoke of his youth to her. There were no crow’s feet, dark circles, or frown lines to measure age by. The absence of any of these features struck her as odd despite knowing that perception wasn’t normal considering she also lacked them and didn’t consider herself any other age than what she knew herself to be. The discrepancy in her logic struck her as another subtler sign of her deteriorating mental health and she suddenly felt very uncomfortable talking with this stranger. She needed to escape before she did or said anything that might reveal her insanity.

“I should get back to my father,” she said, hurriedly walking away from the boy.

“Oh, uh, okay. I’ll see you around!” he called after her.

She lifted one hand in a wave, not looking back as she rounded the corner and nearly collided with her father. He grabbed her upper arm and she stumbled as he pulled her towards the car, her shoes skidding at the gravel in her attempts to match his wide and rapid stride. Her mind raced, trying to figure out why he was hurrying her along so roughly, eyes scanning for any reason to rush but there seemed to be no immediate cause. She felt him shove her and she slammed against the side of the car, the realization of his anger knocked into her on impact. Confusion and fear swelled in her as she tried to gauge whether she should move to straighten herself or stay crouched against the vehicle, but he answered that by opening the back door and gesturing her to get in with a jerk of his wrist. She scrambled to oblige and he crowded in behind her, pushing her across the backseat impatiently.

When he closed the door, he shot her a disdainful look and hissed, “What do you think you’re doing?”

She balked, surprised at her own hot streak of anger at him. Figuring a punishment would be imminent at this point no matter what her subsequent actions, she gave that anger a voice.

“Yeah, I must have had a million conversations with a million strangers back home,” she began, her voice nearly shaking with restraint to keep from shouting. Her fists clenched in her lap and she couldn’t bring herself to look at Leif. “You didn’t even give a shit about me until you started fucking me. Hell, you would barely ever speak to me unless I was having a fucking panic attack. I know you never wanted to be a father but you really can’t start now, not after what you’ve done. You can’t just lock me away from society because I’m… because of some ‘danger to myself and others’ crap! I was doing just fine without you before and I can handle-“

Her world flashed in black and white and reeled around her from the sharp crack of his hand across her face, the pain radiating from her cheek shortly thereafter. Her courage fled her along with the anger that had fueled it and left her shaking in the tremendous fear than remained. Somehow, past the pain and terror, there was only a deep numbness inside of her even as he gripped the roots of her hair and pulled her head back. Her eyes squeezed shut and mouth gaped in a silent groan as he loomed over her, his other hand coming to wrap around her neck and hold her against the seat.
“Would you say that having the cops call me to pick you up from the station multiple times was ‘just fine’? Or showing up at our door asking questions that I had to lie to explain?” he growled out, breath hot on her face. She grunted fearfully as his hand at her throat tightened. “You don’t know what ‘just fine’ is. You’re only not rotting in a prison cell because I protect you and yet you have the audacity to tell me what I can’t do. Is that ‘just fine’, Simone?”

Unable to speak past the tight grip of his hand and the fear lodged in her throat, she shook her head and prayed that would satisfy him. She wondered why she had even said those things to begin with, finding no reason to believe them now beyond further proof of her declining sanity. His hands released their agonizing holds on her neck and hair, one palm smoothing over her aching cheek with a gentleness that brought her eyes open in apprehension. His impassive mask betrayed nothing of his intentions, no clue as to whether he would punish or soothe her, and her breath rattled out of her trembling chest as she stared up at him in the secluded silence of the car. The hand that could so easily crush her cradled the side of her face while he slowly closed the short distance between them, a hint of his sharp teeth just barely grazing her lips as he kissed to remind her of the still painful bite on her shoulder. Her life had become a polarizing series of pain and pleasure, hurt and comfort, and affection and abuse that interchanged so rapidly the lines between them had blurred.

“T’m sorry, Papa,” she whispered when he parted from her mouth.

“How?” he asked, tone dripping with disbelief.

His thumb brushed down the bridge of her nose and she shut her eyes for a moment, gathering the will to voice the impulse that welled inside of her. “Please…” she breathed, then opened her hesitant gaze to watch as she whispered more firmly, “Punish me.”

His eyes snapped to lock with hers, surprise cracking through his mask briefly in the slight quirk of his brow and dilation of his pupils. “You believe you need to be punished?”

Her jaw tensed, mouthing the word before retrying through her fear and whispering a tight, “Yes.”

The fluttering nervousness in her gut practically vibrated as he simply continued to stare down at her. She watched the minor changes in his expression play across his face as his mind worked; an almost undetectable broadening of his nostrils as his breathing deepened, relaxation of his eyelids as they became slightly hooded, a twitch at the corners of his mouth. To any stranger, they might not have detected any expression on him at all. But through her lifetime of seeking any impression or reaction from the normally stoic man, he might as well have been grinning with glee. To see him so pleased brought that familiar swell of pleasure at obtaining his approval that she had always sought, a thing which made her surer of her own insanity in this context. The carnal thrill stirring in her at the darkening of his gaze certainly confirmed it, but something else stirred in her as well.

“It’s discipline, right?” she asked, quiet voice cracking through the struggle of her thoughts. She could hear the edge of desperation in her own tone. “Discipline is a necessary part of training… and my mind needs to be retrained. I think you said that to me once when I started to… to lose my mind. Isn’t that right? I was sixteen and the school called you because mom was on a business trip. And you came.” She could almost feel something unravel in her mind as a memory bubbled up from a dark piece of her. She pursed her lips, swallowing back the tears that crawled up the edges of her eyes and tightened her throat. “I don’t even remember what I did, but… I was so scared when it was you who picked me up. You never yelled at me like mom did, but you were always the one I was afraid of. So, when we got home and you said that to me about discipline, I was terrified. But you only gave me a sedative and sent me to my room.”

She paused, unsure if she should continue, the memory dredging up a deep and long-buried mob of emotions that made her shiver as she brushed the denial off it. She thought she had completely
forgotten it, shoved it so far down into the pit of her that it should never have resurfaced. She had in fact forgotten it for many years and the lack of explosive reaction somewhat surprised her when the memory came back to her cool and calm.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes to shield them from his constant stare as she admitted, “I didn’t take that sedative, Dad.”

Another long and silent moment stretched on before she opened her moist eyes, looking to see the concealed astonishment in her father’s face. Slowly, he backed away from her, his hands retreating to rub at his face and then support his forehead as he rested his elbows on his knees. She sat up, observing his reaction and surprised to see the unabashed guilt etched into his posture and hidden face. Suddenly, she didn’t know what to do. She had expected anger, smugness, spite, but not guilt. In the stillness and silence, memories of that incident played unbidden in the theater of her mind, almost a flashback but it was as though she were watching it happen to someone else.

She saw herself lying down on top of her blankets, the afternoon sun filtering through her shut blinds in thin strips of light across her body as she tried to nap. Then her door slowly opened and her father, still wearing his full three-piece suit from being pulled out of the office, came in and stood over her bed for several minutes just watching her. She’d feigned sleep, not wanting to get in trouble for not taking the sedative, so certain that he’d only come in to make sure of just that. But then he took off his jacket, tossing it onto the bed next to her, followed by his vest and tie. When his hands slid up her bare thighs under her school uniform skirt, the pleated gray material bunching around her waist as he hooked his thumbs at the sides of her plain white panties, she began to feign sleep on instinct. That she had continued to feign sleep would haunt her later until she would manage to bury the memory altogether, but the shame and self-blame had begun from that moment. His hands had pressed down the sides of her legs as he pulled her panties down, so slow that it felt like solid minutes had passed as she felt him slide his palms across her skin. Laying there, her cunt so exposed to him and his touch so sensual, she was still somehow confused about what exactly was happening. A dozen nonsensical reasons had clashed in her mind for this predicament even as his hands had traveled up her inner thighs and parted her pussy.

It wasn’t until she felt him press his wet, hot tongue inside her that she knew what was happening. The betrayal and violation that had crashed down on her in that moment should have sent her kicking and screaming away from him, but her body wouldn’t obey her. An instinctual fear had locked her inside of her mind and only heeded the natural reaction to play dead under this large predator. She couldn’t peek an eye open to see what he was doing, but now she watched this memory play out from the side of the bed as her father had swirled his tongue inside her cunt with brazen hunger. Even her breathing had held the deep, calm rhythm of sleep until he had dragged a shuddering and terrifying orgasm out of her. Her mind had railed against the bafflement of how good he could make her feel physically while her world felt like it was crashing down around her, a sentiment she noted with a hollow feeling held true in present day for her as well.

The sound of him unbuckling his belt and unzipping his slacks had spurred her to panic, but her body wouldn’t move even as he leaned over her and kissed her slack and unresponsive mouth. The idea that she would spend the rest of her life knowing how her own father’s kiss felt was something that had struck a harsh chord deep in her for some reason. The care and tenderness he put into it felt worse than if it had simply been sexual. It had been intimate and so full of love that it had bruised her soul.

The width of his thickness spreading her with each saw of his hips made her throat clench in fear that he would tip his cock just slightly and slide into her, but he seemed to be set on satisfying himself without penetrating her. It had been a cold comfort to her then and an odd consideration to reflect on now. The slick sounds of him sliding his cock against her wet pussy had made her stomach twist.
Internally, she had suffered the revulsion this breach of trust of his fatherhood brought against her, but she couldn’t make her cries external no matter how loudly they had echoed in her mind. She could only lie under him paralyzed until he had finished, but he took his time enjoying her vulnerable body. The heavy sound of his panting, the restrained power in the roll of his hips, the strength of his grip on her waist, and even the heady masculine scent of his sweat had stirred a carnal desire in her that she reviled even as it flooded her cunt.

When at last his thrusts became jerky and his ragged breaths became groans, he’d taken his cock in his hand and finished with his head pushed against her opening. That hot, gooey mess had spilling against her cunt made her flesh crawl. He had stayed there kneeling on his haunches, catching his breath and staring dazedly at her for several more minutes before redressing and leaving the room briefly to return with a dampened towel. After wiping her clean, he slid her panties back on and pressed an affectionate kiss to her forehead, a gesture that only made the entire scenario all the more depraved in the juxtaposition of sexual and fatherly sentiments. He had laid down alongside her in the small twin bed and cradled her limp body against him for hours after that as she drifted in and out of real and fake sleep, mind and body too numb to process what had just happened to her. By the time he had left her bedroom, she had managed to convince herself that it was just a dream. And like a dream, she eventually was able to forget it had happened at all.

Simone watched her younger self lie there in bed and slowly regain control of her body enough to tremble and curl in on itself, the memory warping in darkness until she realized she was sitting in the backseat of the car between Anders and Vidar. She felt something press into her palm and looked down to see Anders holding her hand, his thumb rubbing along her knuckles soothingly as he looked out the window into the pitch black night. The numbness around her heart weakened just enough for it to ache.
“What’s the most you’ve ever lost in a gamble?”

Leif sighed heavily, hoping to avoid the aggravatingly cheerful conversation between Vidar and Henrik as they spoke loudly between the back and front seat, but the burly bearded man was clearly asking him the latest annoying question. In truth, he was somewhat glad to be dragged out of his thoughts, but still considered his brothers annoying.

“My status as an only child,” he answered, turning his attention back to driving through the inky darkness of the country road.

Henrik slapped his arm and scolded, “Come on, jackass, give a serious answer.”

Leif entertained the question for a moment, recalling the bluff he lost against three Japanese lackeys in a San Francisco basement and the molar they had collected from him with a wrench, but answered, “$6,000 at poker.”

“How the fuck did you let yourself lose that much?” Vidar asked as Henrik guffawed and Anders whistled lowly.

“It won the company a 20 million-dollar contract with a sore loser of a client,” Leif answered. Vidar threw his hands up in disgust.

“Braggart,” Henrik jeered, but then asked, “What’s the most you’ve ever won in a gamble?”

Leif didn’t have to think for an answer as he glanced through the rear-view mirror at the once-again dazed girl in the backseat. “A daughter.”

Vidar groaned in disgust as Henrik mockingly cooed and Anders repeated, “Braggart.”

Leif tuned them out once more, having apparently satisfied their game to provide the most aggravating responses to their aggravating questions, and returned to his heavy thoughts. He wasn’t sure where along the way he had pinned a moral obligation to protect Simone from the knowledge of how they had progressed through the nearly six years of his increasingly bolder actions with her unconscious body. Being confronted with his failure to spare her of that knowledge felt incongruently painful to the self-admittedly sick and cruel process he was willing and frankly eager to put her through currently. He wondered why he felt that he had committed such an offense by being caught in something that was comparably merciful to the girl.

He hadn’t even intended to begin her conditioning at the level they were now at until several months into their seclusion there in Vermont, but it had been her own lust that had advanced his plans. He reassured himself that, had he been a crueler and less patient man, he could have easily taken her while she was even younger and more malleable. That he had chosen to allow her an adolescence in innocence was by his own virtue. He had been so cautious to be subtle in his ministrations up until recently. Every escalation not by his design had been caused from a completely unexpected catalyst by Simone, in fact. The initial — and mutual, he reminded himself — attraction in his father’s kitchen, the enticement in her struggles when he first wrenched the sedative out of her mother’s inept hands and forced it under his daughter’s writhing tongue, the blood smeared over her mouth when he had found her by the pond, all outside of his intentions and all leading to the worst of his deeds.

It occurred to him then, as he was reflecting on the maddening effect his daughter had on his self-control, that the source of his guilt was only partially a natural consequence of violating his own flesh
and blood so carnally. The aspect that set it so apart from that grief was the shame in his own moral decline. His entire value system had been present and shocked throughout the entire process even as he delighted in those dark desires, creating a deep chasm of cognitive dissonance in his psyche. The defilement of his daughter cut both ways. He grinned wryly at how pathetic and futile his guilt really was because he knew that when presented with any scenario between right and wrong, he would always choose the most interesting option. Simone, with her unique and fractured mind and her inherited traits that manifested so vividly, interested him irresistibly for better or worse of them both.

He glanced through the mirror at his youngest brother, seeing him biting his knuckle in much the same way Simone did when she was nervous, and wondered again at what traits that man had inherited from their father’s side of the family. Their shared interest in Simone might not present itself in the same manner, but he knew he could use it to influence and manipulate Anders if he could figure out how his interest functioned. Or perhaps it would be more efficient to manipulate how that interest functioned first. Slowing into the turn up the wooded driveway toward their father’s house, he surreptitiously glanced back to see Anders holding Simone’s small hand in the space between them with her bleary gaze fixed to that point of contact while his brother pretended to stare out the window in a ruse of nonchalance.

Simone picked up her sketchbook from under the coffee table and found the charcoal pencil under the sofa after a bit of searching over the intricate oriental rug. Leif and her uncles had congregated in the kitchen and immediately began the process of preparing some dish they had seemed excited over, so she figured she might have a while to finish her drawing in peace. Or relative peace as her mind randomly replayed scenes from that night four years ago, her thoughts crashing to a halt with each recalled pang of distress and violation under her father’s touch. Five minutes into making shoddy progress on the ocean waves she’d been sketching earlier, she tore the page out of the book in frustration and began a new drawing.

With broad, bold strokes curving and distorting to reveal the dimensions of the shapes underneath, she drew the long horizontal shadows that the blinds on the window in her bedroom had cast over the scene. Then, she spilled inky pools of shadow under those stripes and the musculature of her father’s broad back began to appear when she used her finger to blend the more diffused and softer shadows of skin. The texture of his skin ghosted under her fingertips as she swiped at the thick paper. Wavering between thin gray outlines and broad curves of dark puddles, the sweeping folds of bedding and clothing came into being around him. Her hands flitted over the page rapidly, the image blooming from her touches and the pencil as though she were merely excavating it from the paper. The cloud of her hair splayed over the bedding filled in with darkness and slits of the white paper underneath to become the texture and sheen to her soft waves.

She revealed her face with the shadow along her cheekbone first, then her eyes opened in a way they had not been in that afternoon. She wanted to replace her memory with what she put into the drawing, to rewrite the scene as anything but the painful truth. With lips parted in passion instead of paralyzed, with eyes gazing lovingly instead of blind, with hands pulling and caressing his bare skin instead of laying limply at her sides, with legs and back flexing to roll her hips instead of remaining unresponsive to her screaming mind. Anything but helpless. Anything but powerless.

“Det er utrolig!”

She jumped at the voice beside her, scrambling off the sofa and nearly tripping over the coffee table as the sketchbook tumbled onto the floor once more. She was shocked to see Anders sitting on the
sofa, wide-eyed in bewildered surprise at her outburst of motion, apparently having been seated next to her for a considerable but indeterminable amount of time.

“Sorry! I am sorry! Don’t be scare!” he exclaimed hurriedly, holding one hand out in that placating gesture he seemed to make often and leaning over to retrieve the fallen book. Her eyes darted down to the drawing, dread clouding over her shock as she examined it outside of her frenzied impulse to create it. Her eyes darted between the possibly incriminating erotic sketch and his face, searching for what his reactions could mean as he looked at it. While she could recognize the shape and muscle tone easily as her father’s, it was just his back, but the moaning girl underneath him was undoubtedly her.

“It’s… it’s not… um…” she stammered, still breathing hard from having been surprised. Her hand rubbed from the back of her neck to her chest in stress before she remembered the charcoal on her fingers and she groaned in frustration. “Fuck.”

He was still admiring the drawing, not paying any mind to her consternation as he gestured between her and it. “You?”

Her cheeks burned in mortification, but she nodded. “Uh… yeah. I guess I can’t deny that.”

He pointed to the man, glancing up at her with a mischievous smirk that she had to look away from. “Boyfriend?”

“Fuck…” she groaned again. She nearly covered her eyes with her filthy hands to ward off the stress headache she could feel crowding the front of her skull, but thankfully stopped herself. Her mouth twitched into a humorless grin as she said, “No, I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t think I’m allowed.”

He laughed out loud at that and she stared at him as he said, “På grunn av Leif. Leif is papa bear, yes?”

“Can you… understand me?” she asked, voice hesitant in both hope and anxiety.

Her heart raced as he nodded and shrugged, taking a moment to think before he said, “I speak… a little. Understand, ah… okay.”

Her mind raced as she tried to remember if she’d said anything problematic to him while under the impression that he couldn’t understand English. Her head absently turned to the side and she found herself walking toward the writing desk in the corner, brain searching out any kind of distraction from the stressful scenario but only finding it piled high with junk mail.

“One moment!” he announced, but she didn’t want to acknowledge him as she pressed charcoal fingerprints into the envelopes she nervously rifled through. Credit card offer, bank statement, coupon book, cable bill, real estate offer, all too late to catch Einar Valstad before his exit. At the bottom of the stacks, however, she uncovered a photograph of a much younger Einar and a short thin man, each holding an antler of the dead buck being held up between them. She saw much of her father in Einar’s sharp cheekbones, hooded eyes, and strong jawline. Careful not to smudge the photo, she picked it up and examined him closer. She could scarcely recall her grandfather, but now she could remember the robust and tall Norwegian with the gameshow host grin and easy humor of a man who won people over for a living. She remembered liking him, at least, especially for the endless supply of popsicles he had offered her despite her mother’s disapproval. A little guilt tugged at her for not mourning him as much as she should, considering she’d been in his house and surrounded by what remained of his life for the nearly a whole week.

“Pappa and Bjørn,” Anders said from behind her.
She didn’t jump this time, apparently becoming accustomed to him sneaking up on her, but she did freeze as he pressed a cold and wet hand towel to her neck. The warning bells were loud in her head, but she let him turn her with one steadying hand on her shoulder as he cleaned the charcoal and her makeup along with it from her neck in small, circular wipes of the towel. Memories of her waking nightmare from earlier replayed in her mind as he held her shoulder tighter, but this Anders would surely let her go if she moved away. This Anders was sweet and kind and nothing like her father. She struggled to maintain calm, slow breaths as she forced herself to allow him to clean her off and see the bruises she hid, reminding herself that he’d seen them before and apparently had thought nothing of them. But as he cleaned off more of her neck, she could see concern forming in the furrow of his brow. Her heart skipped a beat as she considered the possibility that maybe he just hadn’t gotten a close enough look before.

“Simone…” he said, his tone quiet and more serious than she’d heard him yet. His eyes seemed unable to tear away from the clearly finger-shaped bruises that spanned her neck and she could feel panic rising in her. “Faen… What…?”

This was her opportunity to either cover for her father or reach out for help and she was surprised to find herself stuck with not knowing which to choose. She knew that she should say something, anything, even just her father’s name but her throat felt paralyzed. Suddenly, being confronted with an escape from the horror and pain terrified her. She deserved what was happening to her, had even wanted it at times. The drawing on the coffee table alone proved that she was just as sick as her father. Anders’ worried eyes lifted to her terrified ones and she could practically see her freedom in the open sky blue of them. Pushing all apprehension down, she rode the impulse to grab the hand that was holding her shoulder and opened his palm over her throat. She stared into his confused face as she pressed his hand to encircle her neck, the calloused and warm fingers rough against her sensitive flesh, and prayed for him to understand. A long moment stretched between them in tense silence as a flush bloomed up from his chest to his cheeks. He pursed his lips, brow furrowing further as his throat bobbed in a nervous swallow and his fingers flexed hesitantly on her neck. She could feel her jugular nudging against the pad of his thumb with her pounding heartbeat as she waited.

“Er dette det du trenger?” he whispered, seemingly unable to look her in the eye as he spoke. She moved her hand from his, but he didn’t remove his loose hold on her neck. She tried not to let the claustrophobic feeling scare her off, needing him so badly to understand what she couldn’t say with her paralyzed voice, so she tipped her chin up and looked at him with all the confidence she could muster. She couldn’t do this without also biting her lip to keep it from quivering and she watched his unsure stare latch onto the habit. His tongue darted out to lick his lips before he looked away and nervously chuckled out, “Hva gjør vi? Dette er sinnsyk!”

“Please!” she managed to whisper, her desperation spilling into the plea.

He looked back to her face and she thought that maybe he finally got it in the solemn way he stared at her for a moment, an almost conflicted frown crossing his features before he sighed deeply. Her hope rose in that moment as he bowed his head, certain he understood that she was showing him evidence of the abuse his own brother was guilty of. Her hope crashed into confusion when his hand tightened more firmly around her neck.

“It’s okay?” he asked as he lightly squeezed her. She barely heard the question, blinking in complete bafflement at what was happening until she realized that he hadn’t gotten it at all. It was his unsure and uncomfortable expression, worriedly glancing between his hold on her neck and her face, that told her he thought she was trying to tell him to choke her. An odd feeling gripped her as she considered how this chronically helpful, well-meaning but perhaps dimwitted man would go so far as to try to choke her if she would ask him of it.
“How the fuck…” she muttered, staring up in utter disbelief at the blonde man. “… are you this kind?”

He smiled a bit embarrassedly, his grip wilting from her neck along with his gaze. He let out a short breathy chuckle and murmured, “Sorry… not good?”

She identified that odd feeling in her as frustration just as it rapidly boiled over the hopelessness in her situation. She began to believe he would never see his brother’s madness past hers even as she bared such condemning evidence to him. She thought of perhaps showing him the photo of her lying tied up and gagged on the floor with blood and semen leaking out of her cunt, but spitefully doubted he would see it as anything but a mad game that a mad girl would play. That anger in her brought her hands up to force his grip around her neck once more, this time crushing his fingers around her neck. He looked back to her in confused shock but his unassuming, compassionate eyes only made her angrier.

She bared her teeth as her words came out in a harsh whisper, unfiltered through her desperate fury, “Not good. You’re not good. I know the same awful, wicked thing is in all of you and I am sick of waiting for you to show me yours. Just do it! It’ll be easier this way!”

That tempting, hot anger filled her as he blinked at her and bit his lip while he squeezed her neck harder, but not nearly hard enough. He looked as though it hurt him to do this to her and she felt some strange satisfaction in the nearly painful conflict of his thoughts playing out in his deeply furrowed brow and frightened eyes. A funny thought pulled the corners of her mouth into a queer grin as her mind supplied something her psychologist once told her about how victims would often repeatedly attempt to recreate their trauma. The thought of this kind, compassionate man imitating the brutal things her father had done to her as laughable even as she was certain that same cruelty lied in him somewhere. She actually wanted to draw it out of him. She felt as though something slithered in her brain as that anger drained out of her, leaving an entranced calmness in its wake as her hands slid off his grip. She watched his baffled eyes follow her fingers as they gave a reassuring caress to his wrist.

“Anders,” she whispered, voice as gentle and pleading as a prayer. His eyes met hers, fearful blue locked on imploring gray. “Please.”

“Jeg burde ikke gjøre dette…” he muttered, his grip easing slightly. She lifted her hands and gently cupped the sides of his face, her small thumbs caressing his cheekbones in the same comforting gesture her father would occasionally bestow on her when he wanted something.

She could hear Leif’s voice speak through her own as she softly whispered, “Please, just a little bit. I need you to do this for me, Anders. Please?”

His troubled brow smoothed as she stroked his cheeks and he inhaled deeply before slowly and shakily sighing. He closed his eyes for a moment, then she gasped softly before her airway was restricted in his stronger grasp. The uncertainty etched into his features blurred as her vision quickly deteriorated, but she kept her gaze locked onto his reassuringly. Her head swam in a strange pleasant fog, something comforting and thrilling all at once in the building pressure.

“You okay?” she heard him ask, the sound muffled and distant.

Unable to easily speak, she gave a short nod and slid her hands into his hair, affectionately running her fingers through the sleek light blonde strands. She wasn’t sure where this courage to be so forward had come from. A dire pang stirred in her as she supposed that it had come from the same madness that had compelled her to make her uncle choke her. But at least this was something she had asked for. Something she had the power to ask for. To take. A wry smile parted her lips before they
opened in a silent gasp at the pulling sensation in her diaphragm, her chest burning for air. He let go of her neck quickly and she gasped emphatically to fill her lungs, her hands slipping down to grip his shirt as she leaned against him while the room spun around her. His arms wrapped around her in a steadying hug and she could somewhat hear him asking her something she couldn’t make out, so she just clung to him and nodded as she panted. The endorphins and dopamine that flooded her system from the near-death simulation of being choked so well felt as good as any drug she’d done, but riding underneath that organic reaction was something darker. As she pressed into Anders’ comforting embrace, she felt what she supposed her father must have sometimes felt after he took from her unwilling body: a sense of control.

Leif carefully wrapped the fresh sprigs of thyme around a bay leaf and tied the bundle together in cooking twine before dropping it into the vegetables simmering in white wine. He checked to make sure the onions caramelizing in butter weren’t burning in the pan next to it, then turned the heat off the pot of boiling rice and salt.

“Drain that rice in a minute, Henrik,” he told the broad man who was wringing the moisture out of the mushrooms at the breakfast bar counter.

“Yes, chef!” Henrik barked sarcastically.

“You find the food processor yet?” Leif called to Vidar.

“Found it. In the process of excavating it from this fucking mountain of shit,” Vidar called out from the pantry closet. On cue, a loud metallic clang and a string of cuss words could be heard from within the pantry immediately afterward. Leif sighed heavily, moving to rinse his hands in the sink before grabbing a kitchen rag and walking out of the kitchen.

“I’ll be back in a minute. Just make sure nothing burns,” he said before stepping into the hallway. He caught Henrik flipping him off but decided not to quip back at the man as he made his way toward the front of the house. It had been at least twenty minutes since he had sent Anders to check on his girl, a move which was met by somewhat confused stares from the other two brothers, and he figured he’d allowed enough time by now for something to have happened. On silent feet, he crept past the archway to the living room, finding the leather furniture empty of any occupants. Then the sound of Anders’ voice whispered from the room ahead. As Leif moved closer to the entryway of the parlor, his sensitive hearing picked up the frantic pace in his brother’s usually upbeat cadence.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, oh fuck! That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? That was what you were asking for, I thought… I thought… God, I’m such an idiot! Why the fuck would you want that?” Anders muttered, nearly incoherent even in his native tongue.

Leif peered around the corner of the wood carved molded archway, seeing a frightened Anders holding up a gasping Simone. He held back the impulse to run over and see what was wrong with his daughter, suppressing the need to protect and secure his offspring for the sake of morbid curiosity at his brother’s words and predicament. He watched as Anders pet her hair in an attempt to soothe her, the troubled crease in his brow and posture not easing even as she reached up and pressed her hand to his cheek.

Her voice was a raspy whisper that Leif had difficulty picking up, but he was able to hear her say, “Thank you, Uncle Anders.”
“God, just tell me I didn’t fuck you up any worse. Why did I fucking do that…?” he rambled, his breathing ragged in panic. Leif watched as her head lifted weakly from Anders’ chest but her back was turned to him so he couldn’t see her face. What he could see was Anders’ expression turn from frenzied to guilty as he looked down at the girl, her hand smoothing his hair in an intimate gesture that twisted Leif’s lip into a sneer. She let her hand drag down the back of his neck as she stood on tiptoe to press a kiss to his cheek, but the gesture did nothing to alleviate his guilt. Leif hid behind the wall when she turned and began walking toward the archway, but didn’t move away from it when he heard only her set of footsteps approaching. Once she turned the corner into the hallway, he slapped his hand over her mouth the staunch her gasp of surprise and gathered her in a harsh hold as he dragged her. She didn’t try to resist him as he brought them into the bathroom, shoving her against the door and locking it before letting go of her mouth.

“Mind explaining what was happening in there, darling?” he whispered with all the calm he could will into his tone. He hadn’t expected to feel as enraged as he did, his jealousy begging to overtake his control and thrash the man for daring to touch what was his, but he needed to secure his girl. She watched him with a strange, manic glint in her eye behind the predictable fear, something sharp and feral lurking in her dread.

She licked her lips slowly in consideration before whispering, “Uncle Anders really admires you, Dad.”

“Speak plainly, Simone,” he demanded firmly. He grabbed her chin and forced her to face him, her lip drawing back in a small snarl that caught him by surprise but he chose to let it go when she quickly corrected it. “We can’t have you start talking in riddles again or I’ll put you back on lithium. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

“No, Papa,” she answered quickly. She glanced away, biting her lips for a moment before saying, “Um… I was about to go into a panic attack and Uncle Anders helped me out of it. Nothing was happening. I just… freaked him out, I guess.”

Leif stared at his daughter as she glanced around nervously. Her timid nature made it difficult to detect when her nervousness was due to fear in general or fear of something specific, but he could tell that she was hiding something. He knew he would have better luck getting it out of Anders at this point with how unhinged she seemed.

“Simone, go freshen up and put on a nice dress for dinner,” he said warmly, pulling her away from the door to open it. He smiled at her owl-eyed stare and kissed the top of her head before he walked out of the bathroom, his steps growing heavier as he headed back towards the parlor. He rolled his shoulders and composed himself before turning the corner into the room, finding Anders worriedly pacing while gnawing on his knuckle.

"There you are," Leif announced. Anders froze except to look at him with terror in his face. "Come back to the kitchen, we could use your help."

Henrik had thankfully strained the rice in time and had taken the initiative to stir it into the onions and transfer it to a casserole dish into the oven. Vidar, however, seemed too cautious with sautéing the mushrooms and Leif quickly shooed him out of the way to increase the heat.

"Just add the cream and stir until the mushrooms absorb it," he told Vidar, handing him a wooden spoon and clapping a hand on Anders’ shoulder when he drifted into the kitchen. The young man jumped at the contact and Leif resisted the urge to crush the flesh under his grip as he said, "You can help make the sauce. I just need you to keep whisking while I add the ingredients."

“Yeah, you got it,” Anders said, giving a weak smile and letting Leif lead him to the stove. Leif kept
his stare focused on his face as he placed a heavy saucepan on the lit burner in front of him, receiving a small joy in the discomfort of his youngest brother as Anders timidly looked to the side to avoid his eyes.

He cut butter into the hot pan as he said, “You know, I couldn’t help but notice you’ve developed quite a connection with my Simone.”

“I’m going out for a cig,” Henrik announced as he headed towards the backdoor.

“Can I join him, chef?” Vidar asked quickly.

“Once the mushrooms have absorbed the milk, you can do whatever the fuck you want,” Leif said firmly, handing Anders a whisk before retrieving the bag of flour. While Anders nervously stirred the melted butter, Leif dusted the flour into the pot and continued saying, “I suppose it’s not so surprising. You’re only ten years older than her. That’s even less than the distance in age between you and I, now that I think about it. So, as her peer, you must have a very different perspective on my Simone. Tell me, if you would be so open, how do you see my little girl?”

Anders swallowed, staring into the pot as he kept the same rigid rhythm with the whisk, and shrugged before saying, “She’s... She’s very... creative. Warm. Um, I don’t know. I like her.”

“I know you like her. You like her a lot. She likes you too,” Leif said, smiling mildly. He turned and pointed at a staring Vidar, nearly shouting, “Keep your fucking EYES on those mushrooms!” Both brothers flinched at Leif’s sudden outburst, turning their full attention to their pans with tensely level expressions and stiff shoulders. Leif continued speaking in his casual tone, “She’s a very loving girl, but maybe a bit too loving. Her mental illness can sort of... dissolve the usual boundaries one needs to function socially. Leaves her very, very vulnerable when she’s not so clear on right and wrong. I’ve had to be careful on maintaining boundaries with her because it can be so easy to do the wrong things.” He paused, leaning closer to his youngest brother, and asked, “Have you done any wrong things with Simone, Anders?”

Anders pursed his lips, inhaling deeply through his nose before sighing and then stammering, “I, um, I don’t know if I would really, uh, know if I... if we were doing anything...”

Both Vidar and Anders tensed as Leif poured the veal drippings into the saucepan. He smiled at them as he then poured in the milk, eying it until he’d added about the right amount and then putting the carton in the fridge.

As he turned back and leaned against the counter next to Anders, he grinned, “Come on, Andy, you can be honest. She’s sexy, she lets you do whatever you want, and you’re not made of stone. What did you do to my daughter? Don’t lie to me this time.”

“Can I ask you something first?” Anders hesitantly requested.

“Go ahead,” Leif offered.

“Do you...” Anders began, then frowned. He took a breath and began again, “Does she ever, um... ask you to do anything... painful to her?”

For a long moment, the only sound was the whisk scraping the bottom of the saucepan as all three men stood silent. Then Vidar turned off his burner and quickly walked out the backdoor without looking at either of them, leaving them alone in the kitchen. When the backdoor slammed shut, Leif reduced the heat on the saucepan and pulled Anders away gently by his shoulder.

He turned him until they faced each other in the center of the cooking area and calmly said in a low
voice, “Listen. You’re my brother, so I’m going to do you a favor and not sock you in the eye this very second. That means I need to make myself very clear and if I feel that I haven’t made myself clear enough, then I’ll have to convince you by other methods. Remember when I said that I would do anything for my child?”

“I remember,” Anders nodded. “That’s why I wanted to-“

Leif stopped him before he could continue. “She’s mentally ill but she still has a right to privacy, so I’m not going to answer your question. I also hope you’ll respect her privacy by not divulging any this to anyone. What did she ask you to do?”

Anders blinked rapidly, his hand roughly running through his hair as he said, “Nothing! Nothing… I saw the bruises on her neck and figured… because I don’t think you would do that kind of thing unless she wanted you to… But I don’t know why she would want you to choke her or-or why you would ever do that? Could you tell me why? I’m sorry. Am I making any sense?”

Leif listened to him ramble with increasing dread and amazement. Dread that Anders knew, without question, that Leif had given Simone those bruises and amazement that his faith in him as a good father went so far as to not consider that it had been abuse. The mental gymnastics Anders was capable of frankly stunned Leif. As he surreptitiously looked around to ensure the windows to the backyard were shut, Leif considered his options for a moment. He could leave things as ambiguous as they’ve been, he could cover up the truth with a palatable lie, or he could fly even closer to the sun. Looking at the well-meaning younger man before him with a heavy stare, he knew what the most interesting option was.

“There are some needs that, as her father, I can’t quite fulfill for Simone… But that doesn’t mean I can’t do anything to help relieve those needs,” he began carefully with a slowness meant to impart double meaning. He waited for Anders to register that meaning in the slight tick of his brow before continuing, “I would do anything for my girl. If that means I must do some things that seem unacceptable to keep her from looking for it in men that could take advantage of her, then I am going to do whatever it takes to keep her safe. I hope you never have to go through that, but I’m sure you would do nothing less to care for your child.”

It took him a minute, but Anders’ confused expression slowly melted into a heavy and disturbed comprehension and then outright appalling. Leaving his brother to grasp the implications but have to imagine the details, Leif turned back to the saucepan and resumed whisking the liquid until it gained the proper viscosity.
Chapter 17

Within the next hour, the tense silence in the kitchen slowly progressed back to their usual boisterous chatter and agitation. Halfway through the process, Vidar had pulled out a bottle of scotch he’d found in the back of the pantry to speed along the recovery of their jovial mood. By the time Leif had pulled the dish from the oven, they were quite a way through the bottle and arguing about something none of them would concede on. Simone hovered near the doorway listening to all of this, her neck and shoulders bare but her bruises once more hidden under paint and powder. The bite mark was impossible to disguise, so she had done what she could to mask the bruises and simply left the punctures alone. It was obvious enough to her now that his brothers would never connect the two crescent rows of healing flesh to the man responsible. She had draped a wide gold collar necklace around her neck that hung low enough to cover about half of it, the cold metal rubbing painfully on the still sensitive wound. She once wore the off the shoulder lace dress to a wedding of her mother’s coworker, her mother having made a comment about how the color nearly blended into her skin and thus made her put on a cardigan. That cardigan was still in the laundry hamper covered in the stains her father had wiped off her legs after fucking her against the wall she currently leaned on, so she stood only in her lacey false nudity and gold. It didn’t matter. She could be wearing a full suit of armor and still feel naked under it.

She was pulled out of her bitter introspection by the kitchen door opening and spilling light into the dark hallway, the tall and broad silhouette of the bearlike Henrik trudging out of it. She looked up at him, unable to see his face through the shadows, her gray eyes catching the light before he shut the door behind him and stepped toward her. Apprehension slithered up the back of her skull when he took her hand, the scent of scotch heavy around him and filling her with the memory of her first taste of her father. Shameful heat poured into her at that, rattling her already shaky hold on reality at that moment. So, when Henrik tugged on her hand to follow, her bare feet began padded close behind him before she could consider why.

“Ssh, ssh,” he giggled, finger pressed close to his grinning lips as he pulled her into the dimly lit living room. He leaned close to her in clandestine excitement, the warmth of his excessive body heat brushing her bare shoulder in a way that made her tense, and whispered, “Don’t tell Leif!”

Simone looked to the side, a glint of light off a reflective surface having caught her eye as Henrik pulled her to sit in an overstuffed armchair. There, on the table next to the chair, was a short letter opener. As her uncle rifled through one of the heavy wooden bookshelves, she picked it up and examined the blade. A strange sensation fogged her mind as she ran her thumb over the surprisingly sharp edge of it and the pain brought her odd comfort. Henrik brought over a thick book and gingerly plopped it into her lap, a suppressed snicker escaping through his nose as she opened it to find it to be a photo album. The first photo was of a young Einar standing with his arm slung around the thin shoulders of a tall gangly boy and the short thin man she now knew to be Bjørn standing off to the side, the yellow leaves of autumn on the ground around them and the Vermont house in the background.

Henrik pointed a thick finger at the boy, whispering, “Det er Leif!”

“Oh…” she breathed, eyebrows raising in surprise as recognition clicked in the wide plains of the boy’s cheekbones and hooded gray eyes. He looked so much softer and smoother, still possessing the rounded edges of childhood with a thin chin and oversized ears. She flipped through the pages, watching the effects of time turn that scrawny boy into something sharper and stronger, something a little closer to the monster she knew. It was disconcerting to see evidence that he had once been a regular kid with squinting grins and awkward postures. Henrik pointed to a picture of Leif standing
on a broad tree stump with three other blonde boys.

“Me,” he said, pointing to the short chubby boy, then, “Vidar,” the sneering one with thick glasses, and “Anders,” the one who couldn’t have been older than four and staring at the camera with a gaping mouth. Leif towered over them all, just a couple years older than Henrik but before the chubby boy’s apparently overenthusiastic growth spurt. She stared at each of them, fascinated at the way their babyish features had developed into the men they would become.

“Was Dad always tall?” she asked.

He laughed. “Ja, tall. I am more tall, haha! He needs careful.”

His hot hand squeezed her shoulder in a friendly gesture, but the cold metal of the blade pressing against her palm kept her calm enough not to flinch. She took a steadying breath and turned through the pages of rowdy boys running through woods and piled on top of each other in a more hideously decorated house. She stopped when she came to a picture of Leif standing in front of MIT, holding up his acceptance letter and looking quite a bit more filled out than the scrawny boy he’d been through high school. So close to her age but looking so much younger than she could have imagined still. This was the bright and ambitious boy her mother had fallen in love with only to fall out of love once he would become an intimidating and strong man. Her finger lightly traced over his open smile, closely examining the teeth that would sink into her skin a little more than twenty years from then. The same just slightly crooked sharpness. Unconsciously, she ran her tongue over her front teeth as her feral mind wanted to lick into her father’s mouth and tempt that bite. The impulse both shocked her and stoked that insistent heat in her abdomen and hips.

“Kom til kveldsmat!” Vidar’s voice called from the dining room. She reflexively shut the book, Henrik taking it from her lap and helping her up with a wide mischievous grin on his face.

“That was fun, ja?” he smiled to her as he led them back down the dark hallway.

“Ja,” she parroted back absently, feeling almost as though she’d seen a ghost.

Even with his back to the door, Leif could tell when Simone entered the dining room by Anders’ expression changing from the easy grin of a drunken stupor to the shy smile and glittering gaze of adoration as he fixed his stare on the girl. It would irritate Leif more if it weren’t so amusing to see how pathetically fond he had become of his niece in so short a time. However, when he turned to assess his daughter, he had to once again question exactly what flavor of adoration Anders held for her as he stared at her in that very fetching tight and short dress.

Henrik pushed her forward into the room, his large hand hooked around the side of her small waist as he announced, “I brought the meat! Let’s eat!”

She shrank under the stares of the men, shoulders drawing inward and arms folding uncomfortably as Vidar leered from his chair, “Not a lot on her, but just enough where it counts.”

“You’re a fucking creep, Vid,” Anders said, rising from his seat and walking around the table toward her. Leif watched intently at their interaction, seeing her eyes widen in uncertain apprehension as Anders walked toward her with placating open palms as though he were approaching a nervous dog. She remained very stiff until he gently touched her arm and smiled at her, at which point her whole demeanor changed and she stepped to him eagerly. Leif pushed aside his twinge of jealousy as she
wrapped an arm around Anders’ middle and he walked her to the table with a hand on her bare shoulder.

They were far too friendly with one another for Leif’s tastes and he was a little glad when Vidar groused, “I can’t get a damn word out of her and fucking Anders of all people has her on his dick like he’s Bill Gates at a strip club.”

“You should try treating her like a person,” Anders quipped coolly.

“She’s not a person. She’s my daughter;” Leif corrected him, reaching out and grasping her wrist when she drew near enough. She yelped slightly when he tugged her down onto his lap, her short skirt riding up her thighs dangerously as he held her close to him. She tensed, obviously embarrassed as she tried to pull her skirt back down, but he grabbed her hand away before she could accomplish it and kissed her knuckles teasingly with a mischievous smile.

“Papa…” she grumbled uncomfortably, trying to squirm away from him.

He pressed his lips to the shell of her ear and grinned as she shivered when he whispered, “Sit. Stay. Good girl.” She obeyed, adjusting on his lap until she sat across it more comfortably, and he traced her hip in a wide and slow sweep of his hand appreciatively. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen this dress.”

“Good dress!” Anders grinned as he took a seat directly across from them. Leif glanced up at him sharply, surprised that he’d understood the softly spoken comment, and had to refrain from squeezing her body any more tightly to him. Her shuddering intake of breath as his wandering hand slid down her bare thigh under the table drew both men’s gazes to her while Vidar and Henrik were distracted with dishing out the roast. Leif was endeared to her by the way her hand tightly clung to his vest, the material bunching in her fist and her face hidden in the collar of his dress shirt, then he noticed that his hand had come to wedge between thighs. He chuckled at his drunken absentmindedness, giving her thigh a squeeze that made her choke down a noise in her throat before pulling his hand out. He’d have to be more aware of himself, having gotten used to possessing such free access to her body. He glanced across the table to see Anders staring at her, that goofy grin absent in the presence of slack jawed awe and pinkened flush from his neck to his hairline.

“Just doing what I can,” Leif smirked, shrugging as though it couldn’t be helped. The casual air he put on while drawing attention to the fact that they were both aware of her aroused state was imperative to conditioning Anders that this was all so very normal and yet still private between them. This new gamble on his brother’s gullibility depended on Anders’ ignorance on how to handle hypersexual behavior in mental illness, but ultimately it hinged on his faith that his brother was a good father. When Anders responded with an awkward smile and turned his attention to his plate, Leif was able to relax in his success.

She felt sick. The heat coursing through her body and the arousal tainting her mind with delirium felt like a fever. She hated being so out of control as her father held her on his lap, his erection pressing under her stoking that irritating urge to grind against it. The pantyliner that did what it could to protect her dress from her soaking cunt was a cold comfort to her as she crossed her ankles and squeezed her thighs together in attempts to stem the flow, but the clenching of her muscles only seemed to tease her desire for increased friction. Her mind felt painfully split between wanting to give into lust and obeying what she knew were her actual values and wants, but whenever she felt like she had a decent grip on the basics of her own identity, it was torn away from her in that mind-numbing need to fuck. She hated this. She needed so much more.
“Are you still bleeding, darling girl?” Leif asked.

She swallowed thickly, heart thumping in her throat as she timidly rasped, “I’m not sure… I think it stopped.”

She nearly winced at how pathetic she sounded to her own ears, but he hummed in approval. “Good, good.”

He said something to Vidar and the man placed a plate of the dish in front of them with a brief quip that Leif grinned smugly at. She tried to move off his lap to find her own seat, but he held her fast to him as he scooped up a forkful of the intricately layered roast. His hand squeezing at her waist nearly had her gasping, that ache between her legs throbbing at the pain. He presented the fork in front of her, smiling as her confusion became mortification in realization that he meant to feed it to her.

“Be a good little girl and eat your supper,” he chided her.

She was careful not to meet his intense stare as she reluctantly opened her mouth and accepted the morsel. The humiliating act of being fed unfortunately did not allay her arousal, seeming to only increase it in this opportunity to please the man. She hated herself for letting her lips drag slowly on the stem of the fork as she took in the next offered bite too eagerly, letting her eyes close in a show of trust and appreciation. Despite her deepening self-loathing, she felt a flutter in her heart when Leif pressed an affectionate kiss on her temple as a reward for good behavior. The chaste and patronizing gesture twisted her stomach in a jumble of polarizing emotions. Feeling the pressure of being watched, she turned her head and briefly met Anders’ eyes before he returned his stare to his plate in a jolt at having been caught staring. The fresh memory of his hands reluctantly squeezing at her neck in his breathless panic fed a darker hunger in her. She wanted to make him go further. Her father drew her attention back to her debasement by pressing the end of the empty fork to her cheek until she turned and faced him.

“Eyes on me, kiddo,” he warned, then smiled warmly. “Do you like the dish?”

She didn’t even recall the taste in her distraction and embarrassment, but nodded. “What is it?”

“Veal. A meat prized and vilified for the young age at which the animal is slaughtered,” he answered. He scooped up another forkful and held it to her. She tried not to frown as she accepted it into her mouth, this time paying attention to the rich assemblage of mushrooms, meat and onion in the creamy sauce. Her jaw tensed as she forced herself to swallow and watch him take a bite of the meat himself.

“You obviously don’t vilify it,” she stated.

“I view it as an act of mercy toward an animal bound for the slaughter anyway,” he responded. He locked his eyes with her as he fed her another bite. “Why should a few miserable years be significant when their destiny is the same?”

She chewed thoughtfully, weighing the double meaning of the topic, before forcing the rich food down her throat and saying, “Mom never let me eat veal. She thought it was unethical.”

“You view it as an act of mercy toward an animal bound for the slaughter anyway,” he responded. He locked his eyes with her as he fed her another bite. “Why should a few miserable years be significant when their destiny is the same?”

A bitter coil pulled at her self-hatred as she quietly said, “I believe what you want me to believe.”

He stared at her face for a long, silent moment after she’d said that. She worried that she somehow had offended him, that he was considering how to punish her for some unknown transgression and
her stomach tightened until her appetite had been replaced with dread. She nearly flinched in fear when he grabbed her chin and tilted her face. Her eyes widened when she tasted the scotch still heavy in his mouth as he pressed a sudden and intense kiss to her, the electric shock of unexpected pleasure stifled by the dreadful awareness of their audience. The kiss only lasted perhaps two seconds, a move reminiscent of those just slightly too-long kisses he used to bestow on her before she had come to know the full extent of his attraction, but the heat of it had dragged a small moan from her and heated her face in a fierce blush of arousal and humiliation. But the dinner conversation continued uninterrupted between Henrik and Vidar’s aggravated tones and her father pulled away from her with a nonchalance that made her wonder if she had only imagined the impropriety. Only the distinct silence across from them drew her attention away from her doubt and she glanced to see Anders once more staring at her, something in his face like worry and curiosity.

“Er du okay?” Leif asked him. Anders kept staring at her, his fork forgotten in his hand as he held it above his plate, and she felt strangely shy under his intense blue eyes. Something was different in the way he was looking at her. That distant hope and dread that he might know the truth tickled in her once more, but there was something off about how he watched her. Something that drew her wonder.

At last, he blinked and snapped out of his reverie, glancing up at his brother and muttering, “Beklager. Jeg tror jeg er full.”

Leif excused himself from the table while his brothers were still eating, either the scotch having slowed them down or his own eagerness to retreat to seclusion with Simone expediting his eating. He noted with amusement and irritation at how Anders had watched him leave with the girl, noting the suspicious quirk in the younger man’s brow as his stare had lingered on where Leif’s hand had clung to her waist. He could see the confrontation approaching, knowing that Anders couldn’t seem to keep his eyes off her all throughout dinner and practically broadcasting his interest in her rather obvious need. Leif smirked as he thought on how his brother had resembled a dog catching the scent of a bitch in heat, all perked ears and pinpointed concentration. He had begun to doubt Anders was even aware of his own reactions in how blatantly he had been staring until Henrik had made a crass remark on it. As he pulled his daughter by her trembling hand up the stairs toward their bedroom, he tried to think of what lie he would craft to counter Anders’ approaching interrogation once his imagination had supplied enough condemning details on exactly how he relieved her. His inability to think of any solution past outright admitting to fucking her just to see the shock on his face spoke to him of his own level of intoxication. His stumbling up the steps confirmed that inkling.

“Papa, are you alright?” Simone asked, voice high in worry as she knelt next to his crouching form on the steps. He laughed at both how drunk he was and how sweet she still somehow managed to turn out despite his torture, a pang of stray guilt stabbing through his jovial haze at the reminder of all he had done to her. That guilt grew heavier as she pulled his arm over her shoulders, her small body struggling to help him up as she whispered encouragement to him. She was too warm and caring, too easy to love. He resented how those pieces of her had brought out the worst in him; the need to take when she was so giving and the need to corrupt her loving nature too tempting for him to have hoped to resist. He was overcome with the need to explain to her that he still loved her, that she was the most important part of his world, that he was sorry she had the rotten luck to end up with a man like him as her father.

Instead, when he opened his mouth, what came out was, “We don’t have to fuck tonight if you’re too sore, darling.”
He winced at his own tactless crass, at his complete failure to be kind to her for one unguarded moment, but she looked up at him in surprise and whispered, “Oh! I... um... thank you. I’m just a little scared of bleeding... again.”

The sheer gratefulness in her tone only made his guilt heavier. As he flicked on the desk lamp and sat on the edge of their bed, he helped her wriggle out of her tight dress, his hands lingering on her soft skin appreciatively. While there was a guarded hesitance in her movement and she avoided meeting his stare, she allowed him to touch her without shying away and he kept his hands gentle as they caressed her bare torso and thighs. He knew he shouldn’t be this kind to her, at least not until he’d instilled complete fear into her, but alcohol made him sentimental.

“You know I love you, Simone. That’s never changed and never will change,” he whispered, trying not to slur. She looked at him then, such fearful tenderness on her face, just waiting for the painful sting that usually accompanied his kindness. Looking at her standing there next to the bed in nothing but her panties and jewelry, her almond skin glowing in the dim lighting of the room and light eyes glittering with apprehension, he couldn’t deny that he wanted to sting her. He let that fleeting weakness in him recede as he said, “You’ve been separating from reality more often lately. Tell me what visions have tangled themselves to your madness.”

The purse of her lips and wringing of her hands told him that she was afraid of telling him, leading him to smile and say, “I won’t hold them against you, dearest. I just want your honesty. They have no consequence in reality, no matter how vivid, and you don’t have to worry about me bringing consequence here for them.”

She crossed her arms over her bare chest, her face turning away from him to look at nothing as her jaw clenched in consideration until she finally said, “I’ve been... seeing a lot more recently. I, um... don’t really remember but... I’ve been feeling things that don’t belong to me. That’s new and that’s, um... that really has me worried. I think I should see someone about it.”

“Perhaps,” Leif remarked, though he had no such intention of ever allowing her to do that. He drew her closer to stand between his spread knees, his mouth being drawn to feel her navel. He felt her abdominal muscles tense under the feather light touch of his lips dragging across her skin. “What are these feelings that aren’t yours?”

She frowned, her hands rubbing her upper arms as she seemed to search for the words. “That’s... difficult to say. Uh. Mostly anger. It comes and goes.”

As he spoke, he gently unfolded her arms and placed them over his shoulders. “Anger is very informative. It can lead us to parts of our lives that we may be trying to neglect. It’s also a very natural part of transition to experience emotional confusion. You don’t need to worry; I’ll always be there to guide you back to what’s real.”

Her hands grasped his shoulders and she drew in a sharp breath as he took her left nipple into his mouth and caressed her back as he drew her closer.

Unexpectedly, she asked, “How did you meet mom?”

He glanced up at her, seeing her eyes shut and mouth slack in the pleasure his touch was giving her, and didn’t move his mouth away from her skin as he spoke against her breast, “We met while we were both studying abroad in France. We were very different people back then.”

“I know,” she responded strangely. She gasped lightly as he pressed slow, wet kisses across her breasts and chest while he loosened his tie and unbuttoned his vest and shirt. He stood as he slid them from his shoulders and let them fall to the floor, keeping himself bent to suck on the side of her
neck and wrap his arms around her bare body. Her softness never seemed to stop being so remarkable to him as he ran his hands over her greedily, her taste and sighs at once familiar and still forbidden. He might have lied when he had offered to spare her his sex. A sudden bout of vertigo hit him hard, the reminder of the scotch he’d drunken to excess forcing him back onto the bed and he pulled her down with him. As he held her to him, stretching them both out on top of the bedding, he kissed her mouth and found her hungrily returning it with a moan.

“You’re shaking, Simone,” he breathed against her parted lips before delving his tongue back between them. She mewled as he gripped her thighs and spread apart them over his lower abdomen, his hands sliding up and kneading a tight squeeze on her ass that had her break the kiss to draw in a ragged gasp. Her soft, warm body writhed on top of him as the room spun around them. His sweet Simone ran her hands over his chest, her gentle touch soothing him into such a relaxed state that he let her hands wander as they wanted. He wasn’t aware of when he passed out.

She tried not to flinch when she heard the kitchen door open behind her, willing herself to swallow her gasp and simply breathe out slowly and calmly. The house had been dark and empty by the time she’d emerged from her shower, her nervous and possibly manic energy not allowing her to sleep even if she could bring herself to go back into the room that held her passed out father. Unfortunately, this had reduced her to stalking about in the dark and cold night clad only in a towel. After trying and failing to calm herself with any of the books lining the shelves in the living room, she had padded into the kitchen to attempt a warm soy milk solution. She’d been halfway through the glass of heated milk and honey, glaring angrily at her reflection in the window and resenting her vagina’s existence when she was interrupted. She kept her stare on the glass to see Anders step through the door, his surprise at finding her there rivaling her own. Her lips pursed in nervousness at being alone in a room with him again, memories from earlier threatening her shaky composure, so she swallowed them down and carefully avoided remembering. She watched him in the reflection of the glass as he wavered in the doorway, his eyes wide in surprise at finding his niece wearing only a towel in the kitchen at god knows what hour of the night. She watched, a curl of fear twisting in her gut, as his eyes lingered on various parts of her from behind.

“Good evening,” he whispered in the silence of the kitchen.

She gripped the towel around her tighter before turning and attempting a smile. “Hey, Uncle Anders.”

He smiled back and walked across the dated linoleum, empty glass in hand, and she moved to step to the side as he approached the sink. He put his hand on her shoulder to stop her from stepping away as he filled his glass from the faucet, the warmth of his gentle grip on her cold bare skin nearly burning and making her far too aware of her complete nudity beneath the blue terrycloth. She squirmed subtly to wrap it more tightly around her as that insistent heat in her spread to tingle in her breasts and bloom a pink blush high on her cheeks.

“Good dress,” he joked, a mischievous sparkle in his eye as he drank deeply from his glass to cover his self-amused grin.

“Uh huh…” she murmured, letting her sour mood show in her flat tone as she looked away from him. She regretted taking out her frustration on him, knowing he wasn’t the cause of her sexual perversion. However, as he stood close enough for her to feel his heat rolling off him in tempting waves, the appealing shape of his fit body outlined clearly by the way his thin nightclothes clung to him, she couldn’t deny that he was currently contributing to her frustration. She sighed heavily as she
considered how the concept of incest had been distasteful to her just a week ago, yet here she stood getting wet over own father and now her uncle. Considering everything that’s happened, though, she found it difficult to care about societal propriety at that point. It was difficult to consider cultural norms when she was struggling to hold her reality together. She was brought out of her self-pitying introspection by Anders setting his glass down on the counter and turning to her.

He put his hands on her upper arms and bent down to her eye level, a concerned look on his face as he asked, “You okay? Not sleep?”

“Not okay. Not sleep,” she frowned, trying to scrub the apprehension from her face at his touch by rubbing the heel of her palm against her forehead. She reminded herself that she had no reason to be afraid of him. He was nothing like her father. A wicked thought followed that one, suggesting that she wouldn’t mind if he were just a little like him tonight. Enough to scratch that incessant itch inside her. She bit her lip as that warmth in the cradle of her pelvis throbbed at his nearness, the scent of scotch and man bringing back memories of the first night with her father. The memory made her feel so weak and stupid now, knowing how it was certainly far from the actual first time with that man. To her horrified embarrassment, tears pricked at the corner of her eyes and alerted Anders to her emotional distress.

“Åh, gråt ikke, kjære!” he said warmly, pulling her to him in a hug. She stood stiffly as his arms wrapped around her, his chest feeling almost too warm through the thin material of his white t-shirt. That need in her throbbed as he pressed her firmly to him, her frustration boiling over her pitiful teary-eyed state.

“I-It’s fine, Uncle Anders, I’m just tired!” she stammered, trying to step away from him but he clung to her. One of his hands pressed her head to rest against his chest and began petting her hair as his other was wrapped around her and stroking the exposed skin of her upper back. All the while, he cooed soothing words to her in Norwegian, the foreign endearments doing little to soothe her rising apprehension at the arousal he was unwittingly stirring in her.

“You want, ah… Vil du at jeg skal varme deg?” he asked, his voice a little raspy.

“I wish I understood you,” she murmured, nuzzling her cheek against his chest. His hands began to rub over her shoulders in slow, firm caresses, and she decided to let this happen. Whatever this was, it felt nice. She felt guilty for having been annoyed with him for not realizing what was happening with her and her father, knowing it wasn’t his fault that he didn’t see it. He’d been so kind to her, oddly kind at a level that made her uncomfortable, but she wanted to let herself accept him. Anders was, for all she could tell, safe in a world she had suddenly found little safety in. While a part of her wanted to indulge in that as much as she could, a darker part of her wanted to prove that his safety only went so far. A self-destructive need to push him until he showed that past that benevolent exterior, he was just as sadistic as her father.

Wanting to reciprocate his kind touch and also push his boundaries, she arched her back to press
against him more firmly as she let her hands slide towards his front and then slowly glide down the sides of his abdomen, down ridges of his pelvic bones, down the sides of his thighs. With her ear against his chest, she listened as his breathing deepened and his heartbeat thumped louder and quicker. A nervous curiosity in how far she could go before he reacted blossomed in her. When her reach was spent, she let her nails lightly drag back up but much more inward. As her thumbs traced the crease between his pelvis and thighs, she finally got him to react when she felt his cock begin to fatten up against her and he flinched his hips backward quickly when he seemed to realize his body’s response. She hid her smirk against his chest as he exhaled nervously, feeling mischievous as she stepped closer to him again. Surprisingly, he grasped her hips and held her a few inches away, that rougher squeeze on her particularly sensitive hips making her breath hitch and a slight moan escape her. She froze immediately at hearing how undeniably erotic she’d sounded and he seemed to have the same reaction, but his hands didn’t move from her tender hips. Her heart thrummed in confusion and want, apprehension and nervous excitement keeping her locked in place as the seconds ticked by with only his noticeably ragged breathing keeping time. Although her muscles felt tight and rigid, she bent her head to look down and saw the evidence of his response clearly outlined in the bulge at the front of his pants. Her mouth felt dry when her throat reflexively swallowed in nervousness.

“Beklager… Sorry… I’m sorry…” he whispered, his voice raspy and slurred from the alcohol.

“It’s okay…” she muttered absently. And it was, she reasoned. This was just a bodily reaction he couldn’t control, the same as the moisture that collected in her cunt and came dangerously close to dripping down her thigh. It was late and he was drunk and she was broken. It didn’t have to mean anything. “Can I touch it?”

“‘Touch’?” he repeated, barely audible in how tight his voice was. He still hadn’t moved away, still hadn’t removed his hold on her hips, still hadn’t stopped her from staring at the protrusion of his erection. She reasoned that was consent enough. Slowly, she reached down between them, her heart rate nearly humming in how quickly and loudly it beat in her ears.

“Vente, vente, vente…” he muttered, suddenly grabbing her wrist as her fingertips brushed his blood-hot hardness. With one hand still squeezing her hip and the other not quite holding her wrist far enough away to stop her from touching him, she felt like he was teasing her. She knew he wasn’t, knew he was just drunk and uncoordinated, but she still felt that curl of resentment twist her thoughts at these mixed signals.

“Please?” she whispered. His hand on her wrist twitched at the plea and she recalled how he’d responded when she begged. That cruel impulse in her swelled at the knowledge that sweet, helpful Anders had a very hard time saying no. “Please, let me touch you a little. I’ll be gentle. I just want to feel you, don’t worry. Please?”

She wanted him to tell her no, to just say he was sorry and drunk and tired and didn’t want her like that. Even still, she felt that sense of control tingle up the back of her mind when he let out a long, ragged sigh and his hand returned to her hip. She pressed her palm to the underside of his cloth-covered cock, her knees feeling weak and her chest aching in the need to pant for breath, but she tried to not appear as terrified as she felt. The aching in her cunt throbbed in animalistic anticipation despite reassuring herself that he wouldn’t possibly let this go that far.

“Leif… ‘touch’ you?” he asked hesitantly.

Her slowly stroking hand twitched at the question, a spike of hope and fear shooting through her veins. Her voice cracked as she whispered, “Yes.”

His hands tightened on her hips, making her breath hitch again and her fingers tense around what she could grab of his cock through his pants. His breath was hot on the back of her neck as he loomed
over her downturned head and asked, “Why?”

“Because…” she whispered, confused by the question. She found herself at a loss for the answer. Because he loved her? Because he wanted her? Because she was his? These were all answers he had supplied her, but didn’t seem appropriate to the question coming from Anders. A bitter coil of self-loathing tugged at her as she said, “Because I need it.”

“‘Need’…” he murmured. His accent was nearly unintelligibly thick and his drunkenness slurried the words, but she could understand him when he whispered, “You need touch now?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“I go get Leif?” he asked.

“No,” she answered quickly.

She winced at his sharp and sudden intake of breath, his cock twitching under her slowly stroking hand as he let out that breath in a trembling sigh while he muttered, “Gud tilgi meg… Okay, kjære. Okay.”

He gently removed her hand from him, intertwining their fingers in a tender gesture that eased her anxiety. She felt guilty for having put him through that stress then, seeing how he was still so kind even after she was so wicked to him. He really was safe. He still held onto her hand, his thumb tracing the inside of her palm soothingly, as he tilted her chin up and she found she was unafraid to meet his warm gaze. Through his drunken haze and uncertainty, he still had that benevolence in his face that made it so tempting to trust him. He smiled at her, just a small uptick of his mouth that she tried to return, and leaned down to press their foreheads together in a sweet familial gesture that drained the tension from her body. The comfort he bestowed on her made her feel as though she might finally be able to sleep soon and she let her eyes fall shut in appreciation of that nice thought.

“Ready, kjære?” he whispered. Her eyes opened, brow furrowing slightly in confusion before she felt his hand slip under the bottom of her towel.
Anders never got hangovers. As he rolled off the sticky leather sofa in the living room, his mouth dry and sour like he’d chewed on a dirty sock and his stomach roiling like he’d swallowed that sock, he reminded himself of that fact. His bare feet couldn’t carry him quick enough down the hallway to reach the toilet, but he managed to deposit roughly one fourth of mostly digested veal Orloff and about ten fingers of scotch in the sink before his body stopped heaving. He rinsed the foul mixture from his tongue with long drags from the faucet and then nearly vomited all that water while gargling mouthwash. Thankfully the gagging only left him coughing his lungs out for a solid five minutes before exhaustion alone eased the reflex. He splashed cold water on his aching face and risked looking at his reflection, almost resentful that he didn’t look as bad as he felt but he still looked roughly half dead. At least it wasn’t a hangover.

As he toweled his face off, he noticed a purplish smudge on his neck. He leaned closer to the mirror, squinting at the mark as he tried to recall how it had gotten there. Remembering, however, proved to be a bit too painful at that moment so he shelved it for later. The icy water of the shower that felt straight from the frozen pits of Hell helped clear his mind, or at least numb it as well as the rest of him, and he indulged in that refreshing habit of morning torture as he stood under the glacial stream while he waited for it to gradually warm. Thanks to the antique plumbing of his Pappa’s American house, the process had more emphasis on the gradual aspect and less so on the warm.

As he lathered himself with the bar of soap and tried not to think about how it had recently been used by his now dead father, he let his mind slowly begin to wander. There were a lot of places to wander lately, it seemed. The baby drama that awaited him back home, the very real possibility that he could end up stuffed and mounted next to his girlfriend’s husband’s fireplace, the reluctant acceptance that he had already been pushed out of both the baby drama and having a girlfriend altogether according to their last conversation. But that was all back in Norway. This trip back to the States to say his goodbyes to his Pappa and enjoy a break from the tire fire of his personal life had turned out to be a little different than the return to childhood memories he had expected. His thoughts turned, as they constantly seemed to now, to the lovely creature that everyone had kept telling him was his niece. He worked hard to believe it, but there was simply no way that his Satanic brother could have made something that soft and sweet. And sexy, his mind supplied before he could beat back the intrusive thought. He was glad that the shower was still frigid as his mind retaliated against his attempt to control it by recalling how it felt when she ran her hands through his hair as he choked her.

He winced and thumped his forehead against the tile wall of the shower, pulling back and lightly hitting the wall again as he reminded himself how stupid he was to have done that. He just couldn’t say no to those big, gorgeous silver eyes and sweet little plump pouting lip, even when she asked him to do something so dreadfully, terrifyingly, horribly strange. He knew she was a little crazy, he knew he should have known better, but he had to do something. Choking her, in hindsight, might not have been the wisest choice even if it was the one she had wanted. Thank God it was the one she had wanted. He wasn’t certain of much, but he was damn sure Leif would put him into the ground with Pappa if he had gotten that one wrong. Knowing that she had wanted to be choked was disturbing, but then Leif confirming in every way but directly stating that he would do it to relieve some sort of sexual frustration in her was approximately one hundred times more disturbing.

Even if he ignored the fact that sweet, young, innocent, adorable little Simone had a masochistic streak, knowing that his brother was interacting sexually with his own daughter on any level at all frankly freaked him out. The way Leif had discussed it, however, made it seem like some weird part of fatherhood that people just politely didn’t talk about. For all Anders knew, that was true. Or at least true for their case, given how it was framed as a completely pragmatic workaround to a
consequence of her condition. Whatever her condition was. Leif was never exactly clear on what made his daughter so debilitated and Anders couldn’t tell if it was anything past her getting those space spells or oddly emotional at times. Something apparently had happened a year or two ago, but no one other than Leif seemed to know what it was. If there was one thing he could say about his biggest brother, it was that the man hated to be asked questions, so he gave up on ever finding out.

Unfortunately, that prickly privacy of his brother’s also meant that Anders was left to his imagination to fill in the big gaping blanks on what Leif had meant when he had said he helped “relieve her needs”. Since then, that statement had echoed in his head every time he watched them touch or interact. It was odd enough before to see Leif be physically affectionate and loving in the general sense, but now it was uncomfortable. Especially as Anders recalled the previous night’s supper. Without being able to see what was happening beneath the table, they had looked like they were basically fucking. Anders had no other context for the way she wriggled, sighed, and even moaned on Leif’s lap. Then that kiss… Anders groaned and rubbed his eyes harshly as his mind replayed it over and over. He’d been quite sufficiently drunk at that point, but he was sure that wasn’t just a little peck on the lips. That was a half-second away from making out and way past anything chaste. He could chalk everything else up to his own filthy mind, but that kiss seemed to be at least part of how Leif “relieved” her.

The entire concept seemed wrong to him, yet he couldn’t help but wonder if his problem accepting the necessity of it made him bad father material. He’d like to have thought he would do anything for his child, but that was before he knew that everything might also include fulfilling their sexual needs on any level. He’d found he had been imagining himself in Leif’s place with a needing, desperate, wild Simone who could get herself into all kinds of trouble with the wrong men. It was obvious to him, in that scenario, that he would resort to becoming her sexual stand-in. But that was also because he was undeniably attracted to her. He had tried not to be, he really did, and knowing he saw his own relative that way made him feel like the lowest beast in creation but he couldn’t help it. She was attractive, undoubtedly, but there was something about her personally that drew him. Something about her made his brain go completely numb and he didn’t need any help in that department. To make matters worse, he viewed her as a sort of surrogate offspring, an odd effect of rampant fatherly instincts latching onto this helpless girl. He was sure that somehow counted as double-incest and he was of the opinion that he should go to Hell twice for it.

The water had finally warmed up and regrettaably so had his cock. He’d made a lot of dubious sexual decisions in his life, but this was the worst shame boner yet. He felt thoroughly disgusted with himself and decisively turned the shower taps off, forcing his body to calm down as he toweled himself off and ignored the bastardly beast in him. Looking at his reflection with a more functional brain, he noticed that purple smudge in the crook of his neck again. He knew that bruise hadn’t been there yesterday, but his memory had cut out a couple hours after dinner when he had managed to find another bottle of scotch hidden away in the kitchen cupboards. Curious, he examined his reflection more attentively. He saw a strange sort of half-circle of little dotted bruises around the smudge. He touched the tender, fresh wound as he stared at it. It looked almost as though a small mouth had bitten him. He tried to remember if maybe he had a run-in with an animal last night, but his memory was completely wiped. He also didn’t have any scratch marks, but had to correct that assumption when he turned to examine his back and saw the long pink marks down his shoulder blades. He began to feel nervous, seeing the wide splay and how they were made in groups of four. Unless a small bear had very gently mauled him, those could only have been made by human hands. Small human hands. Simone-sized hands.

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh FUCK!”

He threw the towel across the bathroom and snatched up his pajama pants from the floor, examining them and hoping to find no evidence of his horrible suspicion. He felt like he’d been punched in the
gut when he saw the rusty smears of blood stains soaked into the cotton. He had feared to find sexual fluids, but now he wished that was all there was.

“What the hell did I do to her…”

“Oh…” Simone breathed, realizing what Anders thought she was asking for as his fingers brushed the inside of her thigh. Her body burned for it, her muscles humming in the low level electric current of arousal, setting her on fire as the callous pad of his thumb slowly traced the wedge between her thigh and crotch. But she hadn't asked for it. She had told him that her father had been touching her and he had offered to go get him to touch her. She admitted to having a sick need for sex and touch and he had offered fetch the man who molested her in response. She had thought there was some miscommunication but she believed that he had understood her as he had finally stopped her from stroking his cock. He had given her such sweet, uncorrupted affection and had comforted her so tenderly that she was sure his offer was just bad English. But as his hand disappeared under her towel, she realized the only miscommunication was her misguided hope that he was there to help her escape her father.

“Du er så våt… så myk…” he whispered. Her breath hitched into a tight gasp as his fingertips traced her slit, his roughened skin sending sparks through her even as her mind worked to finally connect the dots. All those moments when she had prayed and feared that he had suspected, that he had seen something, that he had become aware of what her father did, Anders had done nothing because he already knew and he didn't disagree with it. Her father had warned her that her uncle wanted to fuck her and like a weak, stupid little girl, she wouldn't listen to him. Now he was finally sampling what his brother had and she was going to let him because it was true: she needed it. She probably was going to ask for it, but he took that control from her. Just like her father so often did.

“You feel good?” he asked. Her legs shook as he circled her clit, her panting now high pitched in need for him. She had to lean against him for support from how weak her knees had become and he held her with his free arm in such a caring embrace. The way he handled her was so drastically different from her father’s overbearing touch. Leif would be restraining her, pushing her, using gentleness only to taunt and make the sting of his force more brutal. But Anders held her up, not down. That tight knot of betrayal in her twisted in confusion.

“Is that what you want? You want to make me to feel good?” she whispered bitterly, trying to push away that seductive desire to believe he cared. He pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head and a deep sadness pooled in her at the sweet gesture. Knowing he had used her trust was not enough to close that hole in her heart he had opened. She needed him to take what he wanted viciously from her body and hurt her to stop the pain his tenderness wrought on her emotions. She untwisted one hand from his shirt and reached down, pressing his slowly circling fingers to her opening and biting her lip against the sting of his calloused skin sliding against the tear her father had made in her.

“Herregud…” he groaned breathily, the arm holding her up tensing as he sunk a single finger into her. Her cheeks burned and hips bucked unconsciously at the sensual noise from him, making her gasp from the sting and the pleasure of penetration. He whispered to her as she fucked herself on his hand, his foreign words rolling delightfully to her ears even as she tried to imagine he was saying crueler, filthier things to her than he likely was. The loving encouragement and appreciation in his tone made her twist to rub his finger more firmly against that raw tear, but she needed more pain to cut back the aching in her heart. He hissed in a sharp breath as she pressed her palm to his erection.

“Please,” she whimpered through her terror. She could feel his whole body tense as she hooked her
He needed Simone. He had to find her and make sure she was okay. Surely, she wasn’t, but he needed her to be. Panic had him run out of the bathroom still completely nude, his bare feet slapping along the hardwood as he frantically ran through the hall but he barely heard it over the rapid pounding of his heartbeat. The parlor, living room, and dining room were a blur of nothing as he scanned each room only for her. He burst through the kitchen door, startling Henrik and Vidar as they sat at the kitchen table with the leftovers of breakfast between them.

“HOLY SHIT!” Vidar yelled as Henrik roared between bellowing laughter, “What the FUCK are you doing naked, asshole?!”

Anders couldn’t find any attention to spare them as he looked around for his niece, but froze when he saw the blue towel crumpled on the floor. He scooped it up, eyes wide and eyebrows raised as something tickled in his brain, almost like déjà vu but even less clear. But he had no time for towels and thinking. He had to find her.

“Have either of you seen Simone?” he asked, his voice loud in his panic. Both brothers looked at him incredulously and he wanted to throttle them for taking so long to answer.

“Why the fuck do you want to know that?” Henrik asked flatly.

“Just tell me!” he demanded.

“She’s with Leif. They went into town hours ago,” Vidar answered. Both men eyed him suspiciously as he tangled his hands in his wet hair, tugging the blonde locks harshly by the roots as he tried to process that information.

“Was she okay? What did they go to town to do?” he asked quickly, leaving out the question Did Leif know?

“I don’t know. She looked pretty good to me,” Henrik shrugged.

Vidar leaned back in his seat and smirked, “Yeah, I’d say she looked good enough to eat. I bet she tastes like—”

“DON’T FUCKING TALK ABOUT HER THAT WAY!” Anders yelled. Both men stared at him, but he didn’t care to acknowledge them as he paced the kitchen, clenching the towel tightly in his fists and trying to figure out what to do with himself.

“God, being naked makes you rude, Anders,” Henrik frowned.

“What are you on? Is it cocaine? Shit, if you had cocaine on you in the airport I will actually beat you to death,” Vidar said grumpily. “And also steal your cocaine. Seriously, where is it?”

“I didn’t- I was just drunk, I didn’t know what I was doing and I can’t- I can’t remember!” Anders stammered, pausing in his anxious pacing to press his fingers to his throbbing temples. His nose filled with the sweet, earthy scent of her from bringing the towel nearer and he threw it from him as though it burned. The effect her scent had on him had always been strangely pleasant, but the yearning it had stirred in him then was alarming. It had to be from the adrenaline.
“Could you please put some fucking clothes on?” Vidar grumbled.

“What the hell are you going on about?” Henrik asked, his voice growing in volume and lowering in pitch as his patience waned. “You come in here nude and yelling like a loon about Simone and now you’re rambling about not remembering shit. What the hell is wrong with you? Did something happen between you and Simone?”

Anders buried his face in his hands and rubbed at his skin roughly, trying to ease a different panic that rose in him at his brother’s questioning. Vidar glanced between Henrik’s grave frown and Anders’ desperate coping, his eyebrows slowly raising in shock and understanding.

“Holy shit,” Vidar breathed. “Did you really fuck around with her?”

“No. No!” Anders quickly insisted. “Why do you guys keep thinking that!?”

“Do you want a short list or the long one?” Henrik groused, folding his arms over his broad chest.

“Yeah, you’ve been having a lot of ‘alone time’ with her and you obviously want to fuck her,” Vidar remarked.

“I want to fuck her? You two have been talking about her like she’s a piece of meat since you saw her!” Anders flared.

“Okay. We only say that shit because it’s funny and we both know we won’t fuck her anyway, so it doesn’t matter,” Henrik said. “But you creep around and get weirdly protective, like you always do with girls you eventually fuck.”

“And deflecting is something guilty people do,” Vidar added.

“So I’m the one who wants to fuck her because I’m the only one not talking about how I want to fuck her?” Anders asked, astonished at their logic.

“Yeah, basically. Also she wants you to fuck her and that has Leif freaked out,” Vidar shrugged.

“God, he’s so weird about her. You think he writes his name on her chastity belts?” Henrik joked.

“If I had a daughter who looked like that, I’d make her sleep in my bed too,” Vidar jeered.

Anders groaned angrily and quickly trudged out of the room, pointedly ignoring the strange looks from his brothers. He knew he seemed completely insane and suspicious, but he didn’t care. He could never hurt Simone so their suspicions could go to Hell. At least, he hoped he could never hurt her. Dread made each step heavy as he ascended the stairs and entered the guest room he’d claimed, the hard twin mattress creaking noisily under him as he collapsed onto it. None of it made any sense. He’d seen Leif drag her off to bed last night and that man rarely seemed to let her out of his sights. There was no way he’d let her wander out of bed in the dead of night alone, not for any significant period of time. But there was a lot that could happen in a heated moment. A lot he could do to make her claw his back like that. An unfamiliar memory of her moaning his name, her back flexing and arching under his hands, flashed in his mind.

“Fuck.”

It was just one second, maybe not even half a second, and the memory might not have been real, could have been a dream or something he imagined since allowing himself to think of her while he masturbated. He knew it was real though. The undeniable reality of it made him press the heels of his hands hard against his eyes, shame squeezing the breath from his lungs in the myriad of implications
just from one fleeting moment. The evidence was stacked against him but he still couldn’t believe or accept it. He wasn’t such a monster as to fuck his own niece. But if she had wanted it, if the universe had aligned in such a way that she actually asked him to with those big eyes and sweet little pout, if his sick fantasies had somehow come into being… Fantasy was still across a wide chasm of terrifying factors before it ever touched reality, though. Even ignoring the immense guilt and damnation pressing down to his very soul for lusting after his own blood relative, no matter how exotic and appealing she was, there were still so many obstacles preventing that fantasy from ever being something he could allow to become real.

Each factor weighed on him like so many grand pianos falling directly on top of his chest. She was an entire decade younger than him, still basically just a kid, and especially naïve even for her age. He wasn’t even sure if she was able to consent in her madness; he had no idea how that worked, but Leif had called her vulnerable and suggestible and those words were not conductive to his concept of consent. Even if she were to beg him, even if she weren’t related to him, even if she were just a little older, the power imbalance between him and her broken mind made him feel sleazy and perverted for ever having wanted her. He found a small comfort in knowing he at least didn’t want her because of those factors. He couldn’t think of how he would be able to live with being that kind of monster. Leif would kill him if he had any idea. If his fears were confirmed, Anders might just insist on it.

He shot out of the bed, his fretful energy not at all abating as these thoughts crowded his mind, and roughly pulled on a blue fleece and whatever pair of jeans and underwear he reached first in his duffel bag. He had finished lacing up his boots by the time he realized he’d forgotten to put on an undershirt or even socks. He needed to slow down. He needed air.

“Vente, vente! Ikke gjør det, kjære!” Anders exclaimed as he tried to yank his pants back up, but his efforts faltered as Simone gripped his cock in her hand. He released his waistband and shot out to grasp her wrist, her wetness on his fingers making his grip unsteady even if he had put any real force to stop her. His ragged gasp as she pumped him helped her to push down her fear and focus on that carnal need throbbing in her cunt. She squeezed her eyes shut and gathered her courage before pushing him against the kitchen counter, the ease with which he followed her lead emboldening her to slide down his body and open her mouth over his cock. When her tongue laved over his tip and scooped up the salty drop of precum forming there, she was abruptly yanked away and found herself suddenly staring into the equally shocked wide eyes of her uncle as he held her a foot away from him by her shoulders.

“Ikke. Ikke gjør det,” he said firmly. She was surprised to see her same fear reflected in his eyes, the same confused conflict between body and mind as when her father would drag out her pleasure against her will. The thrill of power in knowing she could inspire this same effect in another helped ease that emotional turmoil and repelled her. This was different than just pushing his boundaries and prodding him for reaction. This was darker, uglier, and more soothing than that. She could shield her heart with this.

“You don’t want it?” she asked, her unsteady hands reaching out and caressing his chest. He licked his lips nervously, setting a more resolute furrow in his brow even as his eyes continued to reveal that same fearful conflict. She held his gaze as she dragged her nails over his thin shirt. “I’m good at it. Or do you want something else?”

She pulled her hands back and watched as his mouth parted in awe while she unwrapped the towel around her, putting every bit of willpower into letting it fall open and drop to the floor. She couldn’t
stop the panicked little breaths of her panting as she watched him look at her naked body. His eyes roved over her exposed form, taking in every inch of her skin with a hunger that both electrified and terrified her.

“Gud tilgi meg… Du er nydelig…” he muttered, seeming unable to tear his gaze away from her. She tried to let his lingering stare and blatant desire bolster her confidence, but she mostly felt vulnerable. It was her own incessant need for sex that gave her the will to take his hands and slide them down to her breasts. He sighed shakily as she pressed his palms to her, his uncertain gaze turning once more to her face with an expression so raw and conflicted that it shook her.

“Please… Please touch me however you want,” she whispered. She moaned when his hands lightly squeezed, the flame of her lust engulfing all other thought at the pleasure of those calloused palms rubbing her oversensitive nipples. Her body nearly collapsed against him, making him let out a deep grunt as her abdomen pressed against his erection, and she stood on her tiptoes to catch that gasping mouth with her own. He moaned into her kiss, his hands releasing her breasts to wrap his arms around her in a tight embrace, and she tilted her head to deepen it. The passion with which he returned her kiss made her head swim and heart ache, tempting her to lose herself in the dangerous amount of emotion she found in it. A pain twisted in her as she realized he kissed not in the devouring, seductive, manipulating way her father did, but with the expression of a lover. Tears threatened to well in her eyes as his hands slid into her hair and cradled her head, not to pull painfully or restrain her stillness, but to support and soothe.

When he pulled away from her mouth, he pressed his forehead to hers in that sweet, intimate gesture and she just barely heard him whisper, “I’m sorry, Simone… Jeg elsker deg. Jeg burde ikke, og jeg beklager. I love you.”

Her heart felt as though it shattered then. Her voice shook as she rubbed her body against his, her hands nearly clawing at him, and frantically said, “Please, just use me. Fuck me. Isn’t that what you’re after? You like it when I beg, right? Please, Anders. Please, please fuck me. I want you to fuck me hard, any way you want it, just please, please, I need it!”

His hands tried to still her, his voice saying something in a placating tone, and she wrapped her arms around his neck as she hoisted herself up by putting her other knee onto the counter’s edge beside his hip. He froze as she rolled her hips and slid his cock under her, her frustration climbing as she tried and failed to angle him to slip inside. His tip dipped into her only to slip out and he grunted as his hips twitched almost involuntarily from the brief penetration. His accidental motion adjusted him to line up to her entrance and they both watched, equally astounded, as she sank down onto his dick.

The sun was a hatefully bright thing to Anders’ aching head even through the filter of the full late springtime foliage, but being in the open outdoors did help clear his thoughts. He tried not to jump to conclusions, finding that each conclusion based on the current clues brought only panic and crushing guilt. Not that he didn’t deserve that crushing guilt, but he needed to be in a better state for Simone. Whatever had happened, he needed to be able to help her. He sighed heavily for perhaps the hundredth time that morning, tucking his cold-bitten hands into his pockets to try to get some feeling back in them. The memories would only come when he wasn’t seeking them, popping up completely unexpected in flashes of touch and sound. Simone’s skin sliding against his, her soft breasts filling his palms just perfectly, her sweet voice moaning about need and want and please, please, please. He had always thought of himself as a good person despite his many questionable deeds, but this one might change that permanently.
He’d been walking the grounds of the property for well over an hour at that point and he felt more or less together, no longer a jumbling mess of emotional turmoil. He supposed there was no sense in delaying the inevitable. The overgrown brush of maple saplings and weeds hid the pathways as he stepped through them, but he was confident that his sense of direction was taking him back towards the house. Before he judged he had even made it to the halfway point, however, he heard an odd rhythmic sound echoing through the woods. Curious or just looking for any distraction to postpone his destination, he headed towards it, eventually surprised to come upon his father’s old pickup truck. Stepping around it, he finally found the source of that sound to be Leif striking the ground with an old shovel in the process of digging a hole.

“Leif?” he asked. His oldest brother’s face shot up in a tense acknowledgement, his hard glare and strained downturned mouth making Anders stop his approach. He was painfully aware of how alone they were out there, far from the house to make any noise distant enough to go unnoticed. He glanced down at the long, narrow size of the hole and thought it was peculiarly person-sized. Almost his size, in fact.

“What are you doing out here?” Leif asked in an angry rasp.

Anders looked up from staring at his likely soon-to-be grave, regretting having taken his eyes off the obviously pissed off man with the shovel, and said, “Walking. I was just going for a walk. What are… Why are you out here?”

Leif turned back to the hole, taking a moment to re-roll up the sleeves of his black dress shirt, a distant gleam in his eye as he looked around at nothing in particular before he answered, “Digging.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s quite a hole you’ve got going. You want to tell me what it’s for?” Anders asked hesitantly, trying to maintain a casual tone and not tip off the man that he was currently fearing for his life.

“No,” Leif answered as he took hold of the shovel once more and resumed digging.

Anders stood and watched as Leif worked, feeling as though he should not feel as offended by the rude response as he found himself to be considering he was probably going to be murdered by the man shortly.

“If you’ve really got nothing better to do than stand around, you could help me out,” Leif groused out in huffing breaths from the effort of digging.

Anders most certainly did not want to help dig his own grave, but he couldn’t help observing aloud, “I don’t see another shovel, brother.”

“I was going to ask you to take Simone in and clean her up for me,” Leif clarified grumpily.

“I was going to ask you to take Simone in and clean her up for me,” Leif clarified grumpily.

“Clean her up?”

Leif responded by gesturing with a tilt of his head and Anders followed the direction of it to see Simone standing about fifteen meters away, calmly watching them with her front covered in red from her mouth to her navel and smeared up her arms.

“How?” Anders heard himself ask. He felt like his stomach had fallen out of him.

“Don’t worry, it’s not hers,” Leif assured him, not even looking up from his task as he spoke as casually as if they were discussing the weather. Anders stared at the girl, remarkably relieved but no less alarmed. His feet were stuck to the ground until his brother snapped, “Get her cleaned up already. Don’t let them see her like that.”
He couldn’t help but run toward her, adrenaline making him jumpy once more as he trampled unfeelingly through the brush. His couldn’t figure out how to touch her once he reached her, every suitable option covered in red as his hands hovered over her while she just stared into the distance as though he wasn’t even there.

“You’re going to get covered in that when you wash her, so just leave if you’re too squeamish!” Leif called out.

Anders frowned at him and grasped her hand, the skin tacky with drying blood and ice cold. His concern for her quickly overrode his revulsion and he tugged her close as she followed unresistingly behind him. He’d seen her in this spacey state before, but the pliant way she obeyed his lead through the wooded area disconcerted him. Present only physically and completely hollow. Although Leif had assured him that these states were normal for her and transitory, Anders was always anxious to get Simone back into her body as soon as possible. Squeezing her hand firmly as they walked, he spoke to her despite knowing she wouldn’t be able to understand his Norwegian even when fully aware anyway.

“I’m sorry. Are you okay? I really, really hope you’re okay but even if you say you’re completely fine, I’m sorry. I don’t know what the hell happened and I don’t know what’s happening now, but God, please be okay. It’s not an excuse, but I don’t remember what we… what I did to you. I’m not asking for your forgiveness. From what I can tell, I might have done something unforgivable. Something that’s probably going to hurt you for a long time, maybe forever, even if it doesn’t hurt now. So don’t forgive me, just know that I’m sorry. It’s not fair that you should suffer from my mistake. I need to fix… I want to help fix this if you’ll let me. You might hate me now… and I think you should. You should hate me and stay away from me, but if you’ll allow me, I want to help you any way I can. You don’t have to keep this a secret. I won’t make you do that. I deserve to face whatever consequences will come. Tell me what you need and I’ll do anything, anything at all. If you never want to see me again, I’ll leave. I’ll leave this entire family so you’ll never even hear about me. Just… just tell me what I can do.”

He stopped and turned to look at her. She was staring at him, or rather through him, that serene absence in her silver stare so like the glass eyes of a doll. He hadn’t expected her to respond, but a hopeless desire for her to have somehow understand his intentions left him feeling pathetically powerless. Eager to do the one thing he could to help, he walked her to the house and slowed as he approached the backdoor. Peering through the window first, he led them through the empty kitchen, listening carefully for his brothers’ presence. Luckily, their bickering seemed to centralize from towards the front of the house, so he crept through to hallway slowly with Simone in tow. Her footsteps were completely silent, which although fortunate, struck him as creepy. Instead of trudging and stumbling after him like a zombie, she moved with efficiency and almost predatory grace in this state. Even while not in her body, the girl was still full of surprises. He pulled her into the bathroom and locked the door as quietly as he could manage before flipping on the light and turning to her. With his task now at hand, he was more than ready to dive into it and distract himself from his thoughts. If only he could figure out how to approach this mess. He soaked a hand towel from the hot faucet in the sink and began brushing the blood off her chin first, watching in odd fascination as she seemed to respond to the gentle little strokes with a subtle relaxation to her muscles. Her silence unnerved him and he soon found himself speaking just to fill the quiet and ease his self-consciousness at being so close and alone with the girl he had done so horribly wrong.

“This is stickier than I thought it was going to be. I guess I never really had to think about whether or not blood gets sticky, though,” he muttered to himself, scrubbing with the towel a little rougher. He stopped when he saw her upper lip curl back, her red-stained tooth revealed to him in a wince that looked strangely like a snarl. “Oh Christ, it’s in your mouth… Ohh, that can’t taste nice. Hold on, dear.”
He turned to search the cabinets for a cup to help with rinsing her mouth but heard her quiet, small voice mutter the Norwegian endearment he used for her. “Kjære…”

He looked back to her with a shot of hope that she was waking up. “Yes. Dear. Do you want some water, dear?”

She didn’t respond, that thousand-yard stare the same as it had been, and he sighed in both disappointment and a shameful relief. For all his need to find out what had happened between them last night and repent, he still dreaded having to face the truth when she woke. Finding a stack of paper cups in the linen closet, he filled one with warm water and held it to her lips. The water just dribbled down her chin when he tipped it.

“Great,” he grumbled. With unsure hands, he gripped her cheeks with his free hand and gently squeezed until her mouth opened. It felt oddly intrusive to manipulate her jaw like that. “Sorry…”

He tipped the cup into her mouth again, watching closely to make sure she wasn’t drinking it or asphyxiating it, and was rewarded with his face covered in bloody water when she reflexively spat it out. He scrunched his face in a half grimace, half wry grin as he wiped it off and tried not to be too impressed with the force she had put into that expectoration.

“Yeah, I should have guessed that might happen. My fault,” he smiled sardonically. He emptied the cup in the sink and refilled it with mouthwash. “Well, since you’re a spitter, let’s use something more effective to combat that nasty taste.”

He gripped her cheeks and retried the maneuver, standing cautiously to the side this time. He became curious when she didn’t spit as quickly that time, then panicked when he saw her throat bob as she swallowed down a big gulp of mouthwash.

“Oh, shit, no no no!” he frantically said, dropping the cup and patting her on the back hard to encourage her to spit it up. His beating hand was caught in a vicelike grip when her arm shot out and then twisted painfully before he yanked away. He stared at her, awestruck at her swift move, and shook off the slight ache in his arm as he muttered, “Okay, okay, you can keep that in your belly then. It’s probably fine. Jesus, you’re stronger than you look…”

Looking at her, he wouldn’t have been able to tell she’d even moved and he eyed her warily before picking up the damp towel and working at that sticky blood again. Ten minutes in and only achieving to reduce the red to pink on her face and completely stain the terrycloth to uselessness, he gained a fuller understanding of the old American adage he recalled by literally throwing in the towel. He let out an agitated huff and turned on the taps in the shower to begin warming the water.

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He took off her shoes and socks one at a time, noting with wonder at how she didn’t even slightly waver as she balanced on one foot while he yanked, then stood and unbuttoned her jeans with a cautious hesitance. When he pulled open her fly and saw the pink lace of her panties with a tiny bow at the top, he paused. With a nervous lick of his lips, he rethought it and zipped up her jeans, moving on to grip the bottom of her thick knit sweater. He had to move her arms over her head as he peeled it off, then regretted having done it when he saw she hadn’t been wearing a bra. Gripping the sweater in a ball between his tense hands, he tried to keep his eyes above neck level while he gathered his resolve. He hastily pulled off his clothes and left them scattered on the floor, suddenly needing to get this over with quickly and not allow any moments for his horrible mind to wander. Down to his underwear, he very stiffly kept his hands on top of Simone’s shoulders as he guided her into the box shower, following in and shutting the glass door behind them.
“Okay, we are going to finally get that stuff off you, dear,” he announced, gently guiding her under the stream of warm water.

“Kjære,” she repeated. His guilt twisted like a knife in his back as he worried she was awakening, but he didn’t let himself turn away from it this time. Gently gripping her by placing his hands on the sides of her head, he bent to level his face in front of her blank stare and swallowed his cowardice to look her in her empty eyes. It confused him how much it hurt to do this between the shame of what he did to her and his need for her presence, but he couldn’t let himself continue to abandon her in this passive way.

“Simone…” he whispered under his breath, then pursed his lip to gather his courage before more firmly whispering in the limited English he knew, “Simone. Please, come here. I am Anders, here.”

“Anders,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he smiled, feeling like a slightly less horrible human being for not experiencing any regret at succeeding in slowly bringing her back. “Yes, dear. Come here.”

He watched as awareness rose in her eyes, fascinated that the process was so visual in the brightening of that silver stare. He knew he would have to face the reality of what he’d done when she finally came to and let him have it, but he couldn’t stand to see her like that any longer. An odd feeling of calm washed over him as he fully accepted the weight of his sin. That calm was abruptly derailed when she leaned forward and latched her lips onto his in a searing kiss, the taste of copper and mint filling his senses as her tongue delved into his shock-slackened mouth.

Simone made a strangled moan at the feeling of Anders stretching her wide as he panted and muttered, “Nei, nei, nei, vi burde ikke… no, no no no…”

Even as he protested, he bucked his hips, working his cock into her as she made breathy little whimpers through her panic. When he finally hilted in her, he let out a low groan that fogged her mind in the all-encompassing lust she needed. She was so full of him, aching to accommodate his girth in her injured cunt, but the pain seemed so distant to the pleasure as she began to roll her hips. His hands that were on her waist trying to pull her off him just a moment before soon slid down and gripped her ass to support her, kneading the soft globes as she tried to fuck herself on him. The nearly standing position as he leaned back on the counter made it difficult for her to obtain leverage, making the act slower and frighteningly sensual as he had more control of the pacing. His arms held her off the ground with an ease she found intimidating, holding her close and high enough for him to reach her mouth and pull her into another heartbreakingly tender, scotch-flavored kiss.

She tried to make it more carnal, tried to tempt him into biting with shy little nips on his lips, but she found herself nearly giving into the temptation of his simulation of love. It had to be a cruel mimicry of the emotion. Even if his behaviors made any sense for that to possibly be genuine, she was certain of the fact that no one could love a creature like her. When they pulled out of that sweet, cruel kiss, she risked opening her eyes and immediately regretted it when she saw him gazing at her with such open affection and warmth. Her confusion was nearly palpable. None of this was making sense.

“What do you want from me?” she asked, trying to speak as clear as she could but her voice still trembled and she could barely get the words out between panting breaths. His slow, rolling thrusts were meeting her in a gentle rhythm that kept her clit rubbing against him and she already felt dangerously close to orgasm.
“You,” he whispered. She found that wanting to believe him made it hurt worse. He pulled her closer and nuzzled her cheek, the sandpaper texture of his stubble not nearly rough enough to distract her from craving his lies. It felt almost real and so much warmer than the affection her father would reward her with. But he wasn’t her father. She didn’t have that compulsive, dire need for it like she needed it from Leif. A strange new wonder formed in her, asking what it would be like to experience whatever this man said he felt for her. It was certainly a lie, but it could be a beautiful one if only for a moment.

“Oh…” she gasped, surprised by the vertigo-like sensation of being pulled into climax. She was caught off-guard as her body bared down and clenched around his cock, making him let out a shuddering groan and thrust with the deliberate single-minded rhythm she recognized as a man chasing his orgasm. The firmer, faster, shallower thrusts pushed her abruptly over the edge. Her nails dragged hard down his back and she sunk her teeth into the crook of his neck to keep from crying out as she rode out the intense climax. Her entire body trembled with the force of it until she started to come down, only to crash through another sudden and completely unexpected orgasm as he gave one final deep thrust. She was distantly aware that he had gasped her name as he came.

That molten, tingling sensation of being filled with his seed struck an instinctive chord in her, releasing a potent hormonal cocktail that left her feeling elated and emotional. As they panted and held onto each other, his head leaning affectionately against the side of hers with his chin resting on her shoulder, she felt that bond they had formed before knowing of his betrayal blossom into something deeper. Trying to resist the pull of hormones and perhaps even her true feelings, she reminded herself that he was likely tricking her and had outright stated his intention of delivering her to Leif, but knew it was too late. Whatever this was, she cared for Anders and she knew she was going to get hurt.

She tensed as he adjusted his hold on her and slipped out of her. He didn’t let go as he yanked his pants back up and carried her out of the kitchen. Nervously, she clung to him, apprehension creeping through the post-orgasmic haze as they headed into the living room. He breathed out a relaxed sigh as he sat down on the sofa, snuggling her close in his lap and kissing her cheek with a lighthearted fondness that seemed out of place with the grievous sin they’d just committed until she remembered that he was very, very drunk.

“Jeg skal ta deg hjem med meg, kjære,” he whispered as he nuzzled her cheek. “Jeg kan gjøre deg veldig glad... Jeg lover.”

“I don’t understand,” she muttered, feeling silly for being embarrassed over that after all that had happened that night. Still, she didn’t resist the impulse to hide her burning face against his neck, glad he let her cower there for a long moment until she realized he’d fallen asleep under her. The sound of his steady breathing should have soothed her, but she felt uneasy at being in this position in the same room her father had found them so close together in before.

Her body shot up as she recalled her father, trepidation driving her to flee the living room and pad up the stairs as quietly as the creaky wooden floor allowed. Her full body tension didn’t ease until she slowly opened the door to their room to see him still passed out on the bed. A strong wave of exhaustion hit her as she sighed out her fear and she crept into bed, not having the energy to care that she was naked and freshly fucked. Tucking herself against his side, she pushed the myriad of thoughts crowding at the edges of her blank mind down and quickly slipped into a long, terrible nightmare of violence and pain that only calmed when she began to have a strange dream of being in the shower with Anders.
Chapter 19

The house, with its timber slatted rafters above high bone white walls and liquid-shine waxed floors, had reminded Leif of the hollowed-out corpse of a giant since he’d first arrived to begin his life as an immigrant. While he stepped through the central hall, the shadowed beams above suggesting the notches of vertebrae and the spanning of ribs, it was tempting to reminisce on his coming of age in this cavernous country house. The false back behind the line of winter coats hanging in the closet unlatched and drifted open with well-oiled silence before he stepped down into the musty darkness. The acidic and almost tangy scents of the photo developing chemicals soaked into the walls had muddled with mildew from such a long period of neglect. Nostalgia beckoned his mind to turn to his uncle Bjørn, 20 years dead and still such a present actor in the amphitheater of his mind, but Leif hadn’t time to waste on superfluous mourning. Not with the house so quiet and still in the darkness of the early morning hour.

Reaching the concrete floor of the darkroom, he groped along the wall until he flicked on all four switches. The exhaust fans stuttered to reluctant life and all but one of the red overhanging bulbs had been burnt out, but it would suffice. On the shelves lining the far wall, placed casually next to the plastic jugs of fixer, was the tin Christmas cookie box Leif had come for. The lid stuck, but with a little wriggling with his father’s folding knife, he managed to pry it off and began inspecting the collection of tiny bottles inside. He rifled through them until he found the lowest dose in the collection then replaced the lid and cookie tin to its dust-lined space. He allowed himself a smile as he knew how pleased his uncle would be that his tools were still being put to nefarious use so long after his death, but then wiped the silly thought from his mind. He could not permit himself to get into the habit of sentimentality.

Under the dim light of the desk lamp back in the bedroom, with his Simone still lost to the world in slumber, he dug out a syringe from his pack and filled it with a heftier dose than perhaps necessary of the morphine. He tapped the side of the syringe to loosen any bubbles and carefully pressed the plunger until just a drop slid down the thin needle, then rose from his chair and approached the sleeping girl.

Her quickened breaths had him worried that she might have been feigning sleep, but the rapid darting of her eyes under her tightly shut lids told him that she was merely caught in one of her frequent nightmares. He watched her for a moment, smoothing her wavy hair away from her face and gently caressing her sweat-dampened cheek as he reflected on how cruel the mind could be in its attempts to process the horrors of waking life by producing new and revisited horrors in sleep. Nonetheless, it was useful to him that she lacked that source of relief. After he’d taken away a few aspects of her life and identity, she had responded beautifully by clinging to him as her source of comfort and reassurance. He was once more aware of his eagerness for his brothers to leave so he could begin her final transformation in earnest. They had provided an unacceptable distraction to his girl, especially the affection Anders had seemed far too keen to spoil her with. Leif could let her have her comfort for now though. He did feel a surprising amount of sympathy and – at weakened moments – guilt for her time ahead. For all his desire, Anders had seemed too in denial of his darker side to act on it anyway. At least not without further prodding.

Leif gingerly lifted the quilt away from her, exposing her golden skin to the cold open air and causing her to stir. Knowing exactly how heavily she slept, he didn’t wait for her to calm before placing his steadying hand high on her hip. Pressing down on the well-developed ventrogluteal muscle there, he slid the needle into the flesh drawn tight between his splayed fingers and slowly pressed the plunger. Within minutes, the troubled little wrinkle at her brow smoothed into peaceful rest and her breath slowed and grew shallow as the drug took hold. Placing the syringe on the
headboard, he stayed knelt over her and observed her sleeping form. Though hackneyed, he couldn’t help but ruminate on how angelic she looked. Through everything that he’d done to her and made her do, she still held an almost animal-like innocence at her core. His fingers traced the fading bruise of the bite mark he’d left on her breast. She was so soft and exotically lovely with an instinctive viciousness under that outward docility. Like a circus tiger. He delicately mouthed the crest of her shoulder, her chilled skin smooth and sweet under his warm tongue. The quiet little groan she made as she shifted under him, turning away from his stimulation in the natural pursuit of sleep, tugged at the tangled web of his heartstrings with yearning and fondness for her. Even as his arousal made him want to pin her down and watch her struggle with adorably drugged weakness under him, he indulged in the swell of parental pride that she was blossoming into such a fascinating and lovely young woman under his wing. He’d taken her sweetness and dependence on him and twisted it into such interesting forms, but fatherly bias produced relief instead of annoyance that she had retained her base personality.

She sighed in her sleep as he fondled her breast more firmly, but he was interrupted in his progress by the sound of a phone ringing. Damning to hell whichever brother had turned their ringer up that ungodly loud, he began to plot the exact vengeance he would enact on him when Simone stirred to groggy half-wakefulness. The sounds she made as she tried and failed to convince her brain to make coherent speech through the morphine were so cute.

“Ssh, shh, darling,” Leif whispered as he rose from the bed, his hand affectionately smoothing over her mop of hair. “I’ll see to that racket. Go back to sleep.”

“Frnnrr… shnell…” she slurred before flopping back onto the pillow with her sleepy eyes rolling into her head before fluttering shut once more.

He grinned, absolutely charmed, but that phone continued its incessant ringing. Stepping into the hall, he was surprised to hear it was coming from his father’s bedroom. After their initial morbid curiosities had been quickly discarded by the lingering rank of death once venturing inside, his brothers had avoided the room entirely, so this was unexpected. He entered to find a corded landline phone plugged in under the nightstand. Why it had been hidden from sight and hadn’t rung to his knowledge until that inappropriately early morning hour engaged his wonder. With a hope that this might prove interesting, he lifted the handset to his ear and waited for the caller to speak first.

It felt so good to sleep. Simone could hear a voice speaking to her, trying to drag her out, but that blissful dreamland pulled her right back into such restful slumber that she couldn’t even consider waking. The branches of the trees above her were silhouetted by a sky backlit in the pinks and peaches of a beautiful sunrise. In taking a step forward, she noticed that she stood calf-deep in water. The crystal blue water surrounding her was calm enough to be as reflective as glass, but when she looked down into it, she was strangely unsurprised to see Bjørn’s image on the surface instead of her own. Once she realized that he was under the water, she bent down and pulled him up, his whitening blond beard hairs tickling her wrists as she grasped his head and lifted. He wasn’t heavy, just being a head and all, and he blinked up at her with wide gray eyes as she cradled him. His wrinkled skin was soft and loose, folding wherever there was pressure applied, and she hoped she wouldn’t drop him on accident as she waded through the water. He felt like an overripe cantaloupe wrapped in bread dough, but she resisted the urge to squish him. That would be terrible manners no matter how badly she wanted to do it. Plus, if she found the rest of him, he could tell them why they were here.

A stinging crack exploded against her cheek and she startled awake to find herself freezing on the
cracked leather bench seat of the old pickup truck. She scrambled to sit up, pressing into the corner
between the seat and the door when her wild eyes fell on Leif at the wheel. He was rubbing her
shoulder and smiling at her, not a cruel smirk or a plastic grin, but an almost sheepish little upturn as
the truck idled at a blinking stoplight.

“Sorry about that, darling, but I need you awake,” he said softly. She could only guess he was
apologizing for having slapped her.

“Whe… whurruh we?” she slurred, her tongue too thick and heavy to form the words properly. Her
whole body felt like it was floating in molasses, slow and only halfway responsive to her commands
to move. Apprehension crept along the corners of her fogged mind. If she could barely remain sitting
upright, there would be little hope she could run if needed. Not that she would do something as
unwise as running from him, but it was discomfiting to be so disabled. The hand that was rubbing
her shoulder moved to cup her cheek and he held her gaze as he spoke evenly.

“We’re in a Massachusetts town about eighty minutes away from home. It’s Saturday, 4:45 AM, and
you have been in a drug-assisted sleep but, I assure you, you are awake now,” he explained. “We’re
going to meet an associate of Einar’s. You won’t need to participate in the discussion but I was
uncomfortable leaving you alone in that state. Do you have any further inquiries?”

Too many, but her mouth could only say, “Nuh.”

His hand drifted away from her numb cheek, the absence of his heat making her feel even colder
than before, and she let her head fall backwards against the window as she willed the world to stop
spinning. The effort was not helped by the movement of the vehicle turning through the town and
she shut her eyes against the sight of passing trees and brick buildings. She could hear someone
calling her again and the world shifted. She had lost Bjørn’s head, she needed to find him again,
needed to find out why they were both there in that flooded forest. Leif was pulling her by the hand
as he nearly dragged her deeper into those woods, her much smaller hold being completely engulfed
in his grip. Whatever he was, she knew his position as her father had remained consistent through to
the true core of him and her heart ached to draw out his parental approval. So, she smiled, finding it
an easy and natural thing to do being so free from fear in this dreamland, and her heart soared at the
squeeze from his hand in response. If only it was this easy.

“…nodding off again. Stay with me.”

She blinked, finding her head much less dizzy now that the truck was parked but quickly discovering
that any slight movement brought that vertigo back. Her brain sloshed around in her skull as she
clumsily wiped at the itch on her chin, disgust following that move as she discovered she’d been
drooling all over herself. The sleeve of her sweater was fortunately absorbent enough to soak up the
excess saliva, if not the embarrassment she felt when she noticed her father had been watching her
with a quiet amusement written all over his stoic face before he got out. The excruciating slowness of
her muscles to respond to her commands frustrated her as she batted at the approximate area of her
mouth. Even that small effort left her exhausted and he seemed to realize this as he opened the
passenger door and, to her increasing nervousness, gathered her up in his arms bridal-style. The way
he could handle her, as though she weighed nothing more than a bag of flour, and the feeling of his
muscles moving as he maneuvered her to shut the truck door reminded her of his sheer strength. It
made her almost sick with hopelessness and vulnerability.

“Don’t be so worried, darling,” he said, his tone doing a poor impression of reassurance as he carried
her. Although it caused her vertigo to go completely haywire, she rolled her head around to check
the surroundings. No nearby neighbors, a dirt road leading off into just more trees, and what seemed
to be junk littering the overgrown grass surrounding the little track house he carried her toward. She
could see the image of a man silhouetted behind the screen door and he stepped out as they approached.

“By gosh, if you didn’t turn into the spittin’ image of Einar! I mean when he was young, ya know, heheh!” the funny little man grinned as he held the door open for them. Leif gave him a terse smile and a nod as he maneuvered past him into the dingy wood paneled house and she squinted in trying to keep her blurry vision focused on this stranger. He wore what seemed to be fishing gear and had an odd glint in his eyes as he looked at her. Unconsciously, her hand tightened on her father’s shirt and Leif glanced down at her before making his way into the cluttered living room.

“Don’t mind my daughter, Mr. Renfro, she’s just a little doped up,” Leif said, wearing his company smile and business call voice.

“Oh, you can lay her out on the sofa and we can talk in the back room, ya know,” Mr. Renfro offered in his singsong squeaky voice.

To her mild repulsion, Leif did just that, placing her weak body on the mildew-scented lumpy sofa. She stared up at him with uncertainty clear in her expression and, to her surprise, he kissed her mouth without any concern toward their audience. Her surprise transitioned into alarm when he kept kissing her far past any doubt that this was outside the realm of familial affection, his hands cupping her jaw to keep her from twisting away from him as he deepened it. That pleasant warmth bloomed in her treacherous body but she pushed feebly against his shoulders and grunted in protest under his passionate mouth. When at last he pulled away, she met her wide eyes with a pointed stare that conveyed something, some reason that he had done that. Her mind whirled with what that could mean as she frantically glanced back to Mr. Renfro to see that he had indeed seen, in fact had been staring with that odd glint, and she hurriedly looked away when a strange grin pulled at the corners of his thin mouth.

“Is that how it is, Leif?” he drawled.

Leif rose from his knelt position next to the sofa, leveling his cold stare and empty smile at the stranger as he said, “Let’s go have that talk.”

She recognized the tension in her father’s posture turn in that almost undetectable way he worked. Just a slight straightening of his shoulders and the tilt of his head told her that told her he was wary as they disappeared around the corner toward what she supposed would be the back room. The worry she’d had that they’d been exposed evolved into confusion at how he had purposely exposed their relationship to this stranger. Wooziness swirled her thoughts as she obeyed his unspoken command to figure out why. He had to have trusted this stranger if he let him in on such a volatile secret. After all, he was a friend of her grandfather’s. But that wariness in him, that pointed look... That display wasn’t spontaneous, that she knew. If only she weren’t so sleepy, if only this house wasn’t so soothingly warm, she could focus but the world was shifting again until she stood calf-deep in dark water.

She held her instant camera, ready to shoot the quartet of blond boys rough housing in front of her, and waited until the perfect moment when all their smiles could be captured to take the shot. Their laughter and splashing echoed through the trees, their mirth contagious enough to drag a chuckle out of her as she waited for the photo to develop. But instead of a gaggle of brothers, a lone thin man with a whitening blond beard and milky gray eyes stared back at her through the picture.

She startled awake, her heart thumping a quick tattoo and sweat dampening her hairline as she struggled to sit up on the old sofa. She wondered why it hadn’t occurred to her then or why it mattered so much now that Bjørn had taken all those photos in the album Henrik had shown her. It explained why he was only in a couple of them. But that wasn’t what she was supposed to be
pondering. She dragged a shaking hand over her face as she tried to remember what she was supposed to figure out. The thought was gone. Sighing disappointedly, she fell back onto the sofa and let her eyes drift shut again. Fatigue quickly dragged her back into sleep, that sweet darkness enveloping her with blissful peace even as a different dream started up.

She stood in a wood paneled hallway, the musty green carpet muffling her footsteps as she approached the sound of a man speaking from a room at the end of it.

“He said it was an accident but we all knew that was a bald-faced lie. He didn’t have to kill my boy, god damn it...”

Worried the camera she held was malfunctioning, she turned it towards her and snapped a quick selfie, half paying attention to the rambling old man as she slowly walked down the hall and waited for it to develop.

“...Oh yeah. He did tell me a little something about his granddaughter. About what she did. Well, I guess you know all about cleaning up after someone crazy, too. Shame that it seems to run in the family...”

Disappointment dampened her spirits when this photo turned out wrong too. She didn’t have that lily in her mouth when she took the picture. Aggravatedly, she tossed the picture aside and looked past the old man standing with his back turned toward her in the doorway, seeing her father sitting on the edge of a bed with a strange expression on his face. Through all the masks he wore, she had never seen this one, so it took her a moment to piece together what that cold glint in his steady glare and tautly drawn mouth meant. Though this stranger did have a handgun aimed at him, it wasn’t fear or even hatred. Leif was not an emotional man to her understanding, so that didn’t surprise her.

“... I know ya didn’t have anything to do with what happened back then, but secrets like ours are worth a lot. Of course, if ya don’t wanna pay cash, I do accept an eye for an eye...”

Her father’s eyes glanced toward her for just a moment as the man continued to ramble, but that was all it took to finally click in her mind what his face had been saying. He simply wanted the man dead. She let her gaze drift to the wrinkled neck just a foot away from her, a familiar strangeness clouding over her state as she thought on how delicate human bodies were. She was reminded of the specialized anatomical drawing course she took in art school, seeing the wraps of red muscle and yellowed fat from those medical textbook illustrations now superimposed on this man’s neck. She could see those fragile soft tissues unfold like a blooming lily to reveal the map of arteries and veins beneath, each squirming and hot with the blood that pumped through them fast and hard from this man’s fear. He stunk of fear, a sour scent that served to pull her further into her entrancement. The carotid artery, a glistening and petal pink tube, sung to her with its percussive serenade and she swallowed the excess saliva that pooled in her mouth from her excitement. It would take a bit of work, but she could reach it. Daddy would be so impressed.

“It doesn’t look like ya wanna go that route though, so—huh?”

The gunshot was deafening as she bit down and his screams were loud and lasting while she locked onto that column of soft flesh and tore. Her gym teacher had drilled proper form into her, so she primarily engaged her shoulder and back muscles to drive her wrenching jaw. The neck was a delicate thing, after all, and she didn’t want to risk injuring hers by depending too heavily on her strength there. The man struggled and she was nearly bucked off, but thankfully Leif had already been distracting him in his task to wrestle the gun away so she was mostly unbothered by their horseplay. Under the skin, the hot flesh was tough and slippery with blood. The muscles and fat registered less as a person and more as uncooked meat while she ripped it apart in her search for that artery, not entirely unlike an unseasoned and warmed steak tartar. More like a ceviche if the dish
were ever available in pork, she decided. Not good, but nothing she would snub if she were starving.

A second gunshot made the old man jerk under her and she sagged to the ground with him. His dancing veins decreased their quick tempo until they were weakly leaking around her lips and chin as she tried to dig out that carotid artery before the light faded from him entirely. But she was too late. Her father pried her off the man and she looked down at the deep hole she’d gnawed into that neck, a strange sense that something was wrong creeping into the fog of her mind before the dream shifted.

A dribble of saliva and blood crawled down the edge of her mouth as she laughed and she wiped it away on the sleeve of her favorite sweater. Seeing that she was wearing it struck her as the most perfect thing in the world. She loved this sweater. She followed the other sleeve and found Leif’s hand holding hers at the end of it, her much smaller hold being completely engulfed in his.

He looked at her as they walked through the peaceful woods toward the old truck, his gray eyes catching the light to glitter like silver and she glowed at the fondness he projected toward her. Whatever he was, she knew his position as her father had remained consistent through to the true core of him and her heart still yearned to draw out his parental approval. So, she smiled, finding it an easy and natural thing to do being so free from fear in this dreamland, and her heart soared at the squeeze from his hand in response. If only it was actually this easy.

Shock. It had to be shock that kept Anders from pushing Simone away, running out of the shower, packing his bags and fleeing back to Norway that very second. It wasn’t a lie, he was absolutely shocked at how something so simple as a kiss obliterated all shame and sense in him. Those full, sensual lips were softer than he had imagined as she pressed and flexed them against his, that deft little tongue bolder than he would have figured as it coaxed his own to return its caress, that needy moan more alluring than he could have been prepared to resist. He was caught completely off guard when she pushed him against the glass wall of the box shower and pressed her soft, wet torso against his nearly naked body. When she started to slide down, it was only reflexes that had him catch her in a nearly crushing embrace and hold her to him as she tilted her head and deepened the kiss. The jeans she wore were heavy with water and already sagging down halfway over the full rounded crest of her ass, so it just took a little push for her to convince them to slide down to her knees and let her press the front of her lacy little panties against his thigh. He could feel every bit of her through the thin, soaked to translucent material as it clung to her like a second skin and molded into every cleft and cranny. His knee acted completely on its own to wedge further between her legs and push up on her crotch and she moaned again into the kiss, that high needy sound shooting excitement right to his groin as his cock rapidly began to stiffen. This was all progressing too fast for him to react properly or even think as she rocked against his thigh and rubbed his cock between their pressed bodies with the motion.

“Please,” she panted when their kiss broke for her to breathe. She didn’t pause in her motions, in fact rocked against him with an increased urgency that stirred an animal part of his brain. “Please, please, please… I need you, Anders, please fuck me again…”

Out of his limited English, he understood every word of what she had said just then and what it had implied. Guilt doused some of the fevered response she had immolated his higher brain function with, returning enough control over himself to pull back when she went in for another kiss. Instead, she left a scorching trail of open, wet kisses along his jaw and neck that apparently short circuited that guilt.
“God damn, fuck, stop!” he gasped, his hands squeezing at her hips but unable to put any real force in stopping her rocking motions. She sucked at a spot under his ear that made his toes curl and it took him a moment of doglike panting before he could begin again in English, “Stop! You need stop!”

“I can’t,” she whispered, the desperate edge of her voice so close to his ear that it sent shivers down his spine. He groaned as her teeth just lightly scraped down his neck and then latched onto the same bite marks she had made in him earlier, the strong suck she pulled at the skin making his hips buck against her. This was wrong, this was an unforgivable sin, this was disgustingly depraved, and it was the hottest thing he’d ever experienced.

“Fuck, baby, ah fuck…” he panted, his hands sliding from her shapely hips to fondle the soft and springy flesh of her ass. He had wanted to sink his fingers into those round globes from the moment he saw her, and that desire that had haunted his guilt-ridden fantasies was now fulfilled and left him only wanting more. He felt like the filthiest villain to be doing this to his own niece, but she needed it so bad. How could he deny her what she needed?

“Please…” she breathed. He tensed when her hand pulled at the waistband of his boxers, the wettened material clinging to him so revealingly as to be useless as anything but a symbolic barrier between them. He needed that symbolic barrier to keep his sanity, however, and he quickly wrenched her hand away. What they were doing was bad enough, he couldn’t let them go further. Nothing below their underwear, he’d decided. He reasoned that incest didn’t count in some places unless it was penetrative sex, so that would be his line in the sand. He was just letting her get what she needed, after all. Leif had done something to that effect and he was her father, so Anders can do that much. It was comparably less sinful with him just being her uncle. Of course, he still didn’t know what Leif exactly did to relieve her. The thought of Leif doing this with Simone, of her straddling her father’s leg and sucking at his neck while he guided her rolling hips under the banner of taking care of his daughter, stirred an anger in him he knew was entirely hypocritical but there nonetheless.

“Does Leif do this for you?” he asked. She didn’t respond, most likely not understanding, but he had to know for his own conscience that he wasn’t taking her beyond whatever boundaries her father had set between them. There was also a darker, more primal drive that felt too close to jealousy and possessiveness that he didn’t want to think about. She gasped sharply as he rucked up his knee further, the sound feeding into that darker part of him. “Does he fuck you? Is that why you want me to do it?”

She arched her back to lean up and this time he met her in another deep kiss. The sensations it created in him were intoxicating him further and he started rocking into her motions, matching her rhythm until they were both grinding against each other in a chase for mutual release that he tried to mentally deny even as he throbbed against the heavenly slide of her soft body. He was supposed to just be helping her, but she felt so good and under that copper tang of blood and mouthwash mint she tasted so addictive. They’d already done much worse, even if he could only recall bits and pieces, so this was a comparably acceptable concession. Besides, she enjoyed this, rocking against him with a heightened fervor they both appreciated with heavy breaths and moans.

His shame rose over him like a breaking wave at the realization of where his mind had gone and he stopped his movements, much to her seeming disappointment as she made a needy little noise that nearly broke through his guilt. He shouldn’t be doing any of this, shouldn’t have let her kiss him, and definitely shouldn’t have kissed her back. He knew he was hurting her despite what she thought she wanted, but he was so weak and selfish. There was no blackout drunk excuse for his behavior this time. In the bright light of day after spending hours repenting and reflecting on the evil that he’d done, he had chosen to harm her further. They might not have been having sex, but they were simulating it. He was absolutely going to Hell.
“I’m sorry, dear, I’m so sorry,” he muttered, his hands moving away from her.

“No, no! Please, please, please keep going!” she begged. Her little hands clenched at his shoulders and everything about her was full of desperation and need, but he couldn’t be weak. He had to stop this for her sake.

“Ssh, shh, it’s okay, dear,” he murmured softly, removing her hands from him and slowly easing her to sit on the tiled floor as her shaky legs buckled without the aid of her hold on him. The spot she had been rutting against above his knee was hot from her warmth and friction, burning him like a brand of sin. He ached for his own release but much worse than that, worse than even his shame at what he’d done, was the ache in him that he had to deny her what she needed. “We can’t do this, Simone. I know you can’t understand me, but try to understand that we simply can’t do this. I’ve probably already fucked you up for life and there’s nothing I can do to make that better, but I don’t have to make it worse.”

She stared up at him, confusion and pain welling tears in her eyes, and it almost broke him down. Almost. He couldn’t bring himself to just leave her there on the shower floor, though. He’d promised Leif he’d clean her up, so he pursed his lips and returned his attention to the task. Working up a hefty lather with the bar of his father’s soap, he tried to ignore the way she trembled and sighed as he worked it over her soft skin. She turned away from him but allowed him to touch her, hiding her face as he pushed down every thought that wasn’t strictly condemning what had passed between them. But her obvious shame weighed heavily on him. It frustrated him that he couldn’t make her understand that he had failed to enforce the boundaries Leif had warned him she was incapable of establishing herself. The shame was entirely his and he wished he could make her see that, but even if he said it to her in perfect English, he doubted she would agree. At least maybe not until she grew older and realized what a cad he was to take advantage of her like that. The suds were stained pink as they broke down the remaining blood on her, leaving her skin once more a creamy expanse of unblemished honey brown when they were rinsed away. As he stood above her huddled, shaking form, he felt a painful twinge of yearning and indulged in the impulse to kneel behind her and pull her into a hug. She tensed at first, then melted in his embrace, leaning back against his chest with a heavy sigh.

“I am so sorry,” he said against her soaked hair, once more wishing he could make her understand why.

“Sorry for what, Anders?” Leif’s voice rose above the sound of the shower. Anders jumped away from the girl, wincing when he immediately realized how much guiltier that made him look, and whipped around to see his brother’s blurry form through the fogged glass.
Leif was not prone to sentimental whims. He did not believe in such fantastic ideologies as an afterlife or souls. The world held enough magic and mystery to sustain him without having to turn to fiction. He believed this disposition had enabled him to obtain a higher appreciation for the value of life in knowing that all that was truly was and all unseen might not be, that everyone and everything is afforded their one chance and there are no refunds or prizes at the end for living a life diluted by that very thinking. Nature builds upon itself through replication and reproduction, and so had Leif in one of the most common and impactful of methods. But in passing on his genetic code, he couldn’t fully appreciate that he had passed on the code of others swimming in his blood until he had seen their uncanny appearances in his daughter. She had his eyes and his good bone structure in petite and feminine miniature with Lisa’s more rounded islander features to soften the angles into something more striking and less predatory. All the typical observations of parentage manifested physically in offspring were present and noted by him with all due joy, but it wasn’t until much later that he had become privy to just how principal genetics were in determining less obvious traits. He did not believe in resurrection or spiritual mysticism, but he had seen the dead come back to life in many small ways through Simone.

Sitting on the edge of the bed in that tacky wood paneled room with the outdated dark green carpet, he saw his long-departed uncle in the cool intrigue of her gaze as it drifted to Renfro. She looked at his neck like one would notice a picture hanging slightly crooked and corrected it with the same self-satisfied detachment when her teeth tore through his jugular. The gunshot filled the small quarters with a deafening pop and Leif may or may not have imagined the whoosh of air as a bullet zoomed past his temple, but it did leave his ears ringing and Renfro’s screams were distant and muffled now. Nonetheless, he had missed and sealed his fate. Leif did not allow him a second turn and pounced on the hand holding the well-worn pistol, adrenaline giving the older man an unfortunate edge as it took Leif a bit of struggling to disarm him.

All the while, rivulets of red poured copiously from the wound Simone had inflicted—no, was still inflicting with her bite. She held onto the man’s shoulder and craned his head to the side with a surprising strength Leif could only assume came from her dissociated mental state. As he wrestled the gun out of Renfro’s hand, he caught how she dislodged a great chunk of mangled flesh with a pull of her jaw, the stringy protein of muscle and elasticity of skin and veins stretching before snapping away. It fell at their feet, red and pink of flesh and yellow and white of fat and skin, before she dove back in to repeat the maneuver with a single-minded determination of searching for something she knew to be there. Leif fired the weapon once through the side of Renfro’s skull, not producing a clean kill as he had to mind his daughter’s proximity, and Simone sank with him to the floor as the man’s scrambled brains lost control of his body. What took Renfro’s life in the end was having great gouts of his blood pour into a growing pool around him while he stared in a vegetable state.

While he dropped the pistol and pulled his daughter bodily away from her task, he watched the light of life fade from the man in the closest Leif would ever concede to witnessing a spiritual event. After that fascinating moment, Simone wriggled from his arms like a petulant child and he numbly released her to let her wander back down the hall. Of all the scenarios he had predicted would take place after leaving her with only a kiss to warn her of possible danger, he had not envisioned anything as interesting as what had taken place.

Hours later, as he stood outside the downstairs bathroom door back at his father’s house, he began to doubt his predictive reasoning when he was met with a scenario he had not expected for the second time that day. He had expected to find his daughter already clean and Anders waiting with far too
many questions, but he had found neither after searching the house. Instead, he was met with a tense no when he had asked Henrik and Vidar if either had seen them and the sound of the shower running behind the locked bathroom door. It hadn’t occurred to him until after Anders had left with the girl that she might murder him, but being confronted with the very real silence behind that door made his blood run cold. The importance of family was one of the few sentimental values he allowed himself and, despite his frequent annoyance with the intrusively helpful brat, he did have a certain measure of affection for his meddlesome baby brother. Silently, he worked the springs in the antique lock with a letter opener until the door unlatched with a quiet click, then he took a moment to prepare himself for the worst before stepping inside and relocking the door behind him.

More than anything, he was simply surprised at himself for having read his brother wrong. Instead of lying in a pool of blood, he seemed to have caught him in an intimate moment with his darling girl. Through the fogged glass shower wall, he could see Anders rubbing soap over the creamed coffee expanse of his daughter’s nude form as she knelt on the floor. Though his hands worked with the efficient diligence of a nurse, this was beyond inappropriate even for the ignorant bumpkin.

Though Leif didn’t consider himself a man of passion, as he placed the letter opener next to the sink and unfolded his father’s pocketknife, he supposed he could commit what would be known as a crime of passion. Standing mere inches away from his brother with only the glass door between him and the blade, he had a moment to let his rage fill him with the righteous bloodlust of the trespassed that had driven even good men to murder. Leif was not a good man. There was no moral threshold for him to cross, no panic of identity or values to overcome, nothing but a narrow list of options to choose from. Though acid pumped through his every vein and the antler handle of the knife seemed to squirm excitedly in his fist, his mind was clear. He could kill Anders now and very likely get away with it in defense of his daughter’s virtue, but there was a fresh corpse planted in the yard and a long record of his name peppering cold case files that, while mitigated due to his caution, would invite a second look when they run him. Murder was not a federal crime, but Leif had crossed state lines and Renfro had almost definitely kidnapped victims, bringing the potential for retrial or investigation on a federal level even if he lucked out with the local boys. The timing couldn’t have been worse.

Besides, he was a family man. He supposed he should be generous enough to afford his baby brother the benefit of the doubt. After all, this might just be an innocent misunderstanding, though a part of him hoped for a reason to harm him. The muscles around the knife handle twisted and bunched as it begged for blood, but he folded it and placed it back into his pocket.

Slipping out with a practiced silence to his movement, he made a detour to the kitchen and addressed his other two brothers there, “It completely slipped my mind until now, but could you two make a town run and pick up a leg of lamb at the butcher block? I’ll sponsor a few beers at the counter there for you while you wait for them to dress it.”

He barely registered anything past their amused acquiescence and he left them with a wad of cash and a request to get moving soon if they wanted it cooked by that night. They were already shifting to stand from the table as he left them to fetch what he needed from his pack upstairs.

This was it. Anders knew he was going to die in the same house Einar had died in, in the same trip he’d flown over to say goodbye to the father who had been absent all his life. Anders didn’t know if it was poetic or ironic or anything at all, but he was sure it had some sort of cathartic ring to it. In any case, he knew he had failed the trial God had set upon him in the form of his tempting little niece and he had failed spectacularly. But despite knowing he was already a dead man, despite knowing he was a soulless sinner who had failed his own redemption, despite insisting he was a good person
who would admit and repent his for his sins, he still didn’t want to die.

“I can explain,” he insisted, holding his hands up palm forward in his habitual placating gesture and attempted to keep the terrified tremble out of his throat. He flinched back a step when his brother opened the glass shower door and looked at him with a mirthless grin and a cold glint in his slate gray eyes.

“Sorry for what, Anders?” Leif repeated. The unperturbed calm in his oldest brother’s demeanor as he slowly turned his head to stare at Simone’s huddled form on the shower floor only heightened his terror. She was too naked, they were both too naked to be touching the way Leif had definitely seen. If he had been watching them just minutes prior, Anders was sure he would already have been murdered.

“I-I couldn’t get the blood… I couldn’t… You told me to get her clean, right?” he stammered rapidly. Leif’s glare shooting back up at him froze him as though his stare was a knife held to his throat.

“Sorry for what, Anders?” Leif repeated, this time anger bleeding into the raised volume of the question. Even in the warm steam from the hot shower pouring over him, Anders felt himself flash cold and every hair on his body raised at the slight growl in Leif’s voice. He’d never, not even at his most frighteningly mad, had heard him use that voice and it was effectively petrifying. He winced as Leif kept the shower door blocked and continued in a chillingly soft voice, “I warned you about maintaining boundaries with her. This doesn’t seem like very strong boundaries are in effect, does it?”

Anders’ throat wouldn’t respond to his command to speak at first, then he managed to croak, “I… I didn’t, um, think she would… wake up.”

He regretted the words the moment they left his numb mouth, wincing again as Leif let out a dry chuckle and shook his head in disbelief. “I know I say this a lot, but you are the dumbest man I know. Look, I don’t want to have to do this. You’re my brother, so I’m going to give you a gift. If you can give me one good reason why I shouldn’t bash your skull in on the floor right here, I’m giving you that opportunity.”

For a moment, Anders’ mind was horribly blank. He clawed at his thoughts, trying to pull out any coherent answer or thought but there was nothing except a scramble of static. Then, he became aware of Simone’s shallow panting at his feet and looked down at her defensively crouched form. She was rolled into a tight ball with her hands locked over the back of her head and he could see that her arms were trembling as though she were freezing. She was relaxed in his hold just a moment ago, but she was like a terrified animal since Leif had spoken. Something wasn’t right between them. He no longer felt as panicked when he focused on her.

“She needed help,” Anders finally responded, no stammer or placating lilt, just a statement of fact. Leif glared at him, that impassive mask of an expression betraying nothing of his thoughts, and Anders waited with every muscle in his body humming to move but his mind finally clear. Whatever her mental state, whatever relationship they had, something was so wrong between Simone and Leif that it had her cowering in fear of his anger even when it was not directed at her. Despite the unforgiveable things he’d done to her, he couldn’t leave her alone with that. Something about this girl drew him in and pulled a strong instinctive drive to protect and help her. He needed to figure out how to go about doing that.

After a long moment, Leif asked so quietly that his voice was nearly lost in the roar of the shower, “How did you clean off the blood?”
Anders blinked, not at all expecting the question, but answered evenly, “Warm wash cloth. It didn’t work so well, so I took her in here. That’s when she—”

“A warm wash cloth?” Leif repeated incredulously, his brow furrowed and lip curled in disgust. “You’re almost fucking thirty years old and you used a warm wash cloth on dried blood?”

“Was I… not supposed to?”

Leif stared at him like he had grown two heads, then scoffed, “Every idiot knows that hydrogen peroxide breaks down blood. That’s why Einar kept a jug of it in the laundry room, remember? There’s a bottle of it in this very fucking bathroom, in fact. Jesus, Anders, I didn’t think I’d have to give you written *fucking instructions.*”

Anders once again found himself more offended than he thought he should be capable of feeling when faced with his imminent destruction, but bit off his defensive reply with a short, “Sorry. Didn’t know that.”

“Thank you for pointing out the obvious, you insipid bumpkin,” Leif seethed. He leaned over and turned the rusted taps off, the squeal of the metal loud in the echo of the shower as the roar of the water dribbled into quiet. The only sound filling the room now was Simone’s panicked panting, her narrow ribcage expanding and contracting rapidly, reminding Anders of a rabbit caught in a snare. His palms itched to help her up and comfort her, but he had a hunch he’d get his teeth knocked out if he tried. The sound she made when Leif pulled her up by her arms was something between a whimper and a yelp, a noise of pure distress that yanked hard at that odd feeling in Anders.

“Do you want some help with her?” he asked despite his better judgment.

“I think you’ve done enough, don’t you?” Leif remarked dryly, not looking at him as he walked her out of the box shower. Her steps were clumsy and stunted by the jeans that hung around her calves. He pulled her to the rug, a dark green circle that matched the dark green tiles of the walls like an algae-filled pond in the center of the floor, and wrapped a white towel around her shoulders. Anders stepped out of the fogged glass box, watching in morbid fascination as Leif tended to her. Her frightened stare was fixed unseeingly to the floor, head bowed submissively while her father stood a little too close, a little too looming, his hands a little too slow as they rubbed the towel over her in a way that seemed a little too close to fondling. Anders couldn’t look away from the hands that rubbed the towel over her hips, up her back, around her front, her lip tucking under her front teeth in a bite as those hands slid slowly along the side of her breast. *Does he fuck you?* Anders’ breath came as harsh as hers seemed to.

He almost didn’t hear Leif say, “I want to be able to trust you.”

“I would never hurt her.” *Liar.*

Leif looked at him with a sharp smirk that made Anders wonder if he could read his thoughts, then said, “Sometimes you have to hurt to help.”

Leif’s hands fell from the narrow indentation of her waist, then they were in his pockets as he approached. Anders had to force himself to stay, feet bolted to the ground, ready to accept that punch in the face that was threatened the other day – was that just yesterday? Jesus—or that skull-bashing he had certainly earned, and shut his eyes when he saw that hand move out of his pocket. Instead of the boom of blunt force trauma he’d expected, he winced at the sharp piercing pain in the side of his neck and blinked in confusion. When his fingers brushed the syringe sticking out of his jugular, he didn’t have time to register his fear or sudden wooziness before the floor came up to meet him and enclosed him in darkness.
When Simone was still what people would later call high-functioning, she had wanted to become a surgeon by her mother’s encouragement. Steady hands, excellent hand-eye coordination and a clinical impartialness toward blood was a combination of traits not to be wasted. Taking advance placement STEM classes with students two grades ahead of her had stretched her math skills, but she was able to keep up and got to dissect a lot of frogs. Her mother had appointed herself as an authority in her social life, dictated who she should be friends with based on their likelihood of entering the medical field and especially if they had parents who were doctors, inviting them over for dinners and pushing Simone through her shyness to consult them about her future career. The pressure was as well-received as any young teenager was capable, occasionally met with screaming matches across the apartment and slammed doors, but Simone did want to become a surgeon and did not resent that her life had revolved around that expectation most of the time.

That was before she had lost the rest of her mind.

It had taken her six years of infrequent psychiatric visits, research, journaling, prodding and poking to figure out that it was all just guesswork and science so soft it often couldn’t hold its own shape. Her mother was waiting for a cure that didn’t exist and had left Simone alone to accept that a paintbrush was safer than a scalpel would ever be in her gifted and steady hands. She knew what kinds of crazy made up the patchwork of her mental illness, had found her triggers and kept vigilant awareness of her limited control over her own mind. She knew what types of crazy she wasn’t. She wasn’t a killer. She couldn’t be a killer, there was simply no prerequisite behavior in her. Even madness had a pattern.

She did not know what her father’s pattern was. He wore normalcy like a costume and she’d watched him fool even those who would consider him their close friend with his imitation of a career-driven man who is charming and attentive to others, if a little reserved. She was disturbed by how envy had snuck into where fear would usually rest while she pondered his ability to disguise himself as a normal human being so well that he had everyone – his wife, his friends, his brothers, herself – completely unaware of the thing that had stood right in front of them. He was able to craft and perform a personality so well that they only saw the Leif Valstad he’d wanted them to see, while she could barely hold onto her own identity. She’d seen him peel off that initial layer when they were alone even before things had changed between them. The man who he let himself be when it was just the two of them had a much more solemn demeanor, always watching and observing her with a quiet intensity that both drew out her desire to please and behave well for him and instinctively repelled her. She used to suspect, with deep sadness, that it was resentment or wariness that had given him such a grave regard for her. She didn’t know back then that it was simply closer to what he really was, didn’t know how much he had been holding back until he’d let it out, didn’t know just how close she was to his teeth until he sank them into her. Maybe uncle Anders had gotten too close to his teeth, too.

“How do you know when you’re not dreaming?” she asked. Leif tested the necktie he’d used to secure her wrists to the metal frame of the twin bed Anders had been sleeping in. He glanced down at her with that reptile intelligence behind his glass eyes.

“All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream,” he answered. She turned her head, saw Anders slumped against the wall, his chest still moving in steady breaths and his hair dripping water down his bare chest. Her mother used to read her Poe, made a funny voice whenever she quoth the raven, but she had always wanted Daddy to read to her with his nice rumbly voice that made her so sleepy and safe. He pressed his hand to her cheek and turned her head back to face him. “Pretend he
isn’t there. It’s just you and me, darling girl.”

He’d brushed her teeth while Anders lied there on the bathroom floor with the needle still sticking out of his neck. Until she felt the plastic push awkwardly against her cheek, she’d forgotten how he used to have to do this when the meds the doctors were trying on her had left her completely inept. Her mother couldn’t even watch. Simone didn’t believe she was supposed to be able to remember that, but it came floating up out of the dark of her mind like a corpse finally bloated enough to surface. She was glad the taste of blood was finally out of her mouth. His lips pressed slow and sweet to hers and she parted for his tongue with a slight moan.

She needed to believe that it was just an awful waking nightmare in a line of waking nightmares. The itchy, horrible feeling of being so out of control of her own body needed to be chased away by something intense and real as touch. She needed to fuck to forget, needed that rush of physical sensation and dopamine to flood out the lingering horror. Anders could have given her that. The heady brain fog of lust was doing so well to cloud any outside thought as she fell into the single-minded pursuit of frenzied sex. It was the scent of freshly dug soil Leif had brought in with him that had brought the horror back. She used to help her mother’s mother garden during summer trips to her home on Aiea. The sound of a shovel scraping the dirt echoed through the trees in her mind as she tried hard to think of the lush tropical dark greens instead of sparser and more ashen maples.

Leif’s hands smelled like dish soap up to his elbows. She figured he must have washed them in the kitchen, taken the time to scrape the dirt out from under his nails before he touched her. That was the way he loved her. He drew back from kissing her and grabbed her chin with his soap-scented hand, craning her head back into the mattress as his teeth sunk in bruising bites down the side of her neck. She gasped, held her breath and then tried not to scream, didn’t want to alert Anders, didn’t want to think too hard on how her hips bucked and squirmed under the pressure of his pelvis with each bite. He was hard against her, both of them bare and her cunt was achingly wet, but he just held the underside of his cock flush along her slit. It felt good to feel him slide against her slick clit, but she needed him inside. She needed him to hurt her in ways that were real.

“Dad,” she whispered. He licked a stripe up her neck and scraped her earlobe with his teeth, making her shiver in waves down her spine. Her voice shook high and thin. “I need to go to a hospital.”

“I’m here to take care of you,” he assured her, all fatherly confidence and care. She flinched as his tongue passed over her ear canal, his breath loud and heavy. Her cunt throbbed.

“I can’t…” she whimpered, words breaking off as the urge to sob gripped her throat. She shut her eyes tight against the tears and he reached between them, angling the tip of his cock against her opening. As he pushed in, that tear he’d made in her stretched and threatened to undo the healing it had accomplished. Her gasps were high and sharp as he pumped into her, his mouth still close to her ear with his forehead pressed into the mattress.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered, breath ragged and so close. He fucked her slowly, inching into her bit by bit, taking his time and she could feel every throb and twitch of his cock in time with his pounding heart. “I’ll dissolve these barriers you’ve built to protect yourself.”

He growled against her neck, picked up his tempo, made her hurt but not enough to bleed again. She was too wet for the friction of his slow thrusts to drag that injury open quite yet, the sounds of him sliding in and out of her obscene in the small room.

“I’ll break you down and you will rise from the ashes of your mind born anew,” he whispered breathily into her wet hair, nuzzling against her and sealing his promise with a line of chaste kisses from her temple to the side of her panting mouth. His lips carried away the damp trail of her tears.
“Please just take me to a hospital…” she whispered. He hushed her and began thrusting hard enough to make the bedsprings groan and creak under them. Her body began to bear down in pursuit of its climax, that cock dragging against a ridge in her that made her gasps hitch high with each pass. Her thighs parted wider and her back bowed to drive him deeper; years of gymnastics class finally showing their worth. Beside them on the floor, Anders groaned. Leif came in her with a low, guttural growl as she writhed in pain beneath him, his cock mashed uncomfortably against her cervix as he pushed his weight down into her and held it there. She was so desperately close to coming, her body humming with the drive to fuck up against that painful cock, but he held her solidly down as he filled her.

When at last he let up his weight, still lingering inside her and pressing their sweat-dampened foreheads together affectionately, he whispered, “You’re my most precious legacy, Simone.”

“Daddy…” she breathed, voice cracking into a croak as he pulled out of her. She pulled her legs together and curled on her side as best she could when he dismounted the bed, savoring this now-familiar pain as it felt so much safer than what had plagued her before. The buzzing in her head, the sex and the sorrow, cut deep and drowned out so much. When the bed dipped next to her, she was so far gone that she couldn’t pay it much mind, but heavy and calloused hands fumbled to bring her attention back to whatever reality this was. Shock and bewilderment woke her from her stupor when she looked to see her father sitting a semi-conscious and now completely nude Anders next to her.

“Open your legs again, darling,” Leif instructed her. Simone couldn’t find the words to voice her confusion at first, only able to cry out a sharp yelp when her father took it upon himself to yank her ankles down and apart.

“What are you doing?!” she asked, her cracking voice making the question far too quiet for her level of panic.

“If you won’t cooperate, I’ll find rope for your legs too,” he warned. The threat seemed redundant considering how incapable she already was to move from the bed, but she knew he would make it more unpleasant than she was able to imagine.

“Please, please don’t do this,” she pleaded even as she let him push and position Anders between her legs. Her uncle seemed only conscious enough to stop himself from crushing her as he loomed over her body on his hands and knees, his half-lidded eyes blinking slowly and face drunkenly slack. She stared up at him, unable to look away, chest clenched in anxiety and bafflement. She’d never be able to see her father’s pattern. Leif pushed his brother’s hips down until he sat, his legs folded under him.

“Up, up,” he said, tapping her hip until she lifted her ass up onto her uncle’s lap. She swallowed thickly when his torso brushed up against her sloppy cunt, her eyes now seeking any clues from her father as he adjusted her hips until they were more flush against Anders.

“Papa?” she whispered uncertainly. He looked at them critically for a moment, judging their positioning with a contemplative stare, and then pushed his brother’s shoulders until he was folded over her. Anders’ hands pawed at her clumsily, his breaths labored and hot on her neck, and her body reminded her of her unfulfilled orgasm. She winced with shame.

“*Gi henne det hun trenger*, Anders,” he said, smiling and patting him on the back encouragingly. Anders responded with a dull grunt, his hands gripping her ribcage right under her breasts more intently.

“Papa?!” she nearly exclaimed, that panic rising. Surely, Leif wouldn’t. This was depraved, even for him.
He leaned down near her ear and grinned, “Show him a good time, darling girl. He’ll be a lot more active in just a minute.”

The spike of dread that fell into her stomach nearly took her breath away as she watched him walk out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind him.
Leif had learned a lot about anesthesiology in his experiments on his daughter and had worked out a few promising routines, this specific cocktail proving particularly interesting. While the potential for cardiac and pulmonary failure was too risky to be considered for long-term use, the propofol worked perfectly to render her quickly unconscious long enough for the low dose of temazepam to interact and really bring out the disinhibiting and suggestibility effects of both drugs by the time she had regained a semi-conscious state. Her memory loss during that semi-conscious state was too inconsistent and seemed to be a mechanism of her frequent psychological repression rather than an effect of the cocktail itself, so he couldn’t depend on it even without the health risks. However, the disinhibition and suggestibility was fascinating. His shy little Simone would pursue him avidly and did so with such lustful and forward zeal, not a hint of resistance or embarrassment in the debauched displays he was tempted to entreat her to. Though he had eventually trained her mind and body to adapt a dependency to sex, it was entertaining to see what he could unlock in an instant medicinally.

When he’d injected the milky substance into his brother’s jugular, he knew he was risking a certain amount of danger. Disinhibition is unpredictable in its very nature, after all, and he wouldn’t be surprised if Anders had manifested a violent hostility without the mental restraint to suppress it. So, when his brother began to rouse from the propofol, he worked quickly to set up a situation that would stimulate the effect he sought and removed himself from the room to mitigate any undesired hostility. He would have to depend on the euphoria of the propofol and the enticement of having sweet little Simone writhing under him for Anders to act accordingly.

“Please, please don’t… You can’t… This isn’t you, Anders.”

Wind them up and watch them go. Or at least hear them go, as he stood outside the door to the little guest room and listened in on his latest experiment. His rage was evaporating like sweat off his skin with this vengeance, leaving only a film of disappointment in the lad. Whatever sticky-fingered fumbling in the shower that rube had intended to enact upon his own dear little niece was undoubtedly toothless and fainthearted compared to the acts Leif had planned on driving him to commit, but it was a trespassing nonetheless. Leif could not tolerate anyone touching what was his without his permission. He had to teach the younger man the simple lesson: Simone was under his control and if Anders wanted to partake in her, it would not be by his own power to do as he wished. Leif was happy to generously teach him this lesson; he was his brother, after all. If he had guessed correctly – and he had, for good men did not lust after their vulnerable nieces-- at the dark mechanisms that worked under Anders’ façade, then this method would do well to both teach him that lesson and cut through that irritating delusion of benevolence to the bone.

“Please, just say something… Tell me this isn’t you. Please, please don’t- ah!”

He could hear the hitch of a sob in her pleas even through the thick oak. Et tu, Brute?

Leif leaned against the door, needing to be certain that Anders wasn’t physically damaging the girl, and distinguished the pain in her cries as emotional anguish and not life-threatening. Guilt and possessiveness sickened him in what he had to put her through, but the lesson was for both her and Anders. He reminded himself that she needed to see there was no inherent altruism in men, that every light cast a shadow and every kindness had a cost. She couldn’t see that Leif was burning these false ideals out of her, that the kindness she sought was in his seeming cruelty. One day, she would know and until then, she would continue to learn. He had seen the way she occasionally looked at his brother with such longing and hope, as though she really believed Anders could be any different. Leif knew what his brother really was even if Anders hadn’t yet fully realized it, but he would show
them both soon enough. From the racket of bedsprings creaking and the impact of skin slapping against skin in there, at least Simone now knew the cruelty in his brother’s deception.

“No! You’ve gotta stop! Please, please hear me, Anders!”

Leif resisted the urge to rush in and beat the man to death, but just barely. His hands shook as they rubbed at his face and the odd tremor confused him. But it was a long day; it was natural he’d be fatigued. Feeling strangely disturbed at the sound of her muffled sobbing through the door, he walked outside to have a cigarette.

She couldn’t look away from his eyes. Those sky-blue irises were just a thin lining eclipsed by widely blown pupils under sleepy, half-shut lids. There was no person behind them, no light of life or thought or feeling emanating from those eyes that once beamed with a steadfast compassion and almost melancholy tenderness at times. This husk of Anders stared back blearily, no longer the strange ally she had come to know but a creature of her father’s making. Like a marionette, his movements were disjointed and unnatural as his fingertips reached out and planted on her cheek. In a poor mimicry of his tender touch, that hand slid slowly down her face, down her neck, down her chest to cup her breast roughly but she couldn’t look away from those horrifyingly empty eyes even as he kneaded her sensitive flesh. His skin was cool from the chilled air where he was folded over her except for his blood-warm cock nestled hard and ready against her sore cunt. Although he pressed his pelvis harder between her spread legs and his breath rattled in and out of him deeper with his rocking motion, there was nothing of the emotional and passionate lover present in the robotic response to her body. Like her father had done to her god knows how many times before, he had chemically stripped Anders of his mind and created another doll to play with as he saw fit. Seeing what it did to someone else, Simone didn’t see how anyone could find enjoyment in something so horrifying.

“Please, please don’t,” she whispered. There was no acknowledgement in his blank expression that she had spoken at all, but she had to believe that Anders was in there somewhere. She had to reach him. “You can’t… This isn’t you, Anders.”

The calloused pad of his thumb rolled her nipple and she flinched at the sharp pain to the tortured skin, her father’s mark still tender. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. It was hard not to let them gather and fall, but she had to maintain composure. Although her body knew this man and burned for what he could give her, she couldn’t let herself be complacent in this twisted game her father had set up. It hurt to look at her kind, sweet uncle and see him used this way, but she couldn’t cry or she might not be able to stop enough to help him. Unexpectedly, he leaned down and pressed their mouths together in an odd slide of slack lips and tongue. Her chest clenched in a deep sadness as she realized he was kissing her when his bleary eyes fell shut and his thick tongue slid against her teeth. Desperate for him to return to normal, she squeezed her eyes shut against her tears and leaned up into his kiss. Her tongue sought his, smoothly and eagerly caressing along that sluggish muscle, trying to coax some recognition deep inside of him. His kiss that was always so full of expression and emotion, so different from the dominating and devouring ones of her father, felt so alien in this absence of feeling. Even though he reacted to her zeal with a low moan into her mouth and a more insistent push of his pelvis, there simply was no feeling in this once intimate act except her own despair. She broke the kiss with a sob and fell heavily to the bed, bending her head backward into the mattress as another tight sob clenched her throat. He took this offering of her neck to drag his tongue down the front of it, that basic drive to seek touch and taste the only motivations she could detect in the artless motion. Staring up at the silver and blue paisley pattern of her makeshift bindings,
she felt so horribly impotent to stop this from happening.

“Please, just say something,” she said, voice high and tight through her useless tears. “Tell me this isn’t you. Please, please don’t- ah!”

She yelped as he pulled his hips further back and let his tip line up to her opening, the feeling of his glans penetrating her briefly the only warning she got before he slammed into her fully. Her back arched off the bed, every muscle drawn taut at this sudden and painful invasion, and her mouth fell open in a silent scream. He didn’t give her a moment to adjust before rearing back and slamming into her again. He fucked her at a brutal pace so unlike the gentle lovemaking he’d insisted on before. There was nothing of Anders in this animalistic taking. Even as he tore open that partially healed wound inside her with a burning stretch and a hot gush of blood, she didn’t feel anything but pity and sorrow for him. She couldn’t hate him for being as much a victim as she was in this.

“No! You’ve gotta stop! Please, please hear me, Anders!” she cried. Her heels dragged frantically over the bedsheets as she kicked and tried to squirm away, but he grabbed her hips in a bruising grip and began fucking her even deeper. The snap of his powerful hips drove his tip to hit her cervix with each thrust and knocked out a high-pitched grunt from her with each painful contact. The sounds of the bedsprings creaking and his pelvis slapping against her ass and thighs set the rapid tempo of his sex. Her entire body was jarred with each thrust and she yanked hard at her bindings, the steel headboard clattering noisily against the wall with their combined motions. Below all this terrible sound and fury, she could hear his heavy breaths growled out above her like some hellish beast huffing with effort and mindless purpose.

Through the pain and the panic, she heard herself crying out and sobbing, “Stop! ANDERS! Oh, god, please stop you have to stop don’t… don’t do this, ple-ease stop! DAD! DAD, PLEASE, END THIS! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’ll be good just please PLEASE DAD! Ah! Ah, god, god no, please…”

The skin under the tie was rubbed raw and sore but she kept yanking on it until at last, with a painful skid across her hands, she slid out of the bindings. Her hands felt crushed and possibly injured, but she wasted no time in trying to push Anders off her. He wouldn’t budge, didn’t even seem to notice that she was trying to get away, and she forced herself to look at him again for the first time since he’d penetrated her. That same terrifying absence met her as he panted and groaned above her. There was a glimmer of relief in the horror of seeing him this way as he effectively raped them both. She knew, with sudden and clear certainty, that Anders would never do this to her. He would never violate or hurt her on purpose. He was always so kind even through her crude and cruel attempts to test that compassion in him. She’d tried to push him away and tear through that façade of compassion only to find that his benevolence for her was bone-deep. She realized now, with a profound ache, that he had been sincere when he’d drunkenly confessed his love for her. Looking up into his unseeing stare as his mindless body raped her at her father’s suggestion, she was horrified at finding that same love echoed in her heart.

“No…” she breathed between her pained panting.

Surely, it was her diseased mind latching onto his kindness or some trick of her starved heart seeking something less harmful than the twisted love of her father, but it ached for Anders just the same. She knew she cared for him, but finding that scorching devotion to him was different from affection or even infatuation. This was dangerous and painful. Her lip quivered as hot tears fell in streams across her temples to soak into her hairline, drawing his attention. He leaned down once more to press his slack lips to hers, but she turned her head and he mouthed at her cheek instead. She couldn’t bare another mechanical and absent kiss like that, not with the horrible revelation of love swirling despair in her thoughts. She didn’t want this feeling. It was so much simpler when it was just a forbidden
lust.

“I’m sorry, Anders,” she whispered.

Though it agonized her to do so, she bared down on his dick and fought against the pain to roll her hips in time with his movements. She had to bite her lip to keep from crying, but that could only muffle her shuddering sobs as she fucked past the pain. Even with how awful it felt to do this, both physically and emotionally, her body still responded to getting fucked with that treacherous climbing pleasure and fog descending over her thoughts. It was tempting to give into that familiar high just to escape, but this wasn’t for her. She needed to get Anders off and out of this hell he unwittingly entered before whatever her father had given him wore off.

His crushing grip let up and he groaned as she began to rock against him, the sound lighting a warmth that felt only depraved in her. Despite her horror, a small but undeniable part of her wanted him to enjoy seeing her helplessly fucked beneath him. If the circumstances were different, if they had come into a similar situation on their own terms and not as pieces in a cruel game, she was intensely curious to experience whatever darkness lurked in this kind man. She wanted him to claim ownership over her like her father had. That creeping curiosity and depravity at a time like this sickened her. She wasn’t like this before, even at her most sexually deviant. It was an awful thing to encounter the evidence of her father’s influence inside her.

He leaned more forward, bracing himself with one hand next to her head and gripping her wavy long locks of hair strewn over the bed there. She could feel his body tensing in approaching orgasm and she reached up with her bruised hands and bloodied wrists to gently cup his face. His bleary eyes blinked and she thought she saw a glimmer of presence in them, at once giving her hope and dread that the drug was wearing off. His thrusts began to stutter and she could feel his cock throb in her.

“Åh helvete…” he groaned, thrusting deep into her and mashing against her cervix as he spilled his seed in her, far too like how her father had come in her.

She shook beneath him, milking his cock as best she could while he held her down and jerked with each throb. That treacherous warmth in her swelled at being filled with his cum and she moaned his name as he pumped into her, the sound of her voice wanton even to her. He responded with a hitched gasp and nearly collapsed on top of her when his orgasm was spent, rolling to his side and narrowly avoiding crushing her under his much larger body. His cock hurt her one last time as he slid out of her, a gush of bloody cum leaking onto the bed and her thighs and ass with the motion. With aching hands, she pushed him to roll over and his unresisting body fell heavily to lay on his back, seemingly asleep from the sedation without the drive to fuck keeping him conscious.

The euphoric cocktail of hormones from such a savage fucking were quickly fading from her and she could feel panic and madness eating away the corners of her mind. She had to get away. She couldn’t do anything further to help Anders and the absence of that purpose left her raw to the fear of her situation. Before this nightmare changed, she had to find somewhere safe to hide. The temptation to slip into that other world was strong enough that she could feel the phantom rush of water up to her calves when she swung her legs over the side of the bed, but she couldn’t give into that weakness. Not now. Not when her father was feeling so cruel. The solidness of the wall as she braced one hand along it kept her grounded enough in reality to not completely dissociate. She swallowed thickly, eyes trained forward as she stepped with numb feet into the hall and avoided looking into the dark forest forming in her peripheral. Get dressed, get out, get away. The instructions mixed into her familiar I’m here I’m fine mantra until the words blended together in a jumble of urgent intention.

She grimaced as she pushed her way into the bedroom she shared with Leif, relief easing some
fraction of the immense tension out of her to see it unoccupied before she set to hurriedly dressing. Sturdy jeans, not the ones with holes in them, thick socks, a few pairs of underwear with a handful of pantyliners for the blood in her pockets, no time to search for her purse, shirt, thick red sweater, red, red, red to be visible if she fell in the woods, red like the hole in his neck. She tore off the red sweater and replaced it with a yellow one. Pulling on her jacket, an unfortunately black leather, black as the shadows but maybe it was good to blend, good to go unseen, unseen and gone, she carried her boots with her as she crept as quietly as she could manage downstairs.

The sunlight poured in through the glass windows on the front door, disconnectedly cheery for this terrifying day, and freedom was just twenty feet down the wide hall. She took one step toward it and froze when she saw the shadow of her father approaching the glass. Panic gripped her but she couldn’t freeze up. She couldn’t be his prey again, so she dodged into the nearest door and found herself in a coat closet. Good. Safe. No reason for anyone to come in here, but she hid behind the line of heavy winter jackets just the same. She held her breath as she heard him walk past, shaking as she saw the shadow of his feet pass under the light that poured into the dark closet in the space under the door. Her whole body was trembling as his steps thumped up the stairs above her head in that little closet and she tried to keep her breathing even and slow, tried not to hyperventilate as she heard him go into a room upstairs and then quickly move about. He was looking for her now. He knew she was hiding. He would punish her when he found her.

“No, that should be fine. I think the visitors from Norway can appreciate smörgåsbord, at least,” Leif spoke into his phone, taking a drag off his third cigarette while the event planner rattled on about the caterer for the funeral reception. He dreaded these annoying calls, but being the oldest son had dictated that he handled the entirety of the funeral arrangements. He was more than happy to let the event planner make every decision with a blank check, but the woman seemed reluctant to accept full responsibility for his hands-off approach. His patience was worn dangerously thin, especially as she rambled on about flower arrangements. He cut her off at the third mention of hyacinth, “Look, I trust that you will make this an elegant or whatever reception, so again, do as you feel best. I really must get back to my family.”

In an uncharacteristic move of rudeness, he ended the call abruptly and stuffed the damned device back into his pocket only to have it vibrate with another incoming call right after. He almost let it go to voicemail, taking a deep drag on the tobacco in irritation, but glanced at the caller ID to see his ex-wife’s name glow on the screen. She’d called him a handful of times since the divorce was finalized, all strictly business and usually unpleasant, so he picked up in time just to sate his curiosity.

“Hello, Lisa,” he answered, assuming neutral friendliness over his irritation as easily as slipping on an old coat.

“Would you be terribly offended if I didn’t come for your father’s funeral tomorrow?” her haggard
tone came through tinny and muffled, as though she were walking outside. The sound of traffic in the background confirmed this.

“Of course not. You’ve got your own life,” he said, trying not to sound too hopeful.

“Yeah, I wish I had time for a life. This client is driving me bonkers, I think I need to take some of Simmy’s Xanax,” she groused.

“Is that what you would like me to tell her?” he asked. “She misses you, you know. She’s still upset with you, but she does miss you.”

“Don’t,” she said flatly. “Don’t fucking guilt me. I didn’t abandon her. Does she still think that? Should I talk to her?”

“She’s not ready to start talking to you yet,” he lied. It was an amusing and useful lie, brightening his mood a bit, so he indulged in rubbing it in a little. “She just needs space. I’ll let you know when she’s ready.”

“Do. Not. Leave. Me. Out,” she warned, menace building in her irate tone. He smiled, admiring the beautiful trees of his father’s property as she went on, “I hate this, you know? I didn’t abandon her. Shit. She just turned twenty. Twenty. She’s not some… fucking child anymore, she should be out on her own and making it in the world by now. I never asked for her to get sick. I don’t care if you gotta pump that fucking clean country air into her, just fix her. Shit. Will you tell her I love her?”

“Of course, Lisa,” he lied. “She knows that. Just give her time.”

“Thanks, Leif,” she said, all cheer after getting that vitriol out. He was going to miss her underlying resentment that Simone had clung to him and not her throughout her mental illness; it was always so fun watching his ex-wife struggle with envy while paving it over with gratitude. The combination of shame of her internalized failings as a mother concerning her daughter’s illness was always interesting to manipulate her with, but having their daughter finally all to himself was well worth going through the divorce and delayed separation. “Well, you’re probably busy with funeral shit, so I’ll let ya go.”

The line cut abruptly and Leif could imagine Lisa, jaw set in irritation at him, herself, their daughter, the world as she struggled to reign in her impotent frustration. It was almost too easy to alienate her from Simone after she completely fumbled that first panic attack, requiring him to step in and pull that sedative from her inept fingers. Recalling that fond memory, he let himself reminisce as how sweetly young little 14-year-old Simone had succumbed to the dissolvable pill. Her violent struggles slowly going slack in his grappling hold had felt like love at first sight and he knew exactly how to make her all his from that moment on. With just a few techniques, the right chemicals, and time, he had crafted her simple anxiety disorder into a full-blown schizophrenia-fueled psychosis that only he knew how to handle. After that, Lisa couldn’t relate to the broken girl at all and the guilt over being unable to help her daughter while Leif adapted so well to it ate away at her until there was only shame and resentment left. Towards the end, the only thing keeping them together as a family unit was her embarrassment at what she could only suppose was her own failure. It was all so easy to manufacture. He wondered briefly if she’d even told her family about the divorce, but he could guess that she had not.

He was pulled from his happy thoughts at the realization that more than enough time had probably passed for Anders to have completed his function. With his palate cleansed of his pessimism from the pleasant reminder of his larger goals, he no longer felt so guilty for having to put Simone through such experimental torment. With the right aftercare, she would cling to him with renewed devotion and shun any such childish ideas as finding kind refuge in his meddlesome brother. The house was
quiet as he stepped lightly up the stairs, a good sign that they had indeed finished. Taking a moment to brace himself against the upsetting sight of another man all over his darling girl, he pushed open the door to the small guestroom and was confused to find her curiously absent.

His brother was laid out next to the bloodstain that marked his successful punishment, but no girl was bound to the tie knotted in the headboard. He walked to the bedside and examined the restraint, seeing the loops where her wrists were held stained with a bit of blood. Knowing that Anders was both too in denial and too drugged to have appreciated such a show, a twinge of excitement and jealousy bloomed in him at the mental image of how frantically she must have struggled to have wriggled out of her bindings. He looked over Anders’ unconscious form, his pale skin stained vibrant red around his spent cock and his mouth slack in the utter oblivion of drugged sleep. Too much temazepam, it would seem. Hopefully he would retain memory of this event or Leif would have to get more creative.

Leif returned his full attention to the aggravating problem of finding the girl. A slight amusement overcame his grief when he noticed the drops of blood on the carpet leading out of the room. He took his time in fondly examining each splatter as they led him down the hall and into his room. This little game took an unfortunate twist as he discovered her sweater thrown inside out on the floor in there and her boots were missing from their place in the closet. Concluding her intent to perhaps find her way to that hospital she seemed so insistent on going, he allowed his anger to bleed into his mind and fuel the punishment he would bestow on her for such insolence. But first, he had to find her. She was obviously too in pain and afraid to have gone very far, so he decided to check around the house first.

To increase her panic, he roared out her name before embarking on this new game of hide and seek. For her sake, he hoped this would not take long.
The darkness was absolute and the air was mildewed and acrid, but it was safety. In the way the body knows when it's away from danger, Simone's flight response began to give way to exhaustion and her resolve to stave off another reality shift quickly deteriorated. There in the complete blackness, her legs buckled until she crumpled into that ankle-deep phantom water, now as dense and undeniable as the shadowy outline of trees surrounding her. The noise of the water splashing as she collapsed to her knees into it struck her as hazardous, but she couldn't remember why she had to be so quiet. There wasn't anyone here but Bjørn's squishy, heavy head in her arms. It was awkward trying to cradle him with her injured hands, requiring her to balance him against her chest with her shaking forearms. She was nervous about dropping him. It only takes a couple inches of water to drown someone, after all. With just a couple inches and a couple minutes, a person can become so still and quiet. But Bjørn could not speak or move except to blink, which she could tell he was doing rapidly in the thin moonlight. He certainly seemed like he had a lot to say though.

“Okay, big guy,” she said softly, groaning as she stood up, the water dripping heavily from her jeans. “Hold your horses. We'll find the rest of you, I promise.”

She was glad for the thick sweater and jacket she happened to be wearing as she held him tucked between her breast and elbows, needing to keep her throbbing hands elevated. She must have really screwed something up for them to hurt this much, but there wasn't much she could do about it at the moment. No use crying over spilled milk, but an ice pack would be nice for the swelling in her left thumb at least. Trudging through the dark waterlogged forest, she dragged her feet to minimize the noise of her steps, the unnatural movement engaging her quadriceps to bear the work and building up a nice steady burn she could tell would hurt a lot more tomorrow. There were probably bigger things to worry about in the world, but when alone in the woods with nothing but a mute head to keep her company, it was too easy to not think on it.

She wasn’t anywhere. Not hiding under any bed, tucked into any closet, crouched behind pantry shelves, balled up in any cabinet, buried under any blanket, nowhere in this cavernous house could Leif find sign of his girl. His anger at her childish insolence deteriorated into an uneasy tension infecting a rashness to his search, flipping over bedding and knocking coats off hangers as that uneasiness grew into anxiety. His girl was gone, carrying with her a stalwart madness and the evidence of his unorthodox punishment. He ran outside and surveyed the land from the back porch, peering for movement between the thick white oaks and the leaner sugar maples. The land surrounding his father’s property meshed seamlessly into the surrounding forest, separated only by an unmaintained split rail fence through which wildlife and people could walk through unwittingly. He could at least limit her wandering to the back half of the property, knowing he would not have missed her staggering about while he was on the front porch.

The wooded land beyond the grassy clearing of the backyard was a blur of green and gray-brown bark as he ran through it, turning his head almost wildly to scan for any sign of his girl. Seconds passed like minutes in his race, knowing the value of every moment he’d wasted in his search through the house amounted to several more paces for Simone to have wandered deeper, and he had to distract his mind from panicking. He allowed his thoughts to wander outside of his situation to facilitate that distraction, his mind naturally turning to similar events in his distant past. His first hunt was in this very section of the property, bringing an interesting parallel between past and present that,
were he a sentimental man, Leif would register as a synchronicity across time.

Strangely, a different memory flashed through his mind as he searched the surrounding flora. He engaged the same helpful piece of advice his dearly departed uncle had bestowed on him already nearly three decades past. It was his first Independence Day in the US and he’d gone with his uncle to a county picnic in the town square. Bjørn was taking photographs of the event for the local paper at Einar’s behest to make good relations with the mayor in that roundabout pandering manner small town folk had so heartily appreciated. Bjørn, of course, pursued his own interests after a few quick shots of the crowd and led him into the nearby woods. There, they seemed to walk in their customary silence for nearly an hour with Bjørn occasionally bending to check a snapped branch or a skid in the dirt before the man spoke.

Leif could hear Bjørn’s oddly soft-spoken voice slowly and carefully explain, “Human silhouettes are particularly distinctive among nature. When in pursuit, don’t just look for a person, look for the human shape with its odd upright bipedal gait and flat shoulders. It will make sighting your target that much faster.”

He had then quickly uncapped his lens cover and snapped a photo of something through the low foliage. Leif had peered through the leaves to see what Bjørn had been so quick to spot: two teenage girls hiding away from the picnic to share a cigarette between them. He was impressed with his uncle to have seen them at all and made sure to remember his words verbatim, and so he had. He didn’t know it at the time, but that was his first hunting lesson. This brought him to recall the follow-up lesson in the first rule of camouflage: easily and quickly break up your human shape and blend into your surroundings by tying surrounding vegetation to yourself. Thankfully, he had yet to relay that lesson to Simone. Clever as she was, there was still much to teach her. However, like his uncle, he had made sure to secretly pass such wisdom into her without revealing the true purpose of his lessons.

His urgency was renewed as his thoughts were once more led to his daughter, the troublesome girl possibly up to a mile out by now even if she were injured. He ran at a pace just slow enough to keep an eye out for any snapped branches or skids in the dirt as he scanned for human shapes.

The sound of someone calling his name over and over brought Anders out of the inexplicable darkness, but it was his own screaming mind that had him upright in an instant. Before he knew what was happening around him, he was already on his numb feet backing away from the bed until his hip hit the corner of the dresser in a pain he did not notice. There was a jumble of emotion and thought so powerful in him that he felt like they were too big for his body, as though they would eviscerate every tightly tensed muscle fiber that currently shook to contain them. Seeing the condemning dark stain on the blue bedsheets, he would welcome that painful death without hesitation. His hands splayed over his gaping mouth, trying to silence the rapid panting of his own breaths. There were so many people speaking, all so loud, but all he could make out was the memory of Simone’s sobbing cries as he… as he…

“My God, what-”

A hot liquid charged up his esophagus and he quickly grabbed the plastic wastebasket from under the nightstand to vomit in.

“-ders, do you need an ambulance?” he heard Henrik asking him.
“Did you try to circumcise yourself? What the fuck happened to your penis?” Vidar nearly yelled. Anders spat the bitter remnants of fluid from his mouth and managed to glance down at the dark red covering his groin before gagging into the wastebasket again. The smears of dried blood burned in his vision even as he squeezed his eyes shut.

“How’s he doing? He’s going into shock?” Vidar wondered aloud. “Oh hell, is he going into shock?”

“I don’t know!” Henrik scoffed. “Aren’t you a nurse? What the fuck do you do all day, hand out lollipops and suck doctor cock?”

“Go shove a horse cock up your huge ass and ride it out of here, Vid. He’s probably just coked up and nicked his dick in his sleep, which wouldn’t have happened if he ever learned how to fucking share his dope like a decent person with basic fucking politeness.”

Anders could barely register their words, all just noise under the overwhelming pounding in his ears. The world reeled around him and that darkness nearly sucked him back into unconsciousness but he fought it off in his frantic need to know that she was okay. He opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t get a sound out before another wave of nausea had him retching into the bin again. The spinning, the draining darkness, the struggle, and then the gagging continued in a rapid cycle until he began to suspect that this was the eternal Hell he had earned. Riding under the crushing wave of guilt and horror was the bewilderment of why. Spitting a pathetic dribble of thick yellow bitterness into the plastic bin, he asked himself and whatever god had been watching why he had hurt her like that. He wished he could say he had no control, that it was some out of body experience or that it was like some distant nightmare, but he was aware of what he was doing. The ugliest, worst truth that howled from his damned soul was that he could have stopped at any point, but it hadn’t even occurred to him to want to cease. Like some unthinking automation, he had hurt her and had kept hurting her without any feeling or drive but to finish the task. He was certainly feeling now, though.

“Where…” he coughed, then choked out into the wastebasket, “Where is she?”

“What? This again?” Henrik groaned exasperatedly.

“Simone’s probably with Leif,” Vidar answered. “I think they must’ve taken a walk around out back or something.”

Anders endured a powerful shudder, a cold sweat renewing over his skin as he rasped, “No. No, she can’t be with him after what he did… what… we did.”

His abdomen clenched, the muscles sore from the effort of gagging, and he worried he’d be thrown into another vomiting fit but a different eruption puffed out of his mouth instead. After the second shaking gasp, he realized he was sobbing and pushed the wastebasket away to press his hands to his face. He couldn’t believe how stupid he’d been not to see what was right in front of him until he literally saw it happen. His brother, his biggest brother who had given him piggyback rides and had bullied him for liking muppets when he was six, was fucking his own daughter.

“Oh God, oh fucking Christ…” he sobbed into his palms at suddenly remembering how he’d drunkenly touched her the previous night, believing he was doing some sort of favor to relieve her when he was really just molesting her. There were no boundaries, no rules, no special circumstances that had allowed Leif to touch her like that. The level of fool he was to have believed that, the sheer denial that his brother could simply have been molesting her, would be astounding to Anders if it weren’t so disgusting. But he’d done it to her and he’d wasted no time in taking her at the first opportunity. Of course she’d have sex with him; it all made so much sense that she would only do as
Leif had trained her. With a twist of his gut that wrung out another shuddering sob, he recalled how sad she’d looked before he’d choked her in the parlor. The revelation that she had been reaching out to him for help and he’d turned it into some perverted game made him feel filthy down to his core. He was glad that the mother of his child wanted nothing to do with him; he could never trust himself to be a father. He was not the person he’d thought he was at all.

“Hey… Anders…” Henrik’s awkward tone came soft and careful as he patted his back reassuringly. “Don’t worry, you’re gonna be fine. Just… put on some pants and we’ll take you to a hospital.”

Hospital… hospital…

Anders shot up from his crouched sobbing and grabbed Henrik by his shirt collar, knowing full well what a madman he seemed as he shouted, “We have to get her to a hospital!”

Henrik swatted his hands away and quickly staggered back from him, but his tone was still placating as he said, “Sure, sure. We’ll take her too, but you’re the one covered in blood, sooo… put your pants on and we’ll-”

Anders’ shaking hands curled into fists and he had to clench his jaw to keep from screaming in frustration. “This isn’t my…”

Don’t worry, it’s not hers. Get her cleaned up already. Don’t let them see her like that.

Leif’s words echoed in his mind, the image of Simone standing there but not there covered in blood. Not her blood. Anders pressed the heel of his hands into his eyes until colors danced among the black behind his lids, muttering over the loudness of his tangled thoughts, “Christ, what did he mix her up in?”

He could hear his brothers saying something, pushing a pair of dark slacks into the crux of his elbow, but he didn’t have any attention to spare them. The drug was still swirling in his system and made thinking a slow and distorted process, like trying to speak underwater. Nothing made enough sense to latch onto, but the facts were all cleanly laid out to interpret. If Leif had dug that grave for him, he would have never woken up from that injection. If Leif had wanted him dead for what he did to Simone, he would not have drugged him to make him do even worse things to her.

Anders staggered at the temptation to put this all on having been drugged. He wanted to believe that he wouldn’t have ever done that sober. There was no part of him that wanted to see her in pain, no morbid curiosity in him at the taboo of it especially now that he knew how repulsive it really was. He’d never fucked like that before, like some rutting beast with no thought beyond domination and insemination, and he never wanted to again. He couldn’t tolerate anything less than full responsibility for his actions. Drugged or not, he’d hurt her. Raped, he corrected himself, the ugly word stabbing through his mind like a dull kitchen knife. He’d raped her. His hands pressed up into his hair, tugging roughly at his roots until it hurt more appropriately as he forced himself to adapt that title. Rapist.

“Snap out of it! Are you there, brother?” Henrik asked slowly and loudly, his hands once more shaking his shoulders.

Anders shook him off roughly, the touch of another person making his flesh crawl. As unforgiveable as he was, Leif was so much worse and he had to make sure he would never get near Simone again. It was difficult to connect the man he knew as his brother with the monster he knew had done those horrible things to his own daughter, but Anders had to force himself to accept it. For her. He had to protect her. He had to find her. The image of her struggling out of her bonds and touching his face with such undeserved and heartbreaking tenderness made him cringe in a flood of shame deeper than
he had thought himself capable of feeling, but it told him that she had freed herself before her father had found her.

“She’s hiding,” he muttered, certain of it. Tucked in some dark space, like a wounded animal waiting out the hounds, she wouldn’t be hiding far. Leif couldn’t have gotten to her first, he couldn’t even consider that horrible possibility. With an urgency that renewed his adrenaline, Anders hurriedly stepped into his pants and yanked on whatever jacket was hanging on the back of the chair as he threw open the closet and looked for any sign of her. No shivering, sobbing girl there. Only so many hiding spaces left to check.

“Whoa, whoa, you gotta slow down!” Vidar warned, grabbing his arm as he rushed towards the door.

Anders jerked out of his brother’s grasp and stumbled out into the hall, growling, “Either help me find her or get out of my way!”

When Simone had still possessed the ability to concentrate for more than ten-minute intervals, she had made it a point to be seen reading medical encyclopedias when around her mother for any extended time. Not only did this ease the woman’s temperament toward her, it had also taught Simone a lot about diseases and conditions. Slogging through the ankle-deep water for what may have been anywhere between the first and third hour, the specific condition that kept popping up in her mind was trench foot. It was not the most pleasant thought, but not very much else was happening inside her mind. She was sure there was something she was forgetting, but she just had to hope that Bjørn would have the answers when she found the rest of him in that wetland. She had up to ten more hours or so to find him before she actually had to worry about the onset of trench foot, though.

“Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink,” she whispered. She looked down at the bundle of squishy wrinkles and scratchy beard hairs in her arms, seeing the wet glimmer of Bjørn’s eyes flash and twinkle as he blinked in the dim moonlight. She smiled at him, feeling a strange companionship to the head after walking in silent dark for this long. “Have you ever had okolehao? It’s like a Hawaiian moonshine. I’ve only had it mixed in cocktails, but it’s disgusting. Puna—my grandma—would make me drink it just to see the faces I’d make. Not in a mean way, though.”

He blinked three times, which she took as a reply. It was the only way he could reply, anyway, so she decided to keep speaking to pass the time. However, she had already forgotten what she was saying, so she plucked another thought from her mind.

“Have you ever had okolehao?” she asked. He blinked. “It’s like a Hawaiian moonshine. I’ve only had it mixed in cocktails, but it’s disgusting.” She stuck her tongue out to demonstrate just how much she disliked it. “Puna—my grandma—would make me drink it just to see the faces I’d make. Not in a mean way, though.”

She smiled down at Bjørn, barely able to make out his blank stare. He was always just staring. She found it unnerving that he was so quiet, so she decided to finally speak. She wasn’t sure what to say, so she just said the first think that came to her mind.

“Have you ever had okolehao? It’s like a... uh, Hawaiian moonshine,” she said. Checking to make sure he was interested, or as interested as an expressionless severed head could seem, she continued, “I’ve only had it mixed in cocktails, but it’s disgusting. Puna—my grandma—would make me drink
it just to see the faces I’d make.” She readjusted him in her arms, mindful not to jostle her aching hands, before hurriedly explaining, “Not in a mean way, though.”

She wished he could speak. It didn’t matter at this point what he would say, she just wished for any conversation at all. It felt like it had been so long since she’d really talked with anybody. She didn’t consider herself a necessarily social person, in fact she supposed she might be a bit antisocial, but being a human required a certain amount of personal contact. She recalled a study on how prisoners in solitary confinement for too long had often experienced harrowing psychological and emotional breakdowns. Not wanting to lose any more marbles than she already had, she decided to speak just to hear a human voice. Without paying any mind to what she said, she spoke at random.

“Have you ever had okolehao? It’s like…”

Her steps and voice stopped before she knew why, her conscious mind catching onto the sound of breathing somewhere nearby a moment after. Holding her own breath and knowing Bjørn presently lacked lungs, she listened for where it was coming from. The slow, rattling breaths sent a chill up her spine that locked her muscles still, the hairs on her entire body standing on end as an animal part of her brain screamed danger. She held Bjørn closer, only mindful enough not to squish him as she latched her good hand over his mushy mouth just in case. Her feet were stuck in the soggy forest floor as though the mud had suctioned her bare heels to it, but she didn’t dare move even if she could. That rattling, awful breathing grew slowly but steadily closer even though she could not hear any movement among the trees or in the water. Her own heartbeat pounded loudly in her ears and she wished it would shut up so she could hear where that thing was coming from.

Then, the world began to shift. The moonlight, as thin as it was, dimmed into complete darkness. The water receded soundlessly, taking with it the stale smell of still water and wet trees. She felt Bjørn vanish from her arms like mist, leaving her clutching herself in fear with nothing to hold onto. A pressure filled the acrid, musty air to tell her she was no longer in the open outdoors. Unconscious thought suggested that she was underground, judging by the heaviness of that pressure, and her intuition agreed with that as fact. The memory of that watery forest was disappearing with these new yet familiar surroundings, leaving only the sense that she had been walking for hours and that sound of breathing. That horrible sound, now so much closer in this confined space. Simone found herself slowly, silently backing up with her hands outstretched in the darkness until her fingers brushed a cold concrete wall. Pressing herself to it, she walked in small, shaky steps and felt along the wall for a light switch. Her lungs burned to take in great gulps of air to fuel her fear-pumped muscles, but she had to be careful to take silent breaths through her nose and not make any sound to alert whatever was in the darkness with her. At least not until she could see what it was.

After a few minutes that felt like a dozen, her hand brushed over the plastic nubs of switches and she took a moment to steel herself before carefully flicking the first one. No reaction. Her fingers slid to the second switch and repeated the slow and controlled motion. Nothing. She swallowed the hopeless whimper building in her throat. Sweating, praying, trying not to cry, she pressed the third switch up. Suddenly, a dim blood red light filled the far side of the basement room, bright enough to paint the entire space in shadows of scarlet. Her wide eyes quickly found the source of that breathing: a person sitting in a chair on the opposite side of the room with a sheet thrown over them. Simone stared at that person, watching the cloth cover billow out and then press in with each rattling breath for several turns until she determined that they had not reacted to the dim light. She could see no part of them that was uncovered by that sheet, only the back legs of the chair.

Looking around the room, she determined this to be a darkroom not unlike the one she had access to in her high school film photography class. That realization made the red light seem slightly less hellish, but was too small of a comfort to lessen the horror emanating from the person under the sheet. Simone was aware of two choices: she could hope that this person would remain unaware of
her presence long enough for her to know when it was safe enough to leave the basement, or she could see if this person needed help. Her chest clenched with the knowledge of what she now knew her father was capable of. There was only one option.

Still not wanting to alert this person to her presence, she crept toward them on rounded steps to keep any part of her feet from slapping the smooth concrete floor. Her eyes were trained on the billowing of the sheet over the mouth. In and out. Step by painstaking step. That chill wracked over her again, tensing her like nails on a chalkboard as she drew closer, and every instinct was telling her to run, run up the stairs, damn whoever was up there and just run. But this person might need her help. That rattle in their breaths, that asthmatic wheeze with each inhalation followed by a dry and almost whistling exhalation, grew dreadfully louder with each step. A corner of the sheet was nearly touching her toe now and she kept her eyes on this figure as she knelt and gingerly bunched it in her fist. This person did not stir as she picked up the corner as she rose, did not change that squeaking horrible breathing as she gathered her courage with a clench of her jaw and a prayer. In one strong, flourishing twist of her torso, she flung the sheet away and saw that under it sat nothing. The chair was empty. The breathing was gone. Simone screamed.

Anders searched his father’s room next. He wasn’t sure why. The pungent rot of death was still lingering in that room, so maybe she went in there because she knew no one would want to go in it. Nothing in the closet except his meticulously arranged suits and shoes and nothing under the bed except storage boxes. His brothers watched in mild horror from the doorway, neither seemingly willing to enter that room. Anders removed himself from the room as soon as he determined that she had not been in there, shoving the useless men aside as he slammed the door shut behind him and bolted down the hall to the room she’d been sleeping in. His feet were stumbling and his head still spun, both undoubtedly caused by whatever the hell Leif had drugged him with, but he couldn’t let a bit of drowsiness and disorientation get in his way. He had no idea how much time they had before Leif reappeared. He had to get to her first, had to make sure she was safe.

“Anders, what the fuck are you doing?” Vidar asked as Anders threw open the closet door in that room where Leif had probably violated his daughter countless times.

He was tempted to toss the blankets off the bed and examine the sheets for evidence of this suspicion, but he couldn’t bring himself to be confronted with the proof that would undoubtedly be there. He made a strange noise as he panted when he saw that she was not hiding in there, something between a lamenting moan and a frustrated growl. She was in the house still, he just knew she had to be. Leif couldn’t have taken her anywhere without the truck, not with the condition she was in. The condition Anders had put her in. He punched his fist against the closet door after he slammed it shut, but he barely felt it. He knelt at the foot of the bed, giving the underside a quick glance before huffing in frustration at finding nothing, but paused as he moved to stand. Next to him was Leif’s large duffle bag, mostly empty of its contents, and he began rifling through it anyway. He wasn’t sure what he was searching for, but he didn’t question the impulse. Rage made his movements jerky and rough as he pushed through the mundane items. Various cords, devices, a deck of cards, useless mundane clutter in every pocket and then he found a zippered case tucked under some socks. His hands shook as he yanked it out and pulled at the zipper, his teeth bared and clenched in impatience at his drug-clumsy fingers until he pulled apart the folded pack. Several tiny vials were held in loops along the inside of the case with a torn open plastic bag of syringes and little squares of alcohol wipes. His eyes quickly scanned over the unfamiliar and complicated words on some of the vials. Tetrahydrocannabinol, pentazocine, butorphanol, scopolamine, atropine, lysergic acid diethylamide, mescaline, phencyclidine. Some were liquid, some
were pills, some were powder. He knew none of them.

“Henrik!” he yelled. The large bearded man hesitantly stepped forward and Anders thrust the case towards him as he pushed himself to his feet. He met his brother’s eyes with a grave regard, trying to put every clear thought into his request as he asked, “What the hell is all of this?”

Henrik broke their stare to look at the collection of bottles, then his brow furrowed as he held it closer to his face.

“What is it?” Vidar asked, stepping up beside his brothers.

“Holy shit…” Henrik breathed, running his fingers gingerly under the complicated words.

Anders did not have the ability to stand and wait for Henrik to decide what to say. His whole body buzzed with the need to move, the need to seek, and he bolted from the room. Neither man followed him as he bounded down the hall to the room Henrik and Vidar were sharing, then the bathroom, then downstairs to check every closet. There were five closets in all and he’d tried every one until he got to one that was locked. His hope rose like a balloon as he knocked on the door and called her name, not surprised when she didn’t answer. A wave of nausea returned as he knew why she wouldn’t, but he knew she’d be frightened of him after what he did to her. She would be insane not to fear him now. He braced his foot against the doorframe and the lock broke after the second pull, but there was no Simone. Instead, there was a collection of knives and tools on the shelf inside, adding an explanation as to why it was impossible to find a cutting knife in the house but raising other questions. He had no time for other questions.

He staggered away from the closet, his body trembling and exhausted, but he couldn’t rest. He needed a drink, he needed an entire bottle, he needed to walk into the ocean and drown, he needed to fry in Hell, he needed to drag Leif there with him, get him away from her, away from ever hurting her again. He needed to think. He needed his anger at himself and his rage at Leif to stop muddling his thoughts with violence. He needed to stop thinking about himself and what he had done and focus on her. She needed him to do better.

He stumbled into the main hall, grasping his head as he tried to force clarity over his mind, and sat at the bottom of the stairs as he muttered, “Please, please, Simone. Where did you go? I can help you, I have to, just please tell me where you are.”

He couldn’t ever make this right, but he was determined to do everything he could to make it less horrible for her. He owed her so much more than that, but safety was all he could give her. He’d wanted to give her so much before. Secret fantasies of being around her, having her visit Norway, learning more English just to talk to her, get to know her better, explain how he felt and learn how she felt, then maybe, maybe, just maybe taking it further with her… All of it dashed. He could never be around her after what he’d done to her. That idea of loving her despite their relation was a sick, perverted fantasy belonging to a filthy rapist. He was her uncle. He had no right to see her as anything but his niece but he did anyway. He had no right to touch, to kiss, to make love to her but he did anyway. He had no right to make her cry and bleed under him, but he did anyway. Intention didn’t matter. He was sick. She needed to be as far away from him as she needed to be far away from her father. He was the same breed of beast as Leif.

His eyes blurred with tears that he didn’t deserve to shed, but he couldn’t stop the ache in his heart as he buried his face in his hands and muttered aloud, “God, Simone, I’m so sorry, so sorry. I love you and this is what it’s gotten you. I’m so sorry…”

His head shot up as a muffled scream came through the walls, so nearby it was almost right under his nose. He leapt to the door to the closet under the stairs, throwing it open and searching but she
wasn’t there. He was sure it came from in there, but she was missing. He tossed out the coats, the boxes, the old stacks of magazines and newspapers, everything out into the hallway but no sign of the girl until his hands pulled out two small black lace-up boots. Her boots. She had been there. A small sound, so quiet he must have missed it in his feverish purging of the closet, reached his ears and he strained to find where it was coming from. He stepped fully into the closet, pressing his ear to the wall inside, then following that sound until he pressed to the back wall. With his gut twisting in familiarity, he recognized the sound of Simone’s distressed sobbing.

He couldn’t think, his body in a panic to act as he pounded on that back wall and heard the reverberation of hollowness behind it. His fingers scrambled for a latch or a knob or any sort of mechanism to move this fake wall but his hands groped around at nothing but smoothness. He stumbled out of the closet and ran to the collection of tools, grabbing the first one that made sense. The ax was heavy but he couldn’t give into his exhaustion now, not when he’d finally found her. Henrik and Vidar were standing outside the closet now and backed away hurriedly when they spotted him running towards them with an ax. He didn’t care. They yelled something at him as he swung and struck that wallpapered wood. He didn’t hear. He yanked the blade out of the wall and swung again, putting everything he had into the strike. It bent and splintered, but not nearly enough. He reared back, readied himself for a third swing, then froze at the sound of Leif’s voice behind him.

“Just what the hell are you doing?”

The ax suddenly felt light as a feather as rage deafened all else in him.
Standing there in the hallway with Henrik and Vidar, both men stunned to silence at the spectacle of seeing Anders hacking the wall of a closet down and then turning to them with an inexplicable rage, Leif regretted not thinking to check that secret room. Of course, she had found it. She was always surprising him with how like his uncle she was; she was probably born with the knowledge of the darkroom. The flash of light reflecting off the blade brought his full attention back to Anders, finding him standing squarely in the doorway of the closet with the ax held towards him with both hands.

Leif had seen similar expressions before, oftentimes finding it in his own reflection. The eyes wide and alarmed not with fear but with a grim resignation, a righteous hatred boiling behind them. He was not surprised that this man hated him; it was thankless work to reveal the worst of someone to themselves. He was, however, surprised to find that his baby brother was just as quick to murder as any of the killers in their bloodline, though he supposed he really shouldn’t be. The apple never fell far from the tree in their family. As much as he would like to push him further along that course, he couldn’t condone anyone threatening him, brother or not.

“You need to think about what you’re getting into, brother,” Leif suggested, the false concern in his tone only stoking that hot hatred in the younger man’s glare.

“I’m giving you a choice,” Anders seethed. “Either leave and don’t come back…” His fists twisted around the smoothed wood handle, knuckles white and wrists bunching with muscle. “… or I’ll ensure you never hurt her or anyone else ever again.”

The thrill of being faced with murderous intent was dampened by their slack-jawed audience. Neither Vidar nor Henrik could appreciate the beauty of this moment; their vices were of the simpler sort. But Anders was proving to be more and more interesting the further they peeled back the layers of humanity he’d wrapped around the true core of him. It was regrettable that this moment of revelation hadn’t been met by more favorable circumstance. Leif was still catching his breath from his marathon through the woods, his muscles stiffening and burning with lactic acid, and Anders was very obviously still affected by the benzodiazepine dragging through his sluggish blood. But Leif had come to expect that violent interaction was rarely encountered under optimal conditions, by the value of desperation so often required to inspire it. Anders, with a tremor in his elbows and an animal fright sparking along that churning hatred, was not accustomed to violence nor to the whimsy of it. The uninitiated always wanted more buildup and meaning, for it to be a last resort even past the last moment, but was no revelation or meaningful shift in violence itself. Even if they were both in top condition with no distractions, it would be the familiarity with taking a life that guaranteed victory each time as it had before. Anders may have the passion and emotion Leif had always lacked, but Leif had experience that harbored a steadfast readiness.

“You’re not in your right mind, Anders. You should drop that before you hurt someone,” he said, shifting his weight to the balls of his feet and aligning his hands and wrists. That electrifying tension vaporized all soreness and fatigue from him, pulling at his mouth to grin in what he knew would be interpreted as nervousness by their two spectators. Receiving the provocation as intended, Anders’ anger flared but he still didn’t budge from the doorway. Leif had to get him to make the first move if he wanted to manipulate his family to the optimal effect, but his commitment to his act was waning with the delightful temptation before him.

“Get out!” Anders shouted, raising the ax higher.

Leif kept their eyes locked as he weighed his options, their mutual glaring so focused that he almost didn’t notice the trick door drift open. Anders did not notice the yawning darkness behind him, nor
the bright apparition in a yellow sweater step from the inky shadows. He had to resist shifting his
gaze to Simone, her small frame nearly entirely eclipsed by Anders’ lean athletic mass. This day was
proving to be quite an interesting day indeed. From his peripheral, he could see her wide eyes shift
between them, that same calm smoothness to her silent movement as she drifted closer as a repeat of
her maneuver in Renfro’s filthy doorway. Anticipation quickened his pulse and distracted him,
making him slower to react to Anders’ sudden lunge toward him. Leif sidestepped the downwards
strike as his hands shot out and gripped the handle of the ax, but what had saved his life was not his
quick reflexes, but his daughter grasping the back of Anders’ jacket.

“Stop!” she cried out as she held onto him, the younger man staggering forward in shock. She buried
her face against his back as she yelled, “Stop this!”

While not the assistance he had excitedly anticipated, Leif was able to twist the ax from his grip and
throw it a safe distance away. He couldn’t risk another unwieldy swing of the blade from either of
them with her this close, a regrettable but fortunate change of the playing field considering the
witnesses. Before he could recover his stance from the throw, Leif’s vision flashed black and white
and then the world tilted. Anders had surprised him with an unforeseen swiftness and Leif wasn’t
aware of the right hook he took to his jaw until after the blow had connected. The elated swell of
adrenaline bloomed in him finally at the comprehension of physical confrontation, staving off the
pain for the moment and giving him an urgency to respond in kind. The lure of his father’s folding
knife buzzed hot in his pocket, but he would need to create some distance between them before
considering the rush of warm blood waiting to burst from the younger man around that blade. Before
his head had even righted itself, Leif’s hands grasped the sleeves of Anders’ coat and his knee surged
up high into his solar plexus.

The deep, low grunt accompanying the whoosh of his breath getting knocked out of him was
satisfying, but Leif must have accidentally gone in too hard as Anders collapsed in a heap. All too
soon, Leif recognized the boneless sway of unconsciousness before his brother even hit the floor.
Damn. He should have gone for a less effective blow, but his temper and instinct had gotten the
better of him. The bounty of catecholamines demanded blood and as the younger man’s knees hit the
hardwood, Leif’s fingers itched to reach into his mouth and carve his tongue out. Unaffected by his
better reasoning, his hand slipped into pocked and curled around that knife, but a flurry of movement
over his target drew him out of the impulse. Simone crouched over the downed man, her torso flung
over him defensively.

This was not how she was supposed to behave. She was supposed to fear and loathe Anders after
experiencing his savage, basic desires. Leif had seen the blood and had heard her crying and begging
his brother to stop. He thought she would repeat her previous murder, but she had merely prevented
Anders from committing one. He thought she would run into the familiar arms of her father, not
protect the man who had mercilessly raped her. She was confused, hysterical, her mind dumb on fear
and twisted in aggravated madness. He should not have left her alone to cope with what Anders had
inflicted upon her. She was prone to delusions; he should have been there to influence them to his
favor instead of letting them infest freely.

“Simone,” Leif warned, his voice gruff from aggression. Her eyes only narrowed at him, her
shoulders hunched lower. His lapse in attentiveness had certainly afforded him quite the correction to
make in her. “Move away from him now.”

The insanity burning in her eyes was untouched by his command. If she had wanted to receive a
rough punishment, she couldn’t have chosen a riper moment. He grabbed her by the back of her coat
collar and yanked her up, intending to throw her against the wall and subdue this rebellion in her by
pinning her, when she suddenly shot up and lunged for him. She was too small and lightweight to
even stagger him, but he was surprised when she attempted to shove him. Trained impulse had him
spin and pull her to redirect her force and she careened against the wall in a loud thump. She wasn’t even fazed, rebounding and letting out a savage cry as she lunged for him again. He wanted to keep this up, to run her down until she was exhausted before striking back and returning her hostility in a myriad of fun and brutal methods, but Vidar snapped out of his bystander effect and grabbed her around her middle. Leif almost charged at him for interfering but held back as Vidar dragged her kicking and writhing further down the hall. He watched for a moment as his brother held her arms locked behind her back and apologized over and over to the snarling girl.

“Henrik,” Leif said, wiping his chin as the first tickle of discomfort and swelling started from that sock to his jaw. The bearded brother turned from the captivating sight of the feral Simone, his eyes nearly bulging. Leif gestured to the still unconscious Anders and said between panting breaths, “Take him up to his room. Don’t let him out of bed, he’s obviously on something.”

The large man nodded numbly, moving towards their youngest brother as Leif walked unhurriedly down the hall toward where his daughter was fighting the arm lock Vidar held her with. Vidar looked up at him, uncertainty and worry beyond his shock, as Leif grabbed her chin and forced her head up to look at him. That wild fury still glimmered in her light eyes, the unabashed hostility of her furrowed glare conveying a deep hatred toward everything it focused on. As he stared back into that glare, her tears welled and fell over his clenching fingers. Defeat replaced that hostility after only a few seconds of facing her master.

“There’s my good girl,” he cooed warmly. She sniffed, tried to twist her jaw out of his grasp and he tightened it painfully. He could see the growing discomfort in Vidar out of the corner of his eye, but it didn’t deter him. “Are you going to behave now?”

Her lips pursed and her eyes drifted down before she whispered, “Don’t hurt him.”

The wide hallway echoed with the sound of the back of his hand clapping across her cheek, perhaps a bit too hard as her head snapped to the side with the force and her high yelp echoed with it. It was scarcely within his control that he stopped at one strike; his girl had a way of driving him mad. Vidar gaped at him, his hold on her loosening and his eyes bugging out even wider as though he couldn’t accept his position as accomplice to this punishment. Typical. Those without children of their own seldom understood the disciplinary efforts of parents.

“What the FUCK, Leif! You can’t hit her like that!” he whispered viciously.

“She’s not throwing a fit anymore, is she?” Leif retorted simply. “If you don’t have the stomach to watch, then go upstairs and help keep Anders subdued.”

Vidar was a quick-witted man and recovered with his hand held out placatingly, switching gears to say, “Look. We’re all upset right now, but you really should cool off before trying to talk with Simone, okay? This has been a really weird day and I think we should just try to relax.”

Leif smirked, his temper ripping through his outward persona dangerously at this meddling asshole touching his girl and trying to tell him what to do with her. His voice dropped the friendly inflection and fell into his actual speaking voice, a thing that sounded very different from the man he was around others. “The methods of which I choose to engage in correcting my daughter’s behavior is not your business. If I want to slap her, whip her, choke her, and bleed her so she learns her lesson, I don’t need your approval to do so. If you ever try to dictate how I interact with her again, I will find out how to make you learn your lesson as well. Go upstairs. Now.”

He was aware that he should be more concerned about the pale look of fright in Vidar’s countenance as the man stiffly released his hold on Simone and quickly walked towards and up the stairs, but all he felt was satisfaction. He watched her, her scared little face still downturned and hidden from him,
her hand cradling her sore cheek, her hair mussed from all the day’s activity, and wondered where he had gone wrong. Perhaps it was too much pressure for her to have both committed murder and been brutally raped in one day. She was such a delicate thing under all that untamed viciousness. He decided he would go easier on her for a while, at least while his brothers shared the house with them. But first he had to punish her while her misbehavior was still fresh.

She gasped as he pushed her down, his hand pressing between her shoulders until she bent over her kneeling thighs with her forehead touching the floor, but she didn’t resist him. She was too smart for that by now. Her fearful panting while he yanked her jacket and sweater off was endearing. Not enough to lessen the severity of this punishment, however. All plaintiveness and submission now that she was caught, she remained curled up on the floor as he brushed her long unruly hair off her back and shoulders and loomed over her to admire the smooth expanse of her bare brown skin. She really had such beautiful skin, it was a pity he’d have to mar it out of punishment instead of ownership this time. He decided to treat her to ointment and bandages if needed afterward, maybe even skip the sting of the rubbing alcohol if she were good. As he pulled his belt off his waist, he hoped she wouldn’t be good.

Henrik and Vidar sat in chairs five feet from the bed Anders was laid out atop, both men staring in tense silence as they began their watch for any change to their unconscious brother. Neither of them wanted to be there when he woke up, but neither were comfortable leaving him alone. Vidar rubbed his left temple in slow clockwise motions to ward off a headache and give his shaking hand something to do. He was still affected by seeing Leif turn into someone he didn’t recognize at all.

“Do you think it’s meth? I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone that violent even on a coke rage,” Henrik whispered, tugging on his beard as he usually did when nervous.

Vidar shrugged, “Do you think Leif is also on whatever he’s got?”

Henrik let out a long, deep sigh before replying, “I don’t know what’s going on with Leif. Anders has always been the wild one, but Leif? He’s different now. Like he’s hiding something.”

“Like all that medicine he was hiding in his room? What was that?”

“That… that was some really weird stuff. Most of it they don’t even make for medical use because it’s too dangerous.”

“Do you think it’s stuff Simone has to take? You know, for her crazy?”

Henrik shook his head. “All of that stuff would just make someone crazy. Like cuckoo-clock-tin-foil-hat-talking-to-Mother-Mary-and-the-little-green-men kind of crazy.”

They both sat in silence for a moment. Henrik had stopped tugging on his beard. Vidar’s hand was frozen at his temple. Neither of them wanted to say aloud the horrible thing they both thought. Then, they both flinched at the sound of a distant snap and a high-pitched cry from downstairs, followed by another of the same snap and cry after a moment. They looked at each other, their terrible unspoken question as to what that was confirmed in the horror they saw in each other’s faces at the third snap and cry. Vidar leaned forward in his chair and buried his face in his hands. Henrik pinched at the bridge of his nose to stave off the sting of tears in his eyes.

“What do we do?” Vidar asked, his quiet question muffled through his hands.
“I don’t know,” Henrik whispered. His voice cracked. He was going to cry and there was no stopping that now that their thoughts were brought out into the open. “What can we do?”

They both fidgeted at the fourth snap, another pained yelp from downstairs.

“Should we call someone? The police?” Vidar proposed.

“And tell them what?” Henrik asked. A fifth turn echoed from below. His voice was high and tight as he held back the sobbing he knew was imminent. “Tell them we think our big brother is poisoning his adult daughter to keep her sick? Does this country even convict for that kind of abuse before the victim dies? Who would believe us?”

“I think Anders would believe us,” Vidar whispered, but his response was despondent as he stared at the prone younger man. The sixth snap was noticeably louder, the cry closer to a scream and shaking with a sob. Vidar screwed his eyes shut and grit his teeth. “He said Leif was hurting her. He was going to kill him for it. Anders was going to kill him. He doesn’t have the heart to gut a fish, but he was going to murder Leif with a shit-fucking ax. What did he find out?”

Henrik took a shuddering breath and wiped his wet cheeks, but at the sound of the seventh snap and cry, he broke down into a choked sob. Vidar stood up from his chair and paced the small room, his hands clenching and flexing in high stress.

“Why? What makes a man do that to his own child?” Henrik frowned.

An eighth snap then Simone’s muffled wail of “Papa!” made both men cringe. Neither man wanted to, but each silently counted to a total of twenty lashes before the sound of her weeping accompanied Leif’s heavy footsteps up the stairs. The walls were thick and nothing was heard after the shutting and locking of the door to the room the father and daughter had shared.

“FUHUH!” Anders gasped, sitting upright in a jerk. He looked around wildly, sweat already beading on his face and he panted and scrambled to get up. The room was spinning, the colors blending together and trailing nauseatingly, but he was able to recognize that his was back in his guestroom somehow. Henrik and Vidar watched him with wide and wet eyes. It was as though his nightmare was repeating.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Vidar hissed urgently, pressing him back to sit on the bed. Anders pushed against him, but he was too physically weak and woozy to do anything but lean against those hands on his shoulders. His entire being felt like a beast had shook him in its jaws like a dead rat, but that haste to find her made staying still agonizing.

“I have to get to her,” he slurred, trying to shove Vidar away. “Get her away from him!”

Henrik stood and moved closer to them, keeping his voice down as he said, “We know. We know! Anders, we know what Leif has been doing!”

“You know… You know that he’s…” Anders slurred. He wasn’t sure if it was from the drugs or from whatever Leif had hit him with to knock him out like that, but he felt even more out of it than before. He wondered, with a worry that was lost in the immense expanse of his current worries, if he had a concussion. “How long have I been out?”

“How long have I been out?”

“About an hour,” Vidar answered, then lowered his voice, “He went downstairs a while ago, but I
“You have to leave,” she whispered. She had the fake resolve that desperation supplied, her voice quivering as she tried to speak firmly. “Go back to Norway. Forget about all of this.”

Anders gathered his brain for the proper English, hoping she understood his intent when all he could come up with was, “Together.”

Whether the torment that furrowed her brow was of comprehension or bewilderment, he could not tell, though he regretted being the cause of her pain all the same. Another drop in the ocean of agonies he had already supplied her. He could not dare ask for forgiveness or even should hope for it secretly, but he was greedy for any small measure of redemption nevertheless. When she moved to sit up, the blanket fell from her shoulders and bared to him her nudity. He seemed to either not notice or care about his discomfort as she rose from the bed, his eyes darting down and seeing that she was now cleaned of blood and semen. He blushed at having even looked, his shame doubling with the knowledge that he still wore her blood under his clothes. Alarm shook him out of his grim distraction when she beckoned him to come to her and his feet obeyed before he could consider it, his hand slow and careful as it silently shut the door behind him. Let his brothers think what they will; he would do anything she wanted of him without hesitance. She stepped towards him before he could make his way to her, her quiet feet swift to close the distance and he panicked as she brought her arms around him in a tight hug.

He couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t even breathe as she pressed her bare front to him and whispered, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for what he did. You have to leave before this gets any worse. Please, please leave!”

He had to amend his fealty to her demands; he would do anything she wanted of him except abandon her. Despite his better judgment, his arms drifted over the hot skin of her back to cling her to him just as tightly as she held him. She shuddered and stiffened against him, her cheek nuzzling his chest over his coat and he sighed at the brief feeling of absolution in her affection. He was so
weak.

“I love you,” he whispered, a cowardly boldness in knowing she couldn’t understand him.

“I love you too,” she responded, the English phrase well enough known to him to not require a moment of translation to churn in his mind. Instead, a calamity of emotion churned there and whether it was the drugs or the stress or the terror, he felt a powerful constriction in his chest and he allowed her warm little hands to cup his face as she stood on tiptoe to press their lips together. The heat and delirium of her kiss drained all reason from him and he found himself gathering her up in an intimate embrace to deepen it.

The stirring in his groin startled him out of his fervor. If there could ever be a time or place for them, this was not it. In both reluctance and urgency, he untangled them to hold her at arm’s length away with his hands firmly set on her shoulders. Her silver eyes and full lips were darkened appealingly, further igniting that urge to just allow their lust to dictate their actions, but he was too aware of the danger lurking nearby and the harm he’d already done in sex. He had to ignore the softness of her skin and the intoxicating scent of her this close, had to forcibly remove the memory of her small pink cleft from his damning glance. It took considerable effort to resist the heavy pull he felt towards Simone, a pull not dampened by shame or swayed by logic.

At times, especially at this time, he felt as though his attraction to this niece he had barely known a week ago was a living thing inside him. He had been too ashamed to even wonder what that living thing would do if he unleashed it, having been able to assume that it would amount to nothing outside of his expected romantic impulses despite the unusual conditions, but it nearly frightened him at how it lurched at his restraint in even these circumstances. A gnawing suspicion had dogged him since the first brush of guilty pleasure at the scent of her that there was something alarming at the root of this attraction. For the first time, he considered that what had distressed him in this attraction was maybe not limited to the aspects of it being incest or a grievous power imbalance, but expanded from something in him that he could not or did not want to understand. But there were more pressing issues at hand.

“Where is Leif?” he whispered.

Simone’s eyes shut and her brow knitted as though a physical pain discomfited her, then she stayed caught in that pained expression for a long moment. Anders wondered if she had perhaps went away to wherever her mind goes when she enters into that absent trance, but she spoke before he could think of what to do to bring her out of it.

“Secrets like ours are worth a lot,” she said, her eyes still closed and voice odd and spoken in a singsong as though she were mimicking someone. When she looked at him and spoke again, her voice was barely above a whisper. “He’s trying to change you like he changed me, but you can’t let him. Don’t let him.”

Anders translated her words as best he could, but most of his English was isolated to nouns and some verbs and phrases. He didn’t understand. Something about a difference, something not about a job? He tried not to frown too much in frustration as he churned the words over and over, not wanting her to worry.

“Please,” she said. He let her step closer to him, let her lean her forehead against his chest as she mumbled, “Please just don’t get killed…”

While she slumped against him, some of her long brown hair fell away from her creamy back and exposed dark blue and purple between her wavy locks. The bursts of color caught his attention and jerked a fretful reaction from him. She flinched away when he swept her hair to the side and caught a
glimpse of the bruises, her arms clutched around her body defensively as she stepped back. Before he could think to handle this more delicately, he grabbed her and spun her by the shoulders, her foot catching on the edge of the rug and sending her tripping. She fell with a grunt face down on the edge of the bed and, knowing she was unhurt, he followed the compulsion to lean over her bent form to hold her down and keep her from turning. He had to see what was done to her. With his free hand, he brushed her voluminous hair from her back and shoulders, his face grimly set as he took in the damage. A terrible feeling welled in him as he saw the colorful stripes of bruises along her back, the unmistakable marks of a belting far more severe than he’d ever seen or experienced in his childhood punishments.

“My God…” he muttered in a rasp.

Even though it was horrible to see, he couldn’t look away. A rage was building beyond that heavy and cold awfulness in him, but it was like an approaching storm on the horizon yet. He knew his brother was a monster. He’d seen plenty of evidence of that, but it seemed like each new one still carried shock with it. This must have been what Vidar had referred to when he’d said Leif had hurt her pretty bad. He lightly ran his fingertips along the edge of one of those broad stripes. She must have screamed and wailed from the pain…

“Ahn…” she gasped softly, her back arching and flexing as she fist the quilt beneath her front.

He pulled his hand away, afraid he’d touched a tender spot, but that was not a sound of pain. With sudden awareness, he looked down at their position. He saw how she was bent over the bed with her legs standing straight, how he was nearly pressed against her raised ass and loomed over her. He flushed at his brutish behavior, at how he’d pushed her down in this position beneath him, at how bare she was and how she had stayed in this lewd pose while he just stared at her. He’d only been concerned, only wanted to check her injuries, he assured himself. He wondered why he wasn’t moving, why she wasn’t moving, but then she did. She pressed her ass, her round and voluptuous ass and warm center back into him. The quivering little huff of a sigh she made when he felt her heat against him made his groin tense in a shiver. He couldn’t tear his eyes away again, though this time his focus was on the deep indentation of her narrow waist leading outwards to the generous flare of her hips. His hands moved on their own accord to grip those soft feminine parts. He wanted to grind his dick in the cleft of her ass, he cock rapidly hardening to do so as he took in this sweet sight. His eyes ghosted over her bruises, just looking at the womanly shape of Simone as she raised hind end on her tiptoes to better press back against his crotch. His hands squeezed and pulled her hips to him more firmly, his own hips rolling to grind his clothed erection against her bare ass. She smelled so good, that unique and indescribable scent that first made him aware that his attraction for her was not just the acknowledgment of her visual beauty, but something more primally linked. His hands ran up and down the curve of her hips and his cock throbbed at how wide they were on her otherwise delicate frame. Good hips, good thighs, good ass were good for pregnancy. His breath came warm and quick at the thought of breeding her. He’d ejaculated in her twice already over the past two days and he wanted to increase the frequency. He wanted to make sure it was his, too. Take her, keep her and breed her. He salivated at the prospect, finding it ringing truer than a mere fantasy in him. He would do this. He would steal her and make a new family with her, where they could live as they should instead of as they did. Husband and wife and child, not uncle and niece and nothing. Uncle and niece. Filthy, rapist uncle and insane, victimized niece.

Anders staggered away from her, the spell broken as suddenly as it had come over him, and a panic fell in its place. He didn’t know where that twisted thought had come from. He was horrified at himself. He shouldn’t have gone into that room, should have left when he saw she was undressed, should have removed himself from her hug, should have just searched out and confronted Leif. He almost ran from the room, his surroundings a blur until he found himself back in his guest room, Henrik and Vidar asking him questions he couldn’t listen to as his mind screamed. It might have
been the drugs, but a growing and terrified part of him knew that it wasn’t. There was something wrong, something very, very wrong in him.
Chapter 24

Leif could slice the root vegetables at a consistent 1.5-millimeter thickness with an adequately sharpened chef’s knife, though he did regret not having the mandoline he had left at the Brooklyn apartment. Finding no more kitchen twine, he had to trust the butcher had done well enough in trimming the fat from the lamb and left it tied as it had come. His mental list of items to acquire was growing more extensive with each passing day, speaking to the dissimilarity in lifestyle between him and Einar. How a man could have in his possession a complete set of Miyabi Birchwood knives and yet lack a simple immersion blender was beyond him, though he did suppose it matched with his late father’s utilitarian yet exquisite taste. For all the man’s appreciation for practicality, it was often paradoxically inconvenient. He was placing the potato slices in a layered spiral on the bottom of the roasting pan, taking a simple enjoyment in the arrangement, when a feeling of being watched alerted him to the presence of another.

He waited for the person to step out from hiding and when they didn’t, he spoke, “If you’re not busy, you could give me a hand in here.”

Henrik stepped in from the darkened hallway into the kitchen, the late afternoon sunlight pouring in from the west facing windows and making his weathered face scrunch in a squint. Leif regarded him with an expectant glance, not pausing from his task as he doled out the slices like playing cards in the pan.

“I trust that Vidar is keeping an eye on poor Anders,” he said. “May I ask you to peel three onions while I do this?”

“We have to talk about what you’re doing,” Henrik said.

Leif set aside the potato and gave him his undivided attention as he wiped his starchy hands with a rag. He was too eager to find out how much they knew with a distraught and vengeful Anders alone with them for so long.

“I’m going to roast the lamb on a bed of potatoes and vegetable slices, then I’m going to make a balsamic and berry reduction. I was thinking about wilting some kale and collards to go with it, but if-”

“You’re poisoning Simone,” Henrik interrupted.

Leif raised his brow at him. “I know we should limit red meat intake, but I hardly think-”

“Leif!” his brother growled, completing his bearlike visage in a manner that nearly made Leif grin. Henrik stepped forward and placed his large hands flat on the surface of the island where Leif was working, directly across from him. Leif looked up at him then, his face a careful arrangement of attentive concern. Intriguingly, Henrik had the look of a man in the throes of a tumultuous mourning rather than the righteous indignation over a disturbing injustice. “What are you doing with those drugs? What possible use could you have for atropine? Propofol? Leif, tell me you haven’t been… Just tell me why you have these. Please.”

Leif frowned, ran his tongue over his sharp teeth and then adjusted his posture to put some annoyance into it. “You snooped through my bags, didn’t you? Then you jumped to some awful conclusion and came to me to confirm it. This is unacceptable behavior even among brothers, Henrik.”
“Unacceptable? You know what’s unacceptable? Carrying around a sampler platter of psychoactives! What is going on with you, Leif? What are you up to? These drugs are being used and not by you. Can you explain that?”

He was close to what had happened, probably had most of the pieces and perhaps suspected it already, and Leif weighed whether to mislead him or bait him closer. He decided to go with the more interesting prospect. “We’ve done drugs together, so what’s so mysterious about this?”

“We’ve done coke and MDMA, Leif. Party drugs at parties. A control freak like you would never self-administer scopolamine, for fuck’s sake! What is it for? Do not give me some bullshit!”

“What are you asking? You’ve already formed an answer in your mind, so why not just say it?”

“Because I don’t want it to be true!” Henrik nearly yelled. His eyes were wet and face reddened like he often used to get when they were schoolchildren. Leif felt a bit uncomfortable seeing this muscular mountain of a man react so emotionally, but then again, emotional reactions had always struck him as odd. This dramatic fanfare for his seemingly harsh methods of raising his daughter was gratifying, however. It entertained his ego to see someone else appreciate just how far he’d been willing to go for her, even if that appreciation was measured in horror.

“Want what to be true? Just spit it out.”

Henrik’s mouth opened and then closed. His hands curled into fists and he looked down at the smoothed wood surface of the island countertop as he quietly asked, “How long have you been inducing Simone’s altered mental status?”

Leif hadn’t expected his brother, even with his medical knowledge, to have come to that conclusion on his own. Perhaps he had given himself too much credit in coming off as a man of conventional vices, or perhaps Anders had indeed been unwise enough to divulge the dirty details of what had happened between them and Simone that morning. However, the first principal in nursing—derived of the Hippocratic oath to do no harm—assured that the order of operations would have Henrik pursuing the more immediate danger of Leif’s sexual activity with girl. The chemical manipulation was debatably more harmful but less urgent. Not to mention that it would have led to Anders having to reveal his own participation. No, Henrik did not know yet and Anders was too ashamed to risk exposing himself, exactly as Leif had predicted. While not quite how he had wanted to achieve that stalemate, the result was as he had planned. Now to handle this development.

He arranged his features to a mask of shock and hurt as he said, “You think I’ve been… I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation. How could you think I’d hurt my daughter that way? I’ve done everything I can to try to make life better for her. I love her!”

“I know!” Henrik spat. “I know that! I also know she has some pretty fucking fresh needle marks in her arms and neck and half the time her pupils are the size of fucking dinner plates! I know what those drugs can do to someone and it’s matching up with what I’ve seen in her.” He brought his hand over his leaky eyes, his mouth drawn in a grimace as he seemed to be crying. Leif watched, fascinated at this emotional display and impressive disclosure of both betrayal and sympathy. “I just… I need to hear it from you. I need to know why, why you would do this. Leif, you can’t lie your way out of this. Tell me. Please.”

Leif considered the knife on the cutting board in front of him impulsively, but eschewed the need for such a drastic measure yet. This was far too interesting to cut so abruptly. He looked at his brother as he worked up the correct emotional response to such accusations, which not an easy task without reference. The risk was exhilarating.
He relaxed his defensive posture and spread his stance a little wider, opening his body language and lowering his voice as he calmly spoke, “Simone was such a bright and motivated young girl. She was always trying so hard to get ahead. It was almost like she knew, you know... like she knew it would happen and she wanted to do as much as possible before that. When she started to slip, we took her to several specialists. Since my work was flexible, I was the one who took her to every appointment. I learned a lot. A lot of different ways a mind can break. After months of scans and tests, trials and observations, and through it all she just got worse.”

He licked his sharp incisor, the pointed end scraping over his tongue with a minor pain that helped distract him from gloating. He noticed the quiet horror on his brother’s tense face and decided to steer away from the familial approach and redirect his attention to his medical professional side. “One doctor would say it was this, one psychiatrist would say it was that, but no one really knew. They couldn’t take care of her... so I did. Those drugs I’ve been administering to Simone help prevent her mania from taking over. There are moments where I need a more powerful sedative than diazepam to keep her from hurting herself, but doctors won’t prescribe them for home use. I’m not going to let her go neglected in some state-run ward or go into debt to have a private facility do what I can do for her.”

At first, Henrik did not respond. Then, with an anger that reassured Leif, he said, “Do you know how fucking stupid that is? Do you know what these drugs can do to her? You’ve probably done irreparable damage! If you didn’t think the specialists you were going to were any good, then get referrals! Find someone that fits! You can’t play doctor, especially with someone else’s life!”

“I’m not experimenting on her, this is all scientifically proven and she’s much more functional than she was,” Leif retorted. This was going very well. If he could continue directing this into an argument about how to care for his daughter instead of a confrontation of what he’d been doing, then he might not need to even threaten him. Playing dumb was cheap and usually transparent, but playing just dumb enough was proving fruitful.

“You’re excessively controlling. I’m serious, this has to stop. It’s too dangerous,” Henrik pressed. “Not just for her, but what’ll happen when they find these drugs in her system? I’m not too familiar with the laws in this country, but as her caregiver, you’re legally on the line for what’s in her body.”

Leif had to stop himself from laughing at the crude joke his brother had unwittingly made. The man really had no idea how right he was. A rape kit was enough to put in him jail for a minimum of five years in New York, but Vermont was much more lenient. All things considered, incest was towards the bottom of his list of possible charges, but he would never allow himself to get pulled into the court system.

He levelled a firm but unheated stare at Henrik as he said, “I’m not going to stop. You’re not going to report me. I’ve been there for her when she had no one and I’ve brought her back from the brink more times than anyone knows. With all due respect to your professional advice, I’m managing her illness just fine.”

“This isn’t your responsibility to assume. You have no idea what you’re doing to her in the long run.”

“I know better than the psychiatrist who recommended shock therapy and my method is certainly more effective than the specialist who only wanted to cut gluten out of her diet,” Leif was getting irritated. He had gotten accustomed to no longer being questioned since pushing Simone’s mother out of her role. He had to end this topic quickly. “Believe me, I’ve tried to work with them all. I know my child. I know what she needs.”

“She needs a professional!” Henrik yelled, stamping a pointed finger on the countertop to emphasis
“She’s been fine without them meddling around in her head!” Leif’s tone was dipping down into his actual voice. He was aware of his mask slipping, but it even more than that, he was aware of the temptation to let it slip. The knife was right there in lovely Damascus-patterned steel, shining brightly enough to illuminate how unmoored he was becoming. It should have been more disconcerting than it was.

“Do you honestly believe you’re qualified to be the one meddling around in her head, then? You’re so arrogant, it’s ridiculous! She needs-”

“I’m what she needs!” Leif snapped. “She doesn’t need anyone else, understand? She belongs to me!”

It took him less than a second to realize what he’d said and when it hit, he inwardly recoiled. Henrik stared at him, eyes wide and face frozen in astonishment as those words rang in the silence between them, and Leif knew he reflected that same shock. He hadn’t meant to say that. He’d meant to guide him away from that trail, lead him toward less volatile conclusions. Henrik had gotten a reaction out of him. Leif was not supposed to react; he was supposed to orchestrate. It must be the fatigue.

“I’m sorry for snapping,” Leif said, smiling as he looked down at the roasting pan. He picked up the thin yellow discs of potatoes and resumed the arrangement as his mind whirled in what he could not admit to himself was panic. “Let’s talk about this another time.”

“Sure, Leif. Sure,” Henrik said softly, nodding his head as he withdrew his hands from the countertop.

“Is Anders feeling any better?”

“He’s, um, sleeping it off. I’d better go check on him, actually.”

“Of course. Supper is in three hours. I hope he’ll feel up to joining us,” Leif smiled.

Henrik nodded, his blue eyes lingering on Leif warily before he turned and left the kitchen. Leif picked up the knife and began those thin, precise cuts into four cloves of garlic on the board, his steady hands not wavering as he wondered how much longer he could let them teeter on the edge of the truth. He could plainly see that he had not succeeded in dissuading his brother from suspecting that he’d been poisoning Simone, as he’d put it. He had done quite well in reinforcing that impression, in fact. It was odd to feel himself slipping. He had expected to rail against it, to be violently seized by the need to maintain control, but there was an inexplicable absence of that past reflexive anxiety in acknowledging a mistake. As he inserted sprigs of thyme, rosemary, and slivered garlic into the pockets he’d speared into the meat, he contemplated what harm there really was in letting his ownership of Simone become known. It was unconventional, but if he smudged certain details, there was really nothing they could do to deter him. Keeping up this friendly family man act in a time when he was finally able to be open with his Simone about their true relationship was proving too restrictive, like a too-small suit coming apart at the seams. Perhaps it was time to create a new image for himself, one that better reflects yet obfuscates this new era for him and his darling girl.

Simone watched as Henrik trudged from the kitchen back towards the stairs, her crouched position
from the shaded dining room allowing her to go unnoticed as she observed his wide and muscular frame deflate with melancholy once out of view of her father. Revisiting this childhood habit of observing from a hidden space brought good and safe memories of laying under her bed for hours or reading books with a flashlight in the attic crawl space while her mother stomped around calling for her. But the darkened spaces in this cavernous old house were not as safe. Even alone in the empty dining room with all the opulent curtains drawn, she felt seen. Movement at the kitchen doorway caught her eye and she watched as her father’s shadow emerged from the door, the knife held in his fist like a pointed extension of his arm. He straddled the doorway as he stared down the hall, that knife hand pointing the direction of his gaze toward the staircase, and she could see the same murderous intent emanating from him as when he stood over Anders’ unconscious body. A cold chill ran down her spine, but she forced herself to act. She had to remain vigilant.

“Papa,” she spoke, her voice small and thin but carrying through the silence like a bell.

He turned to her, his wide mouth already pulled into a smile. “What are you doing down here? You should be resting.”

She stood from her hiding spot behind a tall potted plant and smoothed her pale gauzy nightgown as she stepped into the hallway. Her hair was finally brushed of the nest of snarls it had been and she’d braided it in one long plait down her back, not wanting to risk having it tangled so much again with the trend of activity as of late. All in all, she felt like she looked ready to pose for some chintzy Christmas card involving feathers and brass halos, but it worked to endear Leif to her as his smile widened into something that reached his eyes as he looked at her.

“Look at me, don’t look at them.”

“I can’t sleep,” she said softly, padding her way toward him on stockinged feet. “Would you mind if I helped you with dinner?”

She resisted flinching as his hand gently touched the same cheek he’d slapped a few hours earlier, the scents of herbs and garlic strong on his fingers. “You really should be resting, darling girl. You’ve had quite a busy day and I want you bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for the memorial service tomorrow. Perhaps you need a sedative?”

She reached up and caressed his hand, nuzzling against it and inhaling the fresh rosemary and thyme before grinning up at him and tucking the side of his index finger between her lips. She made a show of growling and giving a little shake with her gentle bite, wrinkling her nose to add to the pantomime of a dog shaking a dead thing apart in its jaws. When he huffed out a brief chuckle, his eyes crinkling with the laugh, she felt an old familiar happiness spring in her. It was always a victory to get a laugh out of either of her serious parents, but more importantly, it was one of her key tactics of distracting them from their anger.

“You’re tasty, Dad,” she grinned, her words muffled around the flesh between her lips.

She ran her tongue up the appendage, observing how his eyes watched her mouth with curiosity and amusement. She had never tried distracting her parents with sex in the past, of course, but the steadfast and predatory leer in his gaze told her that it might be more effective than humor. Tentatively, she encircled the tip of his finger between her puckered lips, keeping her eyes locked on his face in a bravado she certainly did not feel with her knees shaking under her nightgown. That amusement in his gaze turned to heated interest as she slowly slid his finger into her mouth, the trimmed stub of his nail hard against soft flesh as it scraped the back of her throat when she reached his third knuckle. Then, just as slowly, she pressed her tongue to his finger as she slid it out, releasing the tip with an audible pop from the suction she’d applied. Her cheeks were burning in a fierce blush and her mouth salivated at both the taste of herbs and the texture of skin. With a guilty twinge, she acknowledged that she didn’t just want to distract him from his violent impulse. That constant need
to please him thrilled at the opportunity, even after the horror he’d put her through that day. The notion that she would never be free of him rippled with a terrible truth in her.

“Can I help you in the kitchen, Daddy?” she whispered, her voice pathetically small and tight despite the brave front she tried to simulate.

He didn’t answer, making her nervous as he instead rubbed his wet fingertip over her full lips, pressing the plump flesh back to show her teeth while he watched with that same heated fascination. The knife in his other hand moved and she tried not to let her apprehension show, failing in that when she winced and gasped as the cold steel ghosted over her chest. The hand at her mouth gripped her chin, holding her from looking down when she felt the blade tugging at her front accompanied by a ripping sound. Flashbacks to her vision of him tearing her torso open played vividly in the theater of her mind, fueling the fear that made her shut her eyes and whimper as that knife tore downward. The phantom feeling of hot blood pouring down her belly fed her terror, but no pain came along with that tugging. He didn’t release his hold on her jaw as he walked them into the kitchen, shutting the door behind them as she stumbled to match his wider stride without being able to quite see where they stepped. He slammed her against the door, stars swimming in her vision when the back of her head hit the solid oak, and then her knees buckled easily as he pushed her down. Before she could recover, she heard him fumbling with his clothes and then felt something warm and smooth press against her cheek. Startled, her eyes finally snapped open to see him looming over her, that dangerous stern mask over his features as he looked down at her and held his erection to her face. He didn’t give her a chance to react, grabbing her hair by the roots and yanking her up. When her mouth fell open in a pained cry, she felt him shove the tip of his cock between her parted lips and she fought the impulse to pull away, her instinct to submit to this violent male overtaking any resistance.

“Good girl,” his deep voice rumbled when she opened wider.

The slide of his cock gliding over her tongue and crowding into her throat nearly had her gag at the suddenness of it and she struggled to control her panicked breaths through her nostrils. She forced herself to relax, to allow him into her throat, but she wasn’t ready and choked around the intrusion as he drove deeper. Spit dribbled down her chin as she sputtered and coughed when he pulled out and then her throat constricted around him again as he shoved back in. Her head quickly began to swim from oxygen deprivation, darkness closing in at the edges of her vision each time he blocked her airway and retreated with each spastic breath she managed between coughs as he slid out. It took several turns before she could get her coughing reaction somewhat under control, but his pace remained unaffected by her struggle as he fucked her mouth and throat against the door. Her face was wet with tears and saliva and her throat already sore from trying to accommodate his girth. To prevent her head from being knocked back with his thrusts, she held it pressed against the door and just remained still as he took his pleasure. From the sounds of his low, guttural grunting above her, he seemed to be taking plenty. The chill of a draft brushed over her breasts and she realized that he had cut a deep tear down the center of her nightgown from her collar to the end of her sternum.

“Look at me,” he whispered and she obeyed.

He stared down at her, his mouth slightly parted from panting and his gaze burning with an intensity she could see even through tear-blurred eyes. Beyond her terror and violation, she wondered why he chose to have her this way. She was obviously willing and wanting, but he’d assaulted her to make her afraid and turned this into a forced encounter. As his cock throbbed with each whimper she managed to make when it wasn’t jammed into her throat, she tried to understand his hunger for her fear. She couldn’t, but she understood her own body’s shameful reaction to his dominance. It made her sick with how wet she got from any of this, but the damp heat sopping her pantyliner wasn’t just the slow trickle of blood from her injury. It had to be her madness or some desperate measure to hold
onto any semblance of control, but there was something fulfilling in the pain, something almost comforting in how thoroughly he took that control from her. No. She couldn’t let herself enjoy being his, especially not when she had others to protect from his violence.

“Helvete, Simone…” he muttered. Those fingers tugging at her hair loosened and caressed down her cheek as he held her gaze and fucked her mouth slower. “Such a talented little mouth.”

She blushed at the praise, then at her shame with the rush of arousal that came with it. This was hopeless. His thrusts began to knock into her throat with a bruising brutality, making her pitiful grunts raised muffled cries broken up by the plug of his swelling tip. She broke their stare, the pain overwhelming her obedience, and she began to sob earnest. This was enough to push him over the edge as he abruptly pulled out of her mouth and grasped her hair to hold her head back as she hacked and coughed. She heard him stroking himself rapidly as his hot semen shot across her bared chest, dribbling down her breasts in thick trails. The humiliation was secondary to her relief that the assault on her sore throat was over. Covered in sweat, saliva, semen, tears, and with her own arousal leaking onto her thighs, she felt filthy both mentally and physically. She allowed herself one shivering sob before biting her lip against that urge to weep.

“Always such a little trooper,” Leif said warmly, his fingers disentangling from her hair with an affectionate rub and allowing her head to fall forward. “Thank you for helping me in the kitchen, darling. Now wash up and go tell your uncles that I expect them all down for supper at seven sharp.”

“They-” she rasped, then pressed her hands to her neck and mouth as a coughing fit overtook her. Her throat was raw and uncooperative, sorer than after the first time he’d fucked it. At least, more than the first time she’d been aware that he’d fucked it. Suddenly every sore throat she’d experienced in her life made her wonder with an awful feeling. She didn’t want to know. He knelt next to her, one hand supportively cupping her shoulder and the other gently patting her back, and she nearly recoiled reflexively at his touch.

“Save your words for your uncles, dearest,” he whispered softly.

She wanted to tell him to leave them out of whatever was happening and just let it be between the two of them, but she couldn’t speak. Perhaps that was his goal all along; another joke to play at her expense. She laughed, a queer sound that bubbled up from her without her bidding and tore through her throat painfully. That she couldn’t even laugh at his joke without agony was even more hilarious. She coughed, choking around her laughter as it poured out of her only to jam at her throat. This was far funnier than any of the clever little observations and quips he’d made with his stuffy friends from work or the amusing charm he’d put on to impress guests.

“Don’t cry so hard, sweetheart, the worst is over now,” he soothed, his reassuring and fatherly tone so filthy to hear while his come was cooling on her bared tits.

Though tears ran down her cheeks and her face was scrunched in pain as her body trembled, she wasn’t crying. She wished she could tell him she wasn’t crying. She was laughing; it really was all so very funny and the worst was far, far from over. She couldn’t tell him that though, so she just shook and coughed while he mimicked fatherhood in the gentle pats on her back.

“I think we should do it tonight,” Vidar said, careful to keep his voice low.
Henrik looked at him doubtfully, his heavy brow casting a shadow over his eyes and furrowing to deepen the weathered lines along his forehead as he said, “With what proof? We don’t even know if she’s willing to go along with this.”

“You weren’t there when he hit her. He did it without even hesitating, and you heard her hollering down there when he… you know,” Vidar frowned. “She’d be crazy not to want to get away from him!”

“Well, she is crazy, you prick. And women defend their abusers all the time, you should know that.”

“Adult women will lie to protect their abusive shithead husbands and boyfriends, not their weirdo fathers. It’s a totally different dynamic.”

They were interrupted by an abrupt bark of laughter from Anders and they both turned to see him unexpectedly awake on the bed. He held one hand over his eyes as his mouth was pulled into a mournful grin, something halfway between laughter and weeping that was entirely distress.

Henrik crouched by his side, his medical bag open and ready as he said, “Anders, how are you feeling? You’ve been weaving in and out of consciousness for hours, brother. Can you tell me what you took?”

“A needle full of nightmares,” he murmured, his voice raspy.

“Okaaay…” Henrik frowned, looking back at Vidar with an incredulous shrug. “How about you drink some water and try to sit up?”

Without waiting for an answer, Henrik pulled him up with one hand while the other accepted the water bottle Vidar passed him. Anders’ head felt no better than it had before, but his thoughts were clearer. Whether that was any better or not was undecided as the horrible highlights of the day replayed on a constant loop in his mind. He shoed away Henrik’s fussing hands when the man tried to tip the bottle into his mouth and he took it from him as he sat up with a groan. That feeling of having been hit by a truck was still very present in every inch of his body despite the bouts of unconsciousness that had pulled him unwillingly in and out of naps for what had felt like days. To find that it was just hours was not quite believable to him yet.

“Where is she?” he slurred, shutting his eyes against the brightness that leaked through the curtains.

“Are you going to go running around like a maniac and chop down a wall again if we don’t tell you?” Vidar asked flatly.

Anders glared at him. “Where is she?”

“She’s fine,” Henrik said, frowning at both men. “She stopped by a couple hours ago. She’s probably in her room or something.”

“You went into their room earlier and then came running back here and freaked out until you fainted,” Vidar said dryly. He leaned forward in his chair and looked levelly at Anders. “You wouldn’t tell us shit about what happened in there, or any other time you’ve been with her. Do you think you could clear that up now?”

Anders could feel his blood pressure rising just at the implication in his brother’s tone. He was very aware of the bloodstain under the blanket, right next to his knee. “I just… had to make sure she was okay.”

“How long did you know he was administering her hallucinogens and barbiturates? Why didn’t you
tell us sooner?” Henrik whispered.

While grateful for the topic change, Anders wondered if he heard him correctly. “What?”

“That pack of drugs in his duffel bag,” Vidar reminded him. When Anders stared at him blankly, he huffed in frustration. “You showed it to us, remember? It was chock full of crazy shit. Come on, why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

Anders blinked and rubbed his aching head. “I didn’t… I don’t really remember that clearly. I just found it and thought it was weird, I think.”

A heavy silence fell over them, broken by Henrik’s harsh whisper, “Are you fucking telling me that you didn’t know Leif’s been drugging her to make her insane? You found that on accident?! You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Anders could hear the words spoken to him and understand them on a surface level, but there was something odd about them. It took him several tries to piece them together in a way that made sense, like how he had to take a moment to translate English before understanding. He didn’t know… that Leif had been drugging Simone… to make her insane. His mouth felt very dry and his hands felt numb. He didn’t know, but now he knew. Leif, his biggest brother, had been drugging Simone, his… something. He could ponder his hesitance in defining what she was to him later. He ran the sentence through his mind again. Leif had been drugging Simone to make her insane. There was a painful twinge in his brain followed by a profoundly deep rage as it began to make sense to him. With his own too-recent experience in feeling out of control of his own mind and body from whatever Leif had dosed him with, he understood with a terrible complexity just how grievous of a violation he’d enacted on his own daughter. He also knew why. It was so easy for Leif to make him do what he wanted. Leif had staged the entire rape. Leif had fucked his own daughter and then turned him on her for fun. His nails dug into his palms, the pain going unnoticed as he struggled with the fury and outrage burning his mind. That terrible lack of control was something she had to live with for God knows how long while Leif could do every awful thing he’d wanted to her.

“Wait, wait, if you didn’t know that…” Vidar frowned. “… then why were you so god damned insistent on getting her away from him?”

“He’s doing whatever he wants with her,” Anders said, more to himself than to his brother. His voice was clear and calm, carefully measured to prevent himself from screaming. “He’s getting away with it because she’s too fucked up to even think to resist him… and no one would believe her anyway because she’s insane. It’s sick. It’s so sick. But he’s not going to get away with it anymore.”

“Anders… what exactly are you talking about?” Henrik whispered haltingly.

All three men jumped at the sound of knocking at the door. Vidar glanced at them with a warning look before rising from his chair and cracking open the door. Anders couldn’t see who it was, but the downward cast of his brother’s eyes told him it was Simone’s short countenance.

“Simone?” Anders called, keeping his voice just loud enough to be heard. Vidar waved for him to stop, but he ignored him and gathered his best English, “Simone, welcome in.”

Vidar sighed in irritation, but stepped aside and opened the door wider for her. As she hesitantly stepped inside the crowded room, Anders wished he could say he didn’t feel anything but repentant shame and righteous protection for the girl. Those urges were both present, but as he looked at her walking towards him in that short black dress with her hair pulled up and away from her sweet face, he felt those feelings he had no right to have again. It was easier to be contrite and promise to atone for his sins when she wasn’t around to make his heart race and his palms sweat. When she looked at
him with that sorrowful and pained expression, he saw none of the blame and fear he’d deserved. Her bare feet stopped just a few centimeters from the bed, close enough to bring her scent to him. That earthy and slightly sweet scent brought that urge to touch and taste to the forefront of his thoughts, startling him that the urge was this strong even in this circumstance. Even more startling, however, was how she climbed onto the bed and began to move over him.

“Uh… hm… w-wait, ah,” he stammered, scooting away from her but she was already in his lap and wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

His eyes darted to his brothers nervously, seeing them watching this happen with alarm rivaling his own. Despite all this, her softness and warmth were too good to resist returning her embrace and he carefully made sure to accomplish this as non-sexually as possible. He had to try not to look too nervous or too relaxed, not too excited or too eager, and certainly not at all aroused. He was very aware of how disgusting he was to want her even with the news of her unspeakable abuse still fresh in his mind, but by now he wasn’t surprised at his savagery. If anything, it only made him want to claim her more. His hands paused in their comforting and familial pats on her back, a private horror at his own thoughts seizing his attention. She wasn’t a thing to claim.

“It’s time to eat,” she whispered, her voice raspy and thin, nearly inaudible if her lips weren’t so tantalizingly close to his ear. His hands unconsciously pulled her closer to him as they slid down to her lower back. She felt so good, so right, but he needed her closer.

“What did she tell you?” Henrik asked.

Anders snapped out of his daze and scrambled to process the question. “Oh! Uh, she said there’s something to eat, I think?”

“I guess our time here is up, then,” Vidar said, then whispered in a voice dripping with sarcasm, “Would you like us to shut the door on our way out so you can have some special snuggle time with your niece in privacy?”

“Vid, would you like to shut the fuck up?” Henrik glared. He turned to Anders with an apologetic expression. “We’re all expected to show up for supper in the dining room. This is going to be an awkward meal, but I think we should try to talk this all out together.”

“What? What do you mean, ‘talk this out together’?” Anders frowned. He couldn’t imagine having to sit down across from the man responsible for all of this. His arms tightened around Simone. “There’s nothing to discuss. You said it yourself, the man has been drugging his own daughter.”

“Anders,” Henrik grumbled exasperatedly. “It’s not that simple.”

“Fuck you, it couldn’t be simpler!”

“I agree with Anders, for once,” Vidar interrupted.

Henrik scowled at them, then said, “Listen, we’re going to have a civil discussion with our brother and make him see that what he’s been doing is harmful. We’re going to sit down, like the adults we are, and have an intervention with our obviously misguided sibling. We’re going to work on a solution together as a family. This isn’t some psychotic maniac, this is Leif!”

“I’m not going to let anyone hurt Simone just to maintain politeness,” Anders nearly growled. She stirred in his lap, bringing his attention to how tightly he’d been holding her and he relaxed with a self-conscious glance to his brothers.

She leaned up, pressing her body close to his as her lips nearly brushed his neck when she
whispered, “Please. Don’t do anything to anger him. Don’t give him a reason.”

“What in the hell is she telling you?” Vidar sneered.

Anders ignored him, too focused on the way her back arched under his hand and the movement of her chest against him as she breathed. He was aware of the incriminating blush that warmed its way up his neck as her strange foreign words caressed his ear, sending a chill through him that tickled down his spine.

“Please, Anders, don’t do anything stupid. I can’t protect you from him. I can’t even protect myself, so please, please…”

He understood maybe half the words she used, but making sense of them was an afterthought with how she embraced him and begged… something from him. Just hearing how she pleaded filled him with memories of the way she’d pressed herself to him that morning in the shower, her body writhing eagerly against him and her sweet voice high with need. It felt like days had passed since he’d last touched her and holding her now both slaked and incited that need for contact with her.

“… Please, don’t worry about me and just lay low. It’s too late for me, but you don’t have to get dragged into this any further. I don’t think I could take it if anything happened to you. Oh god, this is all so fucked up, but I love you, I love you and I need you, so please…”

Her whispers became breathy and desperate and he began to panic as he felt himself harden despite their audience. This was not good. He tried to focus on translating and deciphering what she’d said, but the phrases “I love you” and “I need you” echoed too loudly for him to understand much past that. He bit his lip, trying to stave off those very unchaste thoughts. If only she didn’t feel so delightful on his lap, if only she didn’t cling to him so closely, if only she didn’t smell like something he wanted to take home and keep all to himself, he might be able to think.

“Please, don’t die.”
Chapter 25

The sun was well hidden behind the maples and oaks surrounding the house, blanketing the grounds in shadow as it began to set. What light there was coming into the dining room was pale and dim, so Leif chose to brighten the room by lighting a candelabra, which had not seen flame in perhaps half a decade since Einar’s decline in health had ceased his once elaborate dinner parties. The gold-rimmed china and silver flatware gleamed in the candlelight. The limited illumination did not extend much past the end of the table where five places were set, giving the illusion of cozy intimacy on a table designed to comfortably seat twenty. Leif took the liberty of pouring a Bordeaux at each setting, the red as deep as blood suspended in the wide bowls above the slender stems of the wine glasses. In a large deep tray under a silver dome that reflected the room in a distorted and curving image hid the sacrificial lamb, standing to seal in its juices as it awaited the serrated edge of the carving knife placed next to it on a cream damask napkin. A simple family meal of one main dish and three sides, with a singular course and no overelaborate distractions, a nod to the late patriarch’s preference. Leif smiled in satisfaction at the elegant arrangement. The stage was set, the props were in place, and all that was needed now were the actors and audience. Having sent his Simone to fetch the others, Leif was seated at the head of the table in waiting when he heard their shuffling arrival.

Henrik’s muscular bulk was the first to enter through the ornately molded archway, his face sporting a smile that was nearly sincere as he regarded the table. “Wow, Leif, this is just like Sunday supper with Pappa!”

“We all dreaded those long, stuffy suppers,” Leif remarked amicably. He smiled at Simone as she came around from behind the hulking Henrik, extending his hand to his girl. “Come sit with me a moment, darling.”

She bit her lip in that endearing nervous habit of hers but did well to quickly obey, the sleek little black dress he’d picked out for her clinging to her curves and lightening her creamy skin appealingly as he looked her up and down for any bruises she may not have hid. He placed his hands on her hips when she stepped within range, pulling her close and sliding down to the hem of her dress before slowly fondling the sides of her thighs under the material. Nothing expressly sexual, but certainly not familial either. Her increasingly nervous glances in Henrik’s direction encouraged Leif to torment her more boldly. He leaned back in his chair and patted his knee, pulling her close when she obeyed to sit in his lap. None of this was unprecedented behavior for them in front of his brothers, not yet. His smile curled into a sneer when he detected Anders’ scent on her, an unfortunate harm of having sent her to his room. On impulse, he nuzzled her neck to mask some of that invasive scent with his aftershave, taking an unexpected delight in how she gasped softly at this unintended affection. Out of view from their onlooker, his hand squeezed the top of her ass, pressing her dress into the cleft with his finger and drawing out a flustered huff from her. It had only been a couple hours since he’d fucked her throat, but he found himself hardening again like a hormonal adolescent.

“Uh… so, um… they should be down soon, but I wanted to ask you something before they get here,” Henrik said quietly, taking a seat to Leif’s right and exuding nervousness.

Leif sawed his finger into the cloth-covered cleft of his daughter’s ass as he looked at Henrik and said, “Surely, anything you have to say could be said in their presence. I think it’s time we stop harboring so many secrets in this family, don’t you?”

Henrik smiled, a small genuine smile of relief. “I’m glad you think so. But, they’re a little, um… upset. I just want to ask you to be patient with them, you know, don’t let them get to you. We’ll work this all out as a family, right?”
“Of course,” Leif nodded. Both men looked at Simone when she flinched and stifled a yelp as Leif worked his hand under her and pressed at her asshole. He let his mouth pull into a sly grin at how entertainingly sensitive his girl was. “Oh, darling, are you feeling alright?”

She started to say something, but quickly ducked her face away to cough into her elbow before she could manage to croak out a single word. He rubbed against her hole more gently, holding her squirming body closer to him in the guise of concern as she tried to get her silent coughing under control. The desperate little breaths she managed to take between the shaking fits were laced with the high grunts of stifled moans, indiscernible from either pleasure or pain, and he wanted to slide his other hand over her cunt just to see if this stimulation was getting her wet.

“That seems like an awful sore throat. May I take a look at her?” Henrik offered, forehead wrinkled in practiced professional concern as he rose from his seat.

Leif turned to him and slid his hand out from under her. “No, you may not.”

She ceased her shaking and coughing, panting heavily to recover her breath while the two men stared at one another. There was nothing in Leif’s tone that threatened or betrayed any ill will with his refusal, but Henrik seemed disturbed at his response.

“I should at least determine if it’s an infection,” Henrik persisted.

“It’s not.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

Henrik scowled and let out an aggravated sigh, but sank down in his seat. Leif stroked Simone’s thigh as he turned her toward him again, leaning her against his chest and kissing the top of her head affectionately. She relaxed into him when it became clear he wasn’t going to do anything more than that, her cheek resting heavily on the ridge of his collarbone. There was a fatigue in how she melted against him that he could relate to, but he could not yet allow himself to reflect.

“Just a bit longer, darling girl,” he whispered into her hair, one hand still slowly stroking her thigh as his other arm was slung tightly around her waist.

She did not stir or react except to snuggle into him further in the simple pursuit of rest, almost as though he had sedated her. Encountering the markers of natural exhaustion in his girl held a novel appeal, but he much preferred the utter oblivion of induced sleep for the purposes of his interests. He grinned in private amusement at how he still thought in those terms out of pure habit; he’d never need to hide their love from her ever again. That freedom was still so fresh and exhilarating. He chuckled and kissed the top of her head again, ignoring how Henrik openly stared in curiosity at his seemingly unprovoked good cheer. Not even the entrance of their other two brothers could dampen his mood in the slightest. In fact, the baleful glint in Anders’ glare did well to remind him of all that was so worth protecting in his life.

“Anders, you’ve recovered nicely,” he smiled.

“Did you drug her? Recently, I mean. I really have to clarify that question, don’t I?” Anders asked.

“Not recently, no,” Leif answered amicably, then looked at him as he said, “She’s just had a rough day. Really rough. You know that, though.”

Anders paused in his approach towards the table, his eyes widening slightly as though he were
Leif watched, amused at the range of emotion the younger man could display in his features, and wondered—as he often did—at how difficult life must be to broadcast every thought so plainly. Anders took a few heavy steps toward him and Leif brightened with the expectation of violence, but they were interrupted by Henrik’s booming voice.

“Hey, hey, hey! Civil discussion, remember?” Henrik warned, pointing a stern finger at their youngest brother.

Leif had vague memories of their mother using that gesture on them, but the memories of any time before moving to the US was very muddled. Either way, Anders chose to sit down at the table and Simone seemed to have snapped to attention at the scolding. He tapped his daughter’s flank to signal her to get up and she sluggishly rose from his lap, her movements indeed as slow and arthritic as if he’d really drugged her. As Vidar had taken his usual spot next to Henrik, this left only the seat between Leif and Anders open for Simone. Anders’ stare moved to her, softening from cold anger to a grave uneasiness as she shuffled sleepily to curl up in the chair to his left.

Leif took a moment to observe his brothers before beginning. They were all fine specimens of Scandinavian men, all sturdy and tall like their father, each of them possessing the blond-haired, blue-eyed, strong-jawed and sharp-cheeked aesthetic that had afforded them privileges in life they most likely never cared to notice were not doled out to their less attractive peers. They each lived their own lives, lacking obligation to any wives or children, as they pursued their interests and careers without any greater purpose than to themselves. It struck Leif as somewhat ironic that he, the one who had suffered an upbringing at the violent hands of their father, was the one who had chosen the family track while they, having been spared of that by being thousands of kilometers away on their mother’s ranch in the northern mountainside, had thus far eschewed it. Well, aside from Anders by recent accident, but that barely even counted as a technicality. They were, as far as he could tell, complete wastes of potential. He rose from his seat and picked up the carving knife, the lovely patterned steel a good weight in his hand as he lifted the cover off the lamb.

“So, no point in beating around the bush, as they say around here,” he began cordially, spearing the meat with a long-tonged fork and driving the blade through it with practiced efficiency. Cooked meat was far easier to work with than raw flesh that had already been set in with rigor mortis. “Shall we discuss how Anders had attempted to murder me first or shall we lead with the objections to how I manage my daughter’s illness?”

A tense silence followed before Anders bitterly proposed, “How about we discuss what is going to happen to Simone when she’s taken away from you?”

“That’s simple,” Leif answered, serving his youngest brother the first slice and smiling in his face as he deposited the meat on his plate. “It won’t happen.”

“I think beating her is good enough grounds to have your caretaker status stripped,” Vidar said. He gestured vaguely with his wineglass, the contents of which were half gone already. “I mean, not to mention regularly drugging her with illegally obtained substances. That seems like a royally fucked up thing to do to your kid, if you want my opinion.”

Leif plopped down the second slice on Vidar’s plate, maintaining his genial tone as he asked, “How would the authorities ever find out about any of that?”

“Leif…” Henrik frowned. “You’re not even denying it. Come on, how could you expect us not to do anything?”

“I expect you to do nothing. If you do, you would be damning your poor niece to a worse fate than I could ever construct for her,” Leif answered as he gently slid a thick slab of lamb onto Henrik’s
plate. He glanced up from his work and regarded him with a sincere, “Thank you for your politeness, Henrik. That lack of antagonism is refreshing to encounter.”

“You don’t deserve it,” Anders seethed. “I don’t see how things could possibly be worse for Simone. We should have already called the police.”

“Do you know what a hospital for the criminally insane is like in the United States?” Leif asked as he placed a sliver of meat on his daughter’s plate. He did not wait for an answer. “They keep them tied up in tiny rooms with no social contact, or they let them wander amongst themselves. She’ll either waste away in a box or the inmates will use her for sex, trade her around like currency, knock out her teeth when she attempts to defend herself, all very common occurrences.”

“She wouldn’t end up in a place like that,” Henrik argued. “She’s not a criminal.”

“I’m afraid she would,” Leif admitted regretfully, dishing himself a bloody center cut of the roast. “You see, my role isn’t limited to father or caregiver; I’m also her warden. If anything should happen where I could no longer prevent her from acting on her violent inspirations, it would only be responsible of me to divulge certain events that prove her to be too dangerous to live among society. Gentlemen, you may help yourselves to the side dishes, if you please.”

“What the fuck are you saying? Simone’s like forty kilos, how could she be a danger to anyone?” Vidar scoffed as he reached for the tureen of wilted greens.

“Believe me, I was surprised myself the first time it happened,” Leif said. He smiled warmly at how her fear warred with her fatigue before he took a bite of the meat. She had that trapped animal look he found so charming, almost as though she could sense what was coming. “She’s capable of such… exquisite violence.”

“So your angle is, what? Blackmailing her and us with supposed proof that would get both of you arrested?” Vidar asked flatly. “The lamb is excellent, by the way. Any other reasons why we shouldn’t make it your last meal in freedom?”

“Like I said before, it won’t happen,” Leif answered.

“Don’t be so fucking sure. You’re going to have to do better than that flimsy defense,” Vidar sneered, a slight slur in his words.

Leif ignored his brother’s rudeness and turned to his daughter, placing his hand on hers dotingly as he asked, “Are you unable to swallow solid food, darling? You should at least drink your wine. It’ll make you feel better.”

“Yes, Papa,” she whispered, her bruised throat making the words almost inaudible as they rasped out of her.

He smiled at her when she tipped the glass to her lips, watching how she pressed her fingers gingerly to her throat and winced as she swallowed. He glanced at the other wineglasses on the table, seeing that they’d all been drunken from except for his, and then caught Anders’ eye as he stared at him with a paleness to his complexion and a telling stiffness in his face.

“Ah, I believe Anders might have a thought in his head for once,” Leif grinned. “Care to share it, little brother?”

At first, Anders only opened his mouth and then closed it, drawing the attention of the table as he seemed unable to form the words, then uttered, “What did you make her do?”
Leif took his time chewing the bloody meat, savoring the naturally gamey taste of the flesh mingling with the herbs and honeyed glaze, before casually answering, “I did nothing. She simply has a habit of murdering those who threaten the lives of her or of her beloved.”

“Murder?!” Henrik exclaimed.

Leif glanced at Anders, seeing him staring blankly into his plate, then at Vidar who seemed curiously unaffected by this news. “Do you really find that so unbelievable, Vid?”

Vidar sat up straighter in his seat, or at least tried to when his hand slipped on the armrest and he slapped the table to brace himself. He righted with a nervous laugh that was too loud and leaned far back in his chair, almost sinking into it. His other brothers didn’t seem to have any attention to spare him, but Leif noticed that Simone stared at Vidar with increasing alarm. Ever the observant one, his girl.

“Quit joking, Leif, we really mean it when we say that you have got to stop this!” Henrik scolded and then sipped the wine cocktail. Simone’s eyes shot to the tipped glass at his mouth, her lips slightly parted and chest heaving in panicked breaths.

“Sto-!” she cried, cut off by an eruption of a choking and coughing fit that had her doubled over with her face buried in her arms. Anders broke out of his spell to turn to her and rub her back, his hands on her irritating Leif.

“Let her be, Anders,” Leif frowned. “I don’t think your touch is all that comforting to her anymore.”

The younger man looked up at him with a burning hatred steeling his glare as he hissed, “Shut up. I won’t let that happen to her again, not by you or through anyone else.”

Leif tutted him with a shake of his head. “I didn’t make you do anything. That was all you. Take some responsibility for once in your selfish life, Anders, and face that you’re not the person you think you are. It’s in you, you know it is. I only gave you the key but you are the one who let it out. Trust me: there’s no stuffing that back down once it’s out.”

“You drugged me!” Anders protested, his lip curling back in a snarl from his teeth and showing off the same sharply pointed incisor Leif recognized in himself.

He ignored their bewildered bystanders and leaned towards his youngest brother, sliding his hand possessively over his daughter’s shoulders as he said, “It’s in you. Instead of facing and accepting it, you stuff it down and build a wall of ideals to protect you from it. You believe in your contributions to an undeserving world and ungrateful people because that means it’s good for goodness’ sake. But you’re not good and you’re never going to be good because it’s in you and it’s not withering, it’s not retreating, it’s not going change no matter how thick you build that wall around it. You can only ignore it, but it’s never, ever going to ignore you.”

“You’re insane,” Anders growled lowly, not moving his hand from Simone’s trembling back.

“You want to do it again, don’t you?” Leif asked, then in a whisper too quiet for their audience, “You’ve thought about fucking her, your own niece, since you got here. Did it thrill you when she cried and begged for you to stop? It must have, by the way you tore her with that brutal rutting. Can’t deny that, can you?”

“Burn in Hell, you sick son of a whore!” Anders yelled, seizing the hand Leif had laid across Simone’s shoulders.

With a lightning quickness, Leif twisted his hand away and lunged out of his seat to wrap it around
his brother’s throat. Henrik shot out of his chair with a shout only to stagger and collapse to the floor in a clatter of dishes as he tried and failed to grasp for anything to stop his fall. Vidar stared in wide-eyed wooziness. Anders’ grimace was more of rage and pain than terror, but Leif resolved to adjust that balance accordingly. He knew his grip strength was more than enough to completely compress a man’s trachea one-handed, but he refrained just outside of accomplishing that.

“Tell me, baby brother,” Leif grinned, squeezing the pale column of throat each time Anders attempted to move. “Which did you enjoy more: hurting your niece or trying to murder me? You did both with such zest! Have you been kept up at night, your blood pumping hot and your palms slick in your eagerness to kill me? Hmm? Or did you come up with that idea while you were making her bleed? I admire your ambition, but your heroic savior act only works if you’re not intent on repeating the same crimes as your enemy.”

He felt something slide up his torso and could see in his peripheral that Simone had recovered from her fit and was sitting up in the narrow space between him and Anders, her hand pulling on his sleeve. He kept his eyes on Anders, knowing the danger in glancing away in situations such as these, but he could see the sheen of tears on her cheeks as she leaned up towards him. He began to pet her hair with his free hand, the long gentle strokes of his fingers running through her soft locks drawing Anders’ fevered attention.

“Sto-op… Dad… please…” she rasped, her meager strength not enough to make his choking arm budge as she yanked hard on his suit.

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” Leif asked. Ander’s eyes shot back to him, rage burning in his glare. “That something so sweet, so submissive as my darling girl could be capable of that violence. But you know it’s true; even you could interpret the evidence.”

“Papa… Papa, don’t do this!” she whispered, trying to push him away from Anders with all her bodily force against his torso.

“Let me tell you a little secret, Anders, one that you may have suspected in that empty head of yours,” Leif grinned, leaning in closer and pushing Simone back down into her seat as he moved towards Anders. The younger man’s grip on his arm trembled. “She got it from her father’s side of the family.”

He hauled him up by his throat, enjoying the astonishment and unbridled fear overwhelming his brother’s reddening face as he stepped around Simone to drag him away from the table. Vidar was gripping the armrests of his chair, terrified of what Leif could only imagine he might be seeing from the potent hallucinogen seizing his mind while Henrik was still squirming on the floor. Anders kicked at Leif, his hands now pulling himself up on that strong hand at his throat to try to lessen the weight of his body pulling at his neck as he was dragged out of his seat. Leif growled out a low grunt with the force of his push as he all but threw him out into the hallway in a flurry of limbs rolling across the floor. As Anders struggled to replenish oxygen in great coughing gulps of air, Leif removed his jacket and vest. This was one of his favorite Kiton suits and he’d hate to rip it.

“Leif! LEIF! What the hell are you doing?!” Henrik shouted, his voice muddled and slurring as he tried and failed to get his muscles to cooperate enough to move. “No, no, stop, STOP!”

Anders had rolled onto his hands and knees, about to struggle with getting up when Leif came upon him in three wide steps to grab him by his shirt and throw him onto his back. Anders surprised him with his swift reaction to lean into the turn with a right hook, his fist connecting with Leif’s jaw in the same strike he’d gotten in on him from earlier. Now familiar with it, however, Leif returned the blow with a straight punch. The connection of his knuckles to his brother’s face provided a satisfying crack, enough force in it to draw blood but probably not enough to fracture the orbital bones. He
could hear Henrik still shouting, his words now unintelligible bellowing. He pulled his fist back to repeat it while Anders reeled, but that unexpected swiftness caught him again when Anders lunged up and headbutted him. Leif staggered, blinking away the darkness that spotted his vision and the pain blooming from the bridge of his nose, and repaid him with a solid kick to his ribs that sent the younger man bowling onto his side. While Anders tried to recover the wind that was knocked out of him, Leif rolled up his sleeves and then leaned his weight into two rapid kidney punches, expelling choked grunts on each impact from his already emptied lungs.

“Let me tell you all how this is going to work!” Leif announced loudly, his real voice echoing deeply through the cavernous house and ceasing Henrik’s howling. He pressed Anders down to the floor with the heel of his Italian leather monk strap shoe, the pressure limiting the younger man’s range of breath as he struggled to fill his lungs. “No allusions, no hints, no anonymous tips, not one god damn word! Should I find reason to suspect any level of indiscretion has occurred, I will obtain recompense as I deem suitable! However, I should assure you now, you will not find the reparation to be agreeable! Have I made myself understood?”

Leif listened for a response, hearing only the strangled breaths Anders wheezed and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway until he heard the patter of little bare feet on hardwood. He turned to see Simone rushing toward him from behind, the ten-centimeter-long blade of a steak knife raised high and pointed forward. While he was impressed at how she’d snuck in his blind spot without him noticing, he’d have to teach her more about adjusting her approach once the element of surprise had been lost. He waited the half second it took for her to come within range before lashing out and grasping the arm that held the knife. He twisted her wrist until her body followed and pulled her backwards towards him, grabbing the knife and holding it to her throat in one fluid motion. She wrenched out of his grasp, no concern for the blade that slid along her neck before he could move it away, and rounded on him with an elbow reared upwards into his solar plexus. Leif grunted in the precise blow, not strong enough to wind him but enough to stagger him off Anders and give her an opportunity to uppercut his nose with the heel of her hand. Trained reflex had him grab her offending hand, pull her in and bring his knee up into her torso, knocking a choked grunt from her and bringing her down easy when he backhanded her to the floor. He glimpsed the flash of red on her as she collapsed to the floor and panic gripped him.

“Shit!” he hissed, dropping to his knees and pulling her squirming body towards him to examine her cut.

Blood gushed from the thin line separating her flesh, flowing in a troublingly broad trail down her chest like a bright red necktie before disappearing under her black dress. The knife was still clutched in his fist as he began applying pressure to the wound with both hands, the slick steel showing him an approximation of how deeply it had gouged her from the centimeter of blood along the edge. From the corner of his eye, he saw Anders rise unsteadily to his feet, clutching his ribs as he turned toward them. Simone’s scrambling to get out from under his hands became frantic when she saw the glimmer of the blade turn as he adjusted it.

“Stay away!” she croaked out of her abused throat, her hands clutching his wrists.

Thankfully, her warning went unheeded as Leif heard his brother’s trudging steps towards him. He waited as he stumbled closer, his eyes locked with his daughter’s wild stare. He could see the knowing dread in them, the fury of failure to stop what was to happen, the instinctual alarm that came with bleeding, but most of all, she watched his face with the stalwart rebellion of the hopelessly defeated. Like a mortally wounded beast strikes out with vengeful claws at her approaching executor, she bared her teeth and struggled under his hands. Her nails dug bleeding trails into his forearms where she desperately held them in a futile attempt to restrain him despite surely knowing she was no match at all for his strength. She was his fiercely savage and beautiful creature. He bent
down and kissed her snarling lips, licking over the teeth that had killed a man that very day, and swung his arm behind him to stab Anders in the side of his thigh.

Anders could see the blade sticking out of his leg, but there was an odd disconnect where he didn’t quite feel the pain. Though he fell backward and landed hard on the floor, clutching the area around the knife to keep it still, the thought I have been stabbed should have had more terror accompanying it. Instead, all terror was focused on the image he glimpsed over his brother’s shoulder. Simone shaking on the ground, blood pooling under Leif’s hands at her neck, her face as ashen as her milky tea complexion could allow. She met his eyes in that second before the knife came and he knew that image of her would be among the few in his life that would occasionally jump out at him from the dark of his mind to pull him to this moment. It seemed like he had collected more snapshot memories of extreme horrors and vivid delights during this trip than at any other point in his life. Looking down at the knife embedded in his thigh, it struck him with a resounding clarity that he had changed in ways both apparent and unseen from the person he had been just a week ago. As surely as this wound would leave a lifelong scar, so had the events of the last few days. Then the pain came.

He groaned loudly, growling out each breath with every throb. Instinct called for the removal of the violating intrusion to his flesh and, despite being knowledgably aware of it being the wrong choice, he yanked the blade out in one swift jerk. The scream that tore out of his throat was an animal sound. There was a static sensation around the excruciating burning that seemed to take hold of his entire thigh, pulsing like a someone was feeding that flame with a bellows. A dark stain quickly grew around the slit in his gray slacks and he kept a steady pressure on it in spite of the pain it caused. There didn’t seem to be any way he could handle the wound that would both make the pain bearable and staunch the bleeding. His alarm shifted from a base of fear to anger as he saw Simone fight against her father. He couldn’t see past Leif’s back to determine what he was doing to her, but he could see how her legs kicked against the floor in a struggle. Anders did not have the luxury of wallowing in agony.

“Murderer! You murderer!” she rasped, her heaving gasps hoarse and her words choked out in shrill whispers.

“Simone! Stop this behavior at once!” Leif warned sternly.

“Kill me! Go on, kill me!”

Anders flinched at the loud snap of Leif’s hand striking her, unable to see how or where his hit landed but seeing her little bare feet stop their frantic jig and slowly curl closer to her body. The broken groan that followed brought him away from his own pain, filling him with the need to protect the girl. He grabbed onto that impulse, riding it further away from fear and thought, taking it deeper than he’d allowed himself previously. His head was swimming and his ears rang from the punishing brawl, but his thoughts were clearer than they’d been in days. A voice spoke in his mind soundlessly, telling him what he needed to do.

“Sorry, darling, but I need you to be still,” Leif murmured, his bent form focused on the curled shape of the girl under him.

Anders listened to the voice. Silently, he leaned on his good leg and pushed himself up, the ornate silver handle of the knife tight in his fist.

“Don’t shut your eyes. Stay awake, stay present.”
Anders listened to the voice. He would take away Simone’s suffering; starting with this beast and then by taking his place. He would become the father she deserved. He would become the lover she needed. He stepped forward, slow in stealth, approaching Leif’s broad back from directly behind him.

“You’re going into shock.”

Anders listened to the voice. She would make him a good man again. She would give him the child he was due. They would be so happy together after she learned to forgive him.

“Stay with me, darling girl.”

Anders loomed over Leif, looking down over his shoulder once more to see Simone lying in a pool of blood. It extended around her serene face like a dark nimbus, her half-shut eyes like the Madonna hanging in his mother’s bedroom. She looked up at him drowsily, her paled lips parting to draw in a slow breath. When he swung down, aiming for his neck, he saw everything as though it moved in slow motion as she lunged up and shoved her father. Wet beads of red flew from her hair with her sudden motion, hitting his face like the first few drops of a warm summer rain. The knife grazed Leif’s shoulder and her forearm, a brilliant scarlet line being drawn on her lovely skin as it kissed the serrated edge of the blade. He pulled away as quickly as he could manage, as though if he moved fast enough that it would somehow mitigate the damage he’d done, but that red line grew with the blood it began to ooze.

He stumbled sideways, the knife clattering somewhere down the wide hallway, and hit the wall heavily before sliding down to the floor. He waited for Leif to descend upon him with fury, for him to come bash his skull open on the floor like he’d threatened to do before, but there was no brutal death approaching from his brother’s honed fists. His senses were muffled, but through hazy and blurred vision, he looked up and saw Leif gathering a distressingly limp Simone. The world tilted, the soft sources of lights blooming blearily in the dim of the house, and then Anders found that he couldn’t move as he felt unconsciousness pull at his mind. Unable to look away, he watched as Leif cradled her in his arms, his hand brushing her hair from her face as he looked down into it with a tenderness he didn’t believe a monster should be capable of. Anders blinked and saw himself standing in his brother’s place, every bit the monster Leif was, before the darkness closed in.
Simone could feel something tugging oddly at the skin on her neck, over and over, as she floated in that twilight space between sleeping and waking. Her nightmares and reality had bled into each other and she welcomed any opportunity to disconnect from either at this point, praying to sink back into the oblivion of dreamlessness. But that tugging was irritating and troublingly familiar. She lifted her hand to bat away whatever was yanking at her skin to find that something pulled at her wrist before she could raise it only a few inches. Annoyance opened her eyes, the world painted in splashes of colors like a dreary Monet as she tried and failed to blink the blurriness away.

Someone was leaning above her, the figure cloaked in shadow from the overhead light, but she recognized her father’s deep voice when he said, “Don’t move. This will only take a moment.”

Fear ran cold in her veins at the sound, her mind supplying what her vision couldn’t of his long fingers stitching the cut in her neck. That’s what was so familiar. She’d watched an ER doctor sew a long cut on her wrist shut when she was seventeen, the numbing agent they had injected around the wound enabling her to only feel the pressure of the needle and the tug of the string with each pull. Leif’s vehement insistence on keeping her out of suicide watch back then made more sense now that she had all these other pieces of the puzzle her father had turned out to be. He couldn’t tolerate the idea of anyone getting close enough to help her.

“We are going to have a talk about your irresponsible attitude, young lady,” he said, his tone heavy with stern disappointment.

She swallowed, or at least tried to, the reflex burning her bruised and dry throat before she whispered, “Did you kill them?”

“Don’t be vague, darling,” he teased.

Her stomach twisted at how he toyed with her even now. “Are they alive? Henrik, Vidar and… Anders?”

A terrible dread weighed heavily on her bones, a tight knot forming in her chest as Leif took his time before answering, “They’re alive. For now.”

“I want to see them,” she rasped.

“Why should I let you do that?” he mused. His hands never stopped or slowed their rhythmic work at her neck as he spoke with a deadly calm. “You’ve been very naughty, my darling girl. Why should I let you have anything you want when you’ve misbehaved so badly? Coming at me with a knife when I was only protecting your future… I didn’t raise you to be so ungrateful. What do you have to say for yourself?”

The restraints that held her to the bed were at each wrist and made of metal, each providing only a few inches of slack and tightened almost uncomfortably snug. There would be no easy way to wriggle out of these even if her thumbs weren’t still swollen from her previous success. She stared past his shadowed face to the ceiling, warding off the fear of physical torture by reminding herself that he’d numbed her before sewing her skin. He was angry at her, but he had shown her mercy in that action. She blinked, searching for why.

“Speak up, Simone Lili’uokalani!”

She shut her eyes against the sting of tears that wouldn’t come as memories of that hopelessly
othered middle name echoed from the thousands of times her mother had scolded her with it. She wanted to snatch it from the air and tear it apart so no else one could use it.

“I’m sorry, Papa,” she whispered.

“Sorry doesn’t cover trying to stab me. Try again.”

Her hands curled into fists, digging her nails into her palms until her thoughts aligned back to the present reality. If he wanted her to beg for forgiveness, he could make her do that with pain. Apologizing didn’t pass. If he wanted restitution in sex, he would have taken it from her, the more painful the better. The edge of the scissors was cold on her skin where she still had feeling as he snipped the end of the thread. She opened her eyes, trying to focus on the blurry shape of him as she tried to piece it together. Perhaps he wanted her truth.

“I didn’t want to,” she whispered. “I just wanted you to stop.”

“Do you think of me as evil?”

“I think of you as dangerous. A wolf is evil to a sheep.”

“Am I a wolf, then?”

She breathed in the scents surrounding her. The sour smells of fear and antiseptic were stale on her skin, mingling with the sharp note of the blood that she breathed from her raw throat, but he still smelled like herbs and meat above his natural vetiver and thunderstorm scent. It was as if he never even broke a sweat, but there was something in the air between them that caught her attention. Her nails curled further into her palm. She had to stop her mind from wandering outside how reality functioned. It was something she so clearly recognized in herself, it was almost embarrassing that she had nearly missed it in him. Her father was lonesome for her like she had constantly been lonesome for him.

Her mouth spread into a weak smile as she whispered, “I’m not a sheep.”

“What are you?” he asked, his rich voice no longer holding that edge of malice.

She had to be brave. There was nothing else she could do. “I’m yours.”

He hovered above her, her vision still too weak to discern his expression and his silence could mean anything. When he bent forward and pressed a slow kiss to her forehead, she waited until his lips began moving down the side of her face before accepting that he might not have violent intentions. She was still all too wary of the sharp teeth just behind his kiss. His tongue flicked out along her ear, making her tense from the staticky tingling it induced from the top of her skull down through her spine. How well he knew all her weak points, physically and emotionally, made her insides flutter uneasily. It seemed that he would always know exactly how to manipulate the desired reaction out of her while she struggled – and often failed -- just to keep herself safe around him.

“You belong to me,” he whispered into her ear, each syllable and brush of breath making her want to squirm from the chills that hummed through her vertebrae. He bit her gently and she shivered.

“Y-yes, Papa… I love you.”

“I know you do, darling. Are you going to behave?”

“I’ll try, Papa.”
With a small metallic ping that vibrated the small bones in her wrist, he removed the handcuff that was closest to him and helped her to sit up against a pillow propped along the headboard.

“Drink,” he commanded simply, holding a small plastic cup to her face.

With a shaking hand barely strong enough to tip the cup to her lips, she sipped the slightly sweetened water, careful not to asphyxiate it in her eagerness to wet her dry tongue. The moisture was heavenly. He gently assisted her in holding the cup up when her arm began to sink down from sheer lack of strength and she felt a gratefulness for him well in her alongside the fear of him. The man possessed keen observational skills and such attentiveness to detail, making him both a dangerous manipulator and a proficient caregiver. She wanted to lament what a good father he could have been if he’d had the desire, but that was a pain far older than the troubles that occupied her now.

“Do you remember reading about permissive hypotension?” he asked.

There was a conversational lightness to his tone that threw her off. “Yes, I do… it’s a lot easier to read about than to experience.”

He chuckled. She wondered which one of them had been flippant. She heard him unwrapping something sealed in plastic, but couldn’t quite see what he was laying out on the bed next to her. Some sort of looped tube, a black plastic pouch of fluid, and a larger bag of clear liquid.

While he arranged the various components of his kit, he spoke with a noticeable and troubling cheer. “Well, fortune has smiled upon you tonight, for you narrowly avoided severing your external jugular and your trachea was not breached. You just bleed like a stuck pig. However, in continuation of your good fortune, I keep a stock of my blood wherever I stay.”

He unwrapped a tiny white square from a paper package and wiped the inside of her elbow with it, the cool damp evaporating quickly from her skin. When he tied a thick blue rubber ribbon around her upper arm, she understood the connection between his words and actions.

“You’re going to put your blood in me?” she asked, her breathless whisper breaking nervously at the end.

Without warning, he pierced her fattened vein with the intravenous catheter, the especially thick gauge making her breath hitch in the sharp sting.

“We are both A positive and free of harmful pathogens. I checked Renfro’s history to make certain of that,” he explained as he attached the looping tubes to the dark pouch.

“Renfro?”

“Never mind that for now. Darling, I need you to relax. I’ve done this dozens of times.”

Vertigo made the room tilt dangerously sideways. “Why?”

The saline and the blood were both hooked into the forked tube and he lifted the bags in one hand to feed the liquids into the clear line as he explained with an exasperated patience, “Because sometimes things don’t go as planned, but that’s why you prepare. Accidents happen. Homo proponit, sed Deus disponit. This has worked in my favor as well, of course. I’ve been the target of plans that had obviously gone awry, either by my own design or luck, oftentimes both.”

She was more confused than before his explanation, a queasy uneasiness lurking behind the many questions that followed it. He tucked the line into the catheter and she tried not to pay attention to the discomfort of the needle fidgeting in her vein, but winced when it clicked sharply into place. He
watched as the catheter filled with red and then hung the bags from a hook on the wall she’d previously assumed was once used for a plant, but now doubted it was for anything except this exclusive purpose. The mysteries surrounding her father were unraveling only to show that they ran deeper than she could have imagined.

“I’m going to tend to my brothers, but I’ll be back to check on you. You’re out of the woods now if you’d like to sleep… not that it seems your exhaustion will give you much choice in the matter,” he said airily, fussing over the IV and laying another blanket over her.

Simone felt her lungs tighten at the idea of Leif doing whatever he considered tending to them might entail, knowing firsthand how capricious his definition of care could be. But she could barely lift her arm and he was quickly setting up to leave. She had to do something.

“Dad,” she rasped. He turned to her from the threshold and she licked her dry lips, trying to think of anything at all. “The funeral is tomorrow. Everyone is expecting them to be there. Are they going to be alright enough to make it?”

He stood there watching her until she wondered if he perhaps couldn’t hear her whispery voice, then answered, “I’ll make sure that they will be.”

Then he was gone, his steps quieter down the creaky staircase than she had ever managed while being an easy one hundred pounds lighter than him. She watched the drip chamber, her vision focusing and then blurring in a slow rhythm as she tried to see the red fall from the bags into the tube. Leif’s blood shoved its way into her, feeling more like he was consuming her life than filling her with it. She laid her head back on the pillow and thought of the birds asleep outside, high and safe in their nests while the nocturnal beasts roamed the ground below, each just doing what they must to live another day. Animals chewed through their bones to escape traps, sacrificing limb for life on the chance that they would survive the effort, and Simone considered the wrist still handcuffed. Her jaw flexed restlessly, but she was tired of the taste of blood and she’d lost so much of herself already.

“Vid…” Henrik whispered, gently shaking his sleeping brother’s shoulder.

Vidar made a cracked sound between and whimper and a groan as he pressed his face further into the blankets. He’d refused to wake for an hour after Henrik had startled out of bed and now he simply refused to open his eyes or speak.

“Vid, you have to get up,” Henrik pressed, tugging the blanket off of him.

They were both in the same clothes they had worn yesterday, their shoes placed neatly at the foot of their twin beds and their coats hung with care in the closet. Henrik couldn’t recall the last time he’d ever felt vulnerable. It had taken him some time to process the feeling of raw fear and indignity before he could give it that name. Vulnerable. He could bench 150 kilograms, but he couldn’t lift himself after he went down last night. He wondered, had he’d gone in with his fists instead of his words, if all that had happened might have been avoided. He tested the weight of that blame, held it under the memory of Anders stomped into the floor and Vidar lost to whatever drug had silenced his sharp tongue. The guilt was heavy. He had no idea what Leif had become, but he wasn’t their brother any longer. What he’d done to them wasn’t even human.

“Vidar…” he nearly growled, angry at what had happened, angry at his own fear.
“He’s going to kill us,” Vidar whispered in a frantic hiss that was muffled into the pillow. “He’s not going to let us escape and he’s going to kill us because we know, we know.”

Henrik resisted the panic this stirred in him. At least one of them had to remain calm. “If he was going to kill us, he would have done it while we were unconscious.”

“No. No!” Vidar protested. He turned his face from the pillow, his eye wide and rolling with alarm before it locked onto Henrik. “Don’t you see? Don’t you get it? He was having fun! It’s all amusement! It isn’t just about getting away with the drugs or- or anything, it’s- He was toying with us, he’s been toying with us, and he’s going to break his toys when he’s done playing. Lei.. Le… He’s a sociopath!”

The hysteria rising in his brother made it easier for Henrik to polarize and ground himself in the trained response to deescalate, his brain slipping into the more comfortable space of his profession as he said, “Listen, none of that matters. We aren’t going to play his game. He’s just going to have to find his fun somewhere else because we’re getting the hell out of here.”

“You think he’s going to let you walk after showing you that? He put a target on our backs before we even sat down to supper. We’re dead. We’re dead! We’re DEAD!”

Henrik was shaking Vidar by his shoulders, telling him to quiet down as his voice rose to a shrill yelling pitch, when they both froze as the subject of their fear walked through the door.

“Good morning,” Leif said casually, then gestured with the dark clothes slung over his arm before continuing, “We need to be at the funeral home ahead of schedule to speak with the director, so I’ve pressed your suits for you.” As Leif hooked the hangers in the closet, Henrik realized that Vidar was trembling under his fists clenched tightly at his shirt. When Henrik looked back to their oldest brother, he saw the pistol strapped flat to his side. “Go clean yourselves up and get dressed. Come, come, don’t dally!”

Just as suddenly and nonchalantly as he’d come, Leif left, shutting the door behind him and sealing them both in the silence of the guest room. Henrik let go of Vidar and stepped towards the door, his body moving automatically as his mind whirled with fear. Vidar was right. Leif was having fun.

It took fifteen minutes for Henrik to work up the nerve to go outside the room, then another ten to shower. Vidar made him promise to wait outside the bathroom door while he showered, a process that sounded like he was badly juggling bowling balls in there as Henrik stood wet and cold in the hallway. He’d always been proud of being nonviolent despite his size and strength, thinking himself a good poster boy for pacifism for those very reasons, but now he felt regret at his lack of violent will. There was no use in being powerful if he couldn’t even use it to defend his family. Words and empathy did not breach this madness. He stared at the door to Anders’ guest room, feeling something like a ball expanding in his chest until he tried the knob. It was unlocked.

“ Anders?” he whispered through the cracked door.

No response. That ball in him expanded. He stepped inside. There was a serving tray with several bloodied and wadded cotton pads and some tools on the nightstand. Forceps, an irrigation syringe, nitrile gloves, rolls of gauze and tape, long cotton swabs, a large half-empty bottle of saline, all of it smudged with dried blood. The presence of blood did not affect him except to reassure him that someone had used all of these to hurriedly help his little brother. The bedding was thrown back, a towel folded over the mattress with a large dark stain on it, but no Anders laid in the bed.

“He’s downstairs.”
Henrik jumped at the small voice, his heart hammering in his throat even as he saw it was just his niece. With a chill, he noticed that she wore a light scarf tied snug around her neck. His recall was spotty, but he had a vivid memory of her hitting the floor with a laceration that spilled gouts of blood from the front of her neck. She didn’t face him as she stood in the doorway, though she clearly spoke to him. Her voice was still quiet and raspy, but she managed above a whisper.

“I left your breakfast in your room. For Uncle Vidar, too.”

Before he could respond, she turned and hurried down the stairs. It was alarming how normal she seemed. As normal as she ever could seem, anyway. A suspicion sprouted in him at that, an awful mold spore of a thought that multiplied without him wanting it to, but it gathered and latched onto reason until suspicion became a theory. Simone was a victim of abuse, but after long enough, he’d seen some victims become accomplices. He shook it off, reminding himself that she had done more to try to stop Leif from hurting anyone else than either he or Vidar had. He felt guilty for having even wondered if they were too late to save her, but the doubt was still there.

The breeze carried a thickness to it that promised rain, a heavy one judging by the darkness of the clouds along the horizon. Leif disliked the openness of these wide spaces, feeling uneasy under the sheer amount of sky visible. He felt much more secure with trees or buildings blocking out that blaring exposure. He stamped out his cigarette and watched the big open sky until he could imagine his heels tipping off the ground to fall face-forward into it, then turned back to the shambling crowd some distance behind him. There were perhaps ninety to one hundred twenty people who showed up for the graveside service, an easy double of that had sent notice they’d attend the reception. The funeral home had done what they could to accommodate as far as the mass of folding chairs and pop up canopies they had propped up over the flat tombstones, but most people had to stand through the lengthy eulogies for the much beloved Einar.

There were many familiar faces among the crowd, but Leif had been careful to keep an eye on his brothers as he mingled and greeted. Vidar was preoccupied with staring fixedly at his folded hands, not reacting to any offers of condolences or contact. Henrik had responded to those around him with a tight courtesy. Anders was exceptionally well behaved from the diazepam and alprazolam calming his mind, seeming more preoccupied with staring dazedly at Simone than talking with anyone else. Leif wondered if Anders was even aware he was at the funeral. Overall, Leif had never seen his brothers more cooperative or mannerly than they were now in their fear of him. He was pleased.

He saw his daughter walking towards him from the crowd, her head ducked low to avoid any possible eye contact with the mourners and only raising her gaze to him when she was a good many paces away. He remained standing on the cement curb of the narrow road that curved through the cemetery and waited for her to come to him. She’d been especially affectionate and clingy all day, prompting many to assume her to be his romantic companion despite the disparity of their age. He had not disputed those assumptions. She pressed herself to his front like a cat wanting a scratch behind the ears and he obliged her with his arms loosely wrapped around her middle. He supposed she didn’t know he was aware that she was trying to keep his attention away from his brothers, but he wasn’t inclined to let her in on that knowledge. It was working to a degree; her doting had vastly improved his mood overall.

“How are you feeling, darling?” he asked.

The scratchy wool of her pea coat made him want to peel it off her to touch the softness beneath her concealing funeral clothes like he would skin a kiwi. A daydream of taking her into the brush
beyond the graves and ripping her black tights off had played over in his mind throughout the service as men who had never known the real Einar had rambled on about his accomplishments. He wanted to push her compliance until she broke.

“Just a bit tired,” she answered.

Leif bent closer to her and buried his nose in the top of her hair, giving her two kisses to her scalp and letting his words come out muffled against her. “We could get a room if you want to lie down for a few hours. The reception is at a decent hotel. Better than the hotels you’re used to, anyway.”

“Dad…”

“That was a very reckless habit. Honestly, did you even think about what you were doing, going anywhere alone with strangers? You were a very young-looking teenager, at that. What was it about those pedophiles that got you so hot?”

“What are you… How did you-”

“Did they make you feel mature? Hm? Or was it because they were all tall, blond, and so much older? Honestly, you could have saved yourself a lot of heartache if you’d just asked me to fuck you sooner.”

She pushed away from him, staggering back a few steps and nearly tripping over a headstone. Finally, there was the fire of indignity. He let his empty arms fall at his sides as she glared at him. Her battered throat didn’t allow her to raise her voice, but the venom was obvious as she sneered, “Don’t. Don’t. You don’t get to shame me when you’re the one who fucked me up.”

He stepped forward and she reflexively took a step back, her hands curling into fists briefly. His grim frown broke into a smirk with a breathy chuckle and he ran his tongue over his pointed incisor as he savored the moment fear flushed that anger from her. She paled, her golden brown skin going ashen with terror.

Her voice shook. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that. I-I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head and tutted her with a click of his tongue, then leaned forward and spoke softly as though confiding a secret, “That’s no way to talk to your father.”

At last, her arms hugged tightly around her body and she bowed her head low as tears left hot trails down her cheeks. Baiting her while she was in the delicate self-appointed position of protector to her uncles was an easy game. He closed the space between them in two wide strides and gathered her trembling form in an embrace, maintaining the appearance he was merely comforting this mourning girl to any onlookers. He noticed his brothers all staring at them from their seats in front of the lowered casket, a dreadful tension in their posture and faces evident even at this distance.

He rubbed her back soothingly and rested his chin atop her head as he said, “There, there, darling girl. You can make it up to me later. Now then, let’s head back to the car. We don’t want to delay the reception.”

“We should just head to the airport. Even if he noticed us leaving, there are too many people here for him to do anything about it.”
Anders turned his dazed stare from the plate of scalloped potatoes and cold cuts to Henrik’s bearded face, trying to listen over the din of raucous conversations around them in the overfilled venue. He was accustomed to loud events, but it was hard to concentrate anything with those pills making him uncomfortably high. He smiled at the idea of anyone being both high and uncomfortable, the contradiction striking him a peculiarly amusing, but remembered they were trying to escape a hostile madman with a gun. He took another bite of the potatoes. The cold cuts were too painful to chew and frowning made his face ache even more.

Vidar didn’t move his glare from his clenched fists on the table as he said, “He has the keys. And our passports.”

Henrik was on his third plate of American funeral food, his old habit of stress eating in full effect as he said around a mouthful of baked ziti, “We’re better off hitchhiking through this bumfuck backwater countryside than waiting around for Leif to snap.”

“Anders can’t even figure out how to walk with crutches. We won’t make it far before he finds us.”

“We could get one of these people to give us a ride, I’m sure. At least someone here has to be taking a redeye back for work tomorrow.”

Vidar paused, his rapidly blinking eyes the only sign he’d heard him at all. Anders glanced from him to Henrik, a sour feeling cutting through his high.

“But he’s got her,” he slurred, putting his effort into articulating without making his face hurt more.

“We can call the police before we get on the plane,” Henrik whispered loud enough to be heard, which wasn’t that much quieter than his previous speaking volume. Anders frowned, then winced, and Henrik shook his head in exasperation. “Look, even if we managed to get her away from him and take her with us, that’s only going to look like kidnapping to the police.”

“But we’re rescuing her,” Anders protested.

“What if she doesn’t want to be rescued?” Vidar scowled. Both men turned to him with their brows furrowed incredulously, but he didn’t look up from his hands to acknowledge them as he continued. “You’ve seen how she is around him. He cut her up last night and in the morning she’s giving him kisses and doe eyes. He’s the only person he’s allowed her to love, so why would she want to be taken away from him?”

“That’s not true,” Anders said.

“How?” Vidar asked flatly.

Anders’ anger was slow to filter through the drugs. “Simone is in love with me.”

For the first time all day, Vidar slowly looked up from his hands, his glassy eyes wide and his eyebrows raised high. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She’s in love with me. You know... She wants to be with me. I’ll take her back to my house and she will live there with me,” Anders explained. When both men just stared at him owlishly, he felt the beginnings of frustration stir. “It’ll work!”

“Are you hearing yourself right now?” Vidar scowled. “She has a weird, silly little crush on you, she’s not ‘in love’! She doesn’t ‘want to be with’ you. You can’t just say that shit like you believe it.”
“But it’s true! She told me herself.”

Henrik broke his stare with a nervous grin, saying, “Oh, that’s an easy misunderstanding. English doesn’t differentiate familial love and romantic love. She just meant that she loves you, not in love with you.”

Anders was about to disagree, then stopped as he realized that what he’d said had indeed sounded very suspicious. He needed to watch how and what came out of his mouth while on these drugs.

Vidar’s stare furrowed into a glare and his tone became acidic as he pressed on, “No, no, no, don’t give him the answers, Henrik. Anders, I want you to explain what the hell has been happening. He drugged you yesterday, we get that, but what else happened that you didn’t tell us about? He said something about you making her bleed. Give us a real answer this time; I can tell when you’re bullshitting and you have been consistently tossing it to us instead of answering. What did you do and how much does he know?”

Anders felt as though he should be a lot more concerned at having his sharp-minded brother’s perception aimed at him, but the worry was curiously absent. Instead, there was a logical awareness of the necessity to keep his relationship secret. They just wouldn’t understand. But Vidar had scented the trail and he was zeroing in on the truth. He had to give him something.

“I… I don’t really remember, I was so doped up, but…” Anders paused to swallow, found his mouth still dry, sipped his cup of ice water. Vidar’s unflinching stare fixed on him like a snake on a field mouse. Henrik was looking at him from behind his stony discomfort, disbelief in his downturned mouth beneath his sloping mustache. It was easier to talk about than he’d thought it would be. “But I kind of remember, maybe, during that time I did something terrible.”

“Did Leif make you do something?” Henrik asked lowly. Vidar shot him a dirty look, which went ignored.

“Kind of… I’d never want to hurt her, you have to believe me, but I… I did.” He couldn’t look at them. “I hurt Simone… in a, um, a sexual manner while under the influence of… something he injected me with.”

“What else?” Vidar asked.

Anders almost didn’t hear him over the ringing in his ears from having said that out loud. “Huh?”

“What else did you do?” Vidar’s voice rose. “Before that, before yesterday, what did you do that got his attention? Paralyzing Henrik, making me lose my fucking mind, goading you into violence… That son of a bitch loves irony. It’s not just random that he made a game out of using you to hurt her. What did you do to inspire that?”

“Vid, what the fuck, it’s not Anders’ fault that Leif is crazy!” Henrik scolded.

“Crazy doesn’t exclude the obvious,” Vidar said, his accusatory stare never leaving their younger brother. Anders was confused as to why he wasn’t sweating bullets. “And it’s been obvious. I want to hear it in your words. Did you, in any way, do anything sexual with Simone?”

That urge to confess mounted in him, warring with self-preservation. They would surely ostracize him from the family, but he couldn’t deny that he would deserve that. He felt so strangely numb though, none of that panicked repentance rushing him to beg for forgiveness for having been so weak. He loved Simone. Simone loved him. All that really mattered was protecting that love.

“No,” he lied. He wasn’t offended by the accusation, wasn’t reacting defensively, wasn’t bewildered
that anyone would ask him such a thing. He was able to look Vidar straight in his eye as he said, “She just has a silly little crush. It’s… flattering, but she’s my niece. Maybe I’m guilty of not doing enough to discourage her. I think Leif only used me to punish her for her feelings.”

Henrik pinched the bridge of his nose in the way he always did before he’d start to cry, his voice already going froggy as he mumbled, “God, that’s too fucked up. Jesus Christ, Anders, I’m so sorry that happened to you. To her. Oh God, it’s sick…”

Vidar broke off his stare, his severe expression melting into regret as he returned to looking down at his folded hands. Anders wanted to feel more alarmed at his lack of feelings, but every emotion he’d anticipated for this moment had been numb and distant. There was an acknowledgment in him that Leif could no longer use the rape to blackmail him as well as a disappointment in himself that he’d divulged her violation without her permission. His eyes scanned the crowd for Simone, eventually spotting her being offered a cup of punch from some gangly boy about her age. He watched, an odd jealousy itching at the back of his mind as this boy regarded her too familiarly. Then he saw Leif sidle up to her, unbutton his jacket and put his arm high around her shoulders as he grinned unpleasantly at the boy. His jacket bowed open with the stretch of his arm and the boy noticeably paled before quickly excusing himself. Anders realized that Leif had shown the kid his sidearm in a not-so-subtle threat to back off Simone. Anders smirked at this and, before he could replace it with the horror he knew he was supposed to react with, Leif met his eye from across the crowded room and returned his smirk knowingly. A slimy chill ran down Anders’ spine at the unspoken and unwelcome camaraderie between them in that fleeting moment.
Of all the injuries that ached on and in her body, what currently brought Simone the greatest discomfort were the four-inch Jimmy Choo stilettos digging railroad spikes into her heels. The banquet hall that had been rented out was not large enough to seat all the guests, leaving the chairs primarily for the elderly and the selfish as the crowd swarmed and clumped in a cacophony of voices droning under the string quartet. In her expensive shoes and expensive dress that she had neither worn or seen before her father had zipped her up that morning, she felt like an expensive decoration. Leif touted her around and greeted a seemingly endless parade of his long-unseen faces and old acquaintances. The crowd was disorienting and she had to fight the rising panic of being surrounded by droves of people so upfront and intrusively close. His hand was constantly at her waist, his long fingers splayed down and over her hip bone possessively as he pulled her along. She found herself tucking close to his side, wanting to press her face into his suit like a shy toddler, and felt ridiculous. She was used to subway rides where grumpy strangers were packed close enough to sway as one unit with each stop. Surely, she was in more danger there than in this polite milquetoast society where people still had room to carry around heaping plates of casserole and shrimp cocktails, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that each of them had daggers under their skin and acid in their spit. She forced another smile as she was introduced to some ex-mayor or district attorney or damn elephant trainer, she couldn’t remember already, when something brushed firmly up her side.

“Ow, ow-ow-ow!” a nasal voice yelped behind her.

Simone turned and found her hand crushing the wrist of a petite middle-aged man, her nails drawing blood from where his skin had been exposed by his rolled-up sleeves. Instantly, she jerked away, her mouth tasting like ash as she stared bewilderedly at her hand. The still-healing thumb only began to ache when she looked at it.

“Hey, sorry, buddy,” Leif said, releasing her hip to reach into his jacket. She tensed, fearing the gun, but he only pulled out his wallet. He shoved some indiscriminate number of folded bills into the man’s shirt pocket and clapped him on the shoulder as he grinned, “Forget about that.”

She swallowed the ash to form a knot in her throat as Leif pulled her away from the bustling hall and down the corridor where the crowd-averse had gravitated. Her stilted shoes clacked with each painful step as she stumbled to keep up until he walked past the line for the women’s restroom and took her into the men’s. A young man at the urinal startled when he saw Simone, but Leif didn’t even glance at him as he hurriedly zipped and walked out of there red-faced.

“Wash your hands, darling, and use lots of soap,” Leif gently commanded, still using his friendly personable voice.

“I didn’t mean to-” she started to mumble, but he stopped her by reaching over and turning the tap on. Withering under his commanding stare, she eagerly lathered the sticky pink liquid soap under her nails. Her mind raced with how to process what had happened. She raised her voice painfully over the sound of the rushing water, “He slid his hand over me, I couldn’t help it. It was… automatic, compulsive, I don’t know. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Leif waited until she had turned off the tap. “That was Gregory Bartek, a tailor and fashion consultant. You’re wearing a tailored Chiara Boni. His was only a professional interest, I assure you.”

“I attacked him without thinking,” she muttered mostly to herself as she dried her hands.
He turned her by her shoulders and looked at her face closely. She thought he would make some remark to remind her of her lack of control or maybe even slap her and she braced herself as subtly as she could for either, but he only licked his thumb and wiped off a smudge near her mouth. She watched as he lingered on that wettened stripe, seeing the costume of his outer self slip in the darkening of his eyes before he leaned down and licked her. Her heart jumped at the low growl from his throat as he moved his mouth over hers, his kiss mostly teeth and tongue and urgent. That sick, warm, poisonous feeling coated her when he stepped closer, his hands holding her hips in a nearly bruising grip to keep her still. They’d been touching all day, nice and friendly touches except for his cruelty in the cemetery, but this was the first time his touch had become that heated demand for sex her body couldn’t help reacting to. It hollowed out a bitter self-loathing in her as she melted against him, all pain in her body twisting into a muted sort of stimulation with arousal rewiring her perception. She hated this. She needed this. Just as her mind was finally starting to quiet, he stepped away from her. Confused, she opened her eyes to see him looking down at her with an amused smirk, his tongue slowly swiping over his lower lip to draw in the moisture there.

“I just couldn’t resist having a taste,” he smiled. She felt her cheeks redden in humiliation, her breath hot as she tried to calm the needful ache in her. He smoothed her flowing curls with soothing strokes and spoke softly, “I’d love for nothing more than to damn this entire charade and take you back home for some quality time together, but there are people here I am required to meet first. Oh, that reminds me…” To her surprise, he dug out Bjørn’s watch from his pocket and fastened it to her wrist. “There we are. I see you’ve remembered to wind it even with all the recent excitement, my good girl. I know it doesn’t quite match your ensemble, but it adds a sort of intriguing and unexpected charm, wouldn’t you say? Just like the wearer.”

The watch hung a little more loosely on her than it had the first time, telling her just how little food she had been able to keep down in the past week. No wonder she was constantly feeling faint. The metal and leather held Leif’s body heat and she unconsciously held it to the exposed skin of her chest between her scarf and neckline as she bit down nervously on her knuckle, her thoughts moving too fast and distant to catch onto any particular one.

He was looking at her, a warmth lightening the dark from his gray eyes, and she pulled out of her mind to reflect that warmth. Despite all the damage he’d wreaked and her life he had stolen, it was still too easy to reach in and find that spring of need and love for him. His caring side was too precious and fleeting for her to forgo, even in fear. Telling herself that she was only doing it to keep him happy, she pressed herself closer to him and leaned up on the unsteady forefeet of her high heeled shoes. Her lips brushed his in a shy kiss just a barely over the line of chaste, something far too sweet and innocent after the aggressive assault he’d just applied to her mouth. The creases at the corners of his eyes deepened as he chuckled, his arms wrapping around her waist to hold her up on her tip toes as he imitated her shy kiss back on her.

“Silly little creature,” he grinned, nuzzling his cheek to hers with an affection that made her heart swell dizzyingly. Traces of authentic fatherhood sparked at the edges of this gesture and she chased them with avid rapture, closing her eyes to focus on this precious feeling. All too soon, he lowered her down to her feet and led her back into the crowded banquet hall.

Hesitantly, she slowed her step once they crossed through the open doors and asked, “Is it okay if I rest here a moment?”

“Just don’t let any scrawny frat boys bring you spiked punch,” he smirked, giving her hand a squeeze before letting her go and disappearing into the throng.

A week ago, she would have scoffed at that comment. Now, she only nodded and leaned against the wall to ease the pressure off her aching feet. She wanted very badly to take off these ridiculous
shoes, but she didn’t want to embarrass her father with that uncivilized behavior at this formal event. It was imperative that she do as little as possible to upset him. She wondered how much longer her uncles could remain safe around the fluctuating temper of this dangerous man her father had turned out to be. She wondered briefly if she was safe, but that wasn’t important. This was her station in life. Her own safety was a constantly shifting concept tethered to the sliding scale of his tastes and whims. Her mind was already broken and he valued her body far too much to disable or disfigure her in any severe way. In that horrible and strange way, she felt a border of safety with him that she was unsure if her uncles also shared. She shifted her weight against the wall and longed for paint-splattered sneakers and simple life.

“Bonsoir, mon Coeur. Might I ask how you knew Einar Valstad?”

Simone startled out of her dire thoughts, blinking back to reality to find the owner of that heavy French accent was a stout old man who was definitely talking to her. “Um, I, uh… I’m his granddaughter.”

His hazel eyes widened, his full white brows ascending to deepen the lines in his forehead as he said, “Je n’y crois pas! Impossible. You do not appear as a Viking.”

She chuckled at his over-exaggerated expression of shock and felt as though she might be able to handle a conversation. “I’m only half-Viking. Mama poured a little flavor in their gene pool.”

“Ah, I see! Allow me to guess what you are,” he said, stepping closer in a chummy way. She had to resist rolling her eyes at the rudeness she knew was coming. “Colombian?”

“No. I get that a lot, though.”

“Hmm… Brazilian?”

“Nope.” She turned her face from him, not wanting him to see the irritation that was knitting her brow. She wished people were more aware of how impolite it was to ask what she was. She didn’t like being a what, especially now that she was so unsure of who she was. “Are you done?”

“One more guess, I promise!” he grinned, holding up his index finger.

She pursed her lips against the scowl that fought its way to her face, her patience surprisingly thin. He wore a white linen suit that seemed to only make his broad shoulders wider, an odd choice for a funeral. He stuck out from the flock of black like an albino crow. The thought ‘have to cut you open just to see some color, haole’ flashed in her mind like a fish leaping from murky water before she could scatter the words.

“One more,” she agreed.

“Pure Scandinavian on your father’s side of course,” he began, squinting and making a rolling gesture with his hand as though trying to place a flavor. “But your mother… was the product of a torrid romance between a Hawaiian native and an Afro-Caribbean naval officer from Philadelphia.”

The walls of her guard came up like the steel shutters slamming in her mind. Her head whipped to face him, finding him grinning at her amusedly, but she did not find this amusing at all. Her voice was gruff and scraped painfully in her throat as she asked, “Who are you?”

“Mr. Marceau, what a surprise!” Leif’s voice called from beyond this stranger. Marceau extended his arm to her father, both men clapping their free hand on the other’s forearm as they shook hands. Leif glanced to her and she sucked in a short breath at the hint of wariness he shot her. “And I see you’ve met my daughter.”
“My apologies, Valstad, but I simply could not wait to be introduced to this devastating young beauty,” Marceau beamed cheerfully. He turned back to her and placed a brief touch to her shoulder that she put effort into not dodging. “You must bring her to Neuilly; I insist you both stay at my house.”

Leif’s smile turned wooden. He moved to the other side of Marceau, putting himself between her and the Frenchman as he held her to him with a possessiveness that had her blushing. “Not yet.”

The Frenchman laughed, a high trilling sound, and waved a hand dismissively as he said. “Non, no, of course not! Just for a holiday, no business. Comment est la progression?”

Leif relaxed. So did she, exhaling a breath she didn’t know she’d held. Her father’s French was surprisingly swift and easy from what she could tell without understanding a word of it. “Elle est naturelle. Trois tueries confirmés, tout dissociatif, sans armes.”

“C’est fascinant, Docteur Frankenstein!”

They both laughed with a cheer that touched neither of their eyes, making Simone feel even more tense. Whoever this man was, he was not her father’s friend though they obviously knew each other well. Her mind tickled with the thought of a different man her father was familiar but unfriendly with, but she recoiled from that corner of her mind with reflexive speed. A cold sweat dampened the back of her neck just from brushing that nightmare. Marceau stepped around to face her fully once more and she noticed how Leif kept his eyes trained on him.

“Your father is one of the most talented in our field,” Marceau said, his smile showing short flat teeth. “A man of truly great vision and technical skill. He tells me you’re an artist. Have you thought of following in his footsteps?”

She glanced to Leif to see what she should do, but he didn’t spare her a look. “Oh, uh, no,” she stammered, then began again more naturally. “No, I would make a lousy architect. I can barely get myself together let alone an entire building.”

“Good. I’d weep if you limited yourself to that miserable job. I would love to see your artwork in person soon,” he said, winking at her before turning to Leif. “Valstad, do you have some time for me? I would like for us to have a private discussion in my room.”

Her father was tense, but his tone betrayed nothing of that as he said, “Of course. Simone…” He faced her, bent down to her eye level and smoothed her silk scarf, his fingers purposefully brushing over her bandaged sutures. There was a threat in that gesture. “Be good while I’m gone.”

“À bientôt, mon Coeur,” Marceau smiled to her with an odd wag of his hand.

Simone did not watch as the two men left together, finding an uneasy restlessness in knowing that she was not with Leif as he stepped through the doorway. There was something in that knowledge that made her teeth itch. She fixed her stare to the nearest centerpiece instead. White lilies with long stems twisted in a tall cylinder of glass, their ends hidden in a pile of smooth dark stones at the bottom. The flowers looked like snakes coiling around each other, their long necks raised up in search for a way out of the vases. Each table held similar centerpieces, all the flowers just imperfect enough to show that they weren’t fake, and she envisioned the snakes slithering in circles while the guests at that nearest table fidgeted nervously under her unwavering stare. A brightness beyond the glass caught her attention and she refocused her vision to the distance, seeing Anders leaning back in his chair a few tables beyond. His charcoal dress shirt was unbuttoned a third of the way down and his necktie hung in two long strips of black silk from his shoulders, exposing the pale length of his throat and some of his chest as his head hung over the back of his seat.
The snakes still swirling in her peripheral, she stepped across the room and sat down in the chair next to him. With his eyes closed and his body relaxed as though in sleep, the vulnerability of his blatantly exposed neck tempted her to lick it, but that would be rude. Instead, she examined him as he sat unaware of her proximity, taking advantage of this opportunity to memorize his features and visualize them outlined in pencil and given dimension with layers of watercolor. She was too engrossed in picking apart the different hues of blue that made up his irises to know that he was watching her until he spoke.

“Hello.”

She flinched away, her arms jerking up to shield her face in an automatic defense before she caught herself and lowered them with a powerful shudder. “Sorry! Sorry, I, um, oh fuck…” she stammered, then stopped by biting down on her lip before beginning again calmly, “I’ve been wanting to apologize. For everything. I should have stayed away from you, but I didn’t… and now everyone is in danger.”

She couldn’t look at him, her eyes focusing on his collarbone instead as she uttered a small percentage of the apology she’d rehearsed in her head since coming to last night. There was too much she needed to warn him about, but much of it was still disjointed and undefined. It was difficult to warn him against dangers that she knew were present and at work but too illusory to identify. She supposed that having been stabbed was enough warning for Anders to protect himself against Leif’s more subtle ministrations. For as much as she knew her father could revel in violence and sadism, it was ultimately another tool for him to break people enough for him to rebuild them to his design. She could only hope that her suspicion was wrong and Leif was only using her uncle to further break her. It was a chilling best-case scenario and not one she could easily explain to him even with perfect translation. She was brought out of her dreary introspection by Anders touching her knee, comforting her immediately with the familiar roughness of his palm.

“It’s okay,” he said.

The quiet assurance in his tone beckoned her stare to raise to his face and, briefly, she believed him. There was a melancholy confidence in his slight smile and steadfast gaze fixed on her, that same tender expression he had often shown her. She’d misjudged it as compassion before finding out it was far more than that. She blushed in shame at how aware she was of her attraction to him. Love in their circumstance seemed inappropriate for reasons beyond the sin and risk of it. She wanted to hide it away to keep it from being dirtied.

“It’s not okay,” she said, but she placed her hand on top of his and let him interlace their fingers. She was weak. “We shouldn’t… Why are you still here? You need to get away. Go home. Go to Norway.”

“Together,” he smiled like it was the most obvious response.

“I can’t go.” Her throat burned.

“Vi kan gå.”

They both startled at the booming cheer of Henrik’s voice and looked to see him standing with a morose Vidar and a very old, very small Asian man. Simone tried to slide her hand away from Anders’ intimate hold, but he tightened her fingers between his and there was a resolve in his set jaw that translated a willfulness she thought seemed foreign on him.

“Vi skal flykte sammen. You will come,” he said, gently but firmly, and she stared with widening eyes as she pieced together what it was she found so disconcerting in his expression.
She’d seen that same look in her father’s face each time he’d told her she belonged to him.

It took ten minutes of riding in Mr. Kyun’s SUV through the pouring rain for Anders to accept that they were actually getting away from Leif. There were no headlights chasing behind them, no gun-wielding madman popping up from the trunk, nobody but Vidar and Simone in the backseat with him and Henrik in the front with Mr. Kyun. They were free. He held Simone pressed to his less injured side, feeling her tremble as he tried to soothe her with whispers and touches. With her much slighter form swimming under his jacket and her face tucked halfway under the collar, she more resembled a shy little kid than a young woman and it brought out a paternal protectiveness as well as a long-lingering shame in him. He shouldn’t think of her in so many mismatched terms. He pushed down that paternal reaction, letting his touches deviate just slightly into indecency as his arm that hugged around her shoulders pulled her closer and his free hand reached over and began stroking up and down the top of her thigh. He wished he had the English to explain to her that everything was going to be okay, that she was finally going to be safe from her father, but he didn’t.

“You shouldn’t be so physical with her after what happened,” Vidar said, his voice quiet but nonetheless disapproving.

Anders felt a flash of anger flare up. Leif had insinuated something similar, but they were both wrong. She needed his support especially after what had happened.

“I’m not hurting her,” he said defensively.

“Then why is she crying?”

He looked down, surprised to see her trembling was all in her chest and shoulders as she hung her head tucked low. Guilt doused that reactive anger in him and he stopped his stroking hand, but didn’t move it from her thigh.

“She’s just scared,” he said.

Vidar glared at him suspiciously. “She did agree to come, didn’t she?”

“Why would she not want to get away from that monster?”

Vidar’s brow furrowed further and his eyes widened in astonished rage just barely restrained. “Anders, tell me we did not actually just abduct this girl.”

“Of course, we didn’t,” he answered, bewilderment clouding his drug-muddled feelings further. “We’re rescuing her.”

The hand Vidar laid on his arm was crushing, his words as hot and hard as coals as he growled out, “You can’t possibly be that fucking ignorant.”

“What’s wrong?” Henrik asked, turning to look at them from the front passenger seat.

Before Anders could reply, Vidar answered vehemently, “This fucker took Simone against her will.”

“Shit, Vid, that wasn’t his fault!” Henrik scolded.

“No, you idiot, not that!” Vidar groused, then hissed, “She didn’t agree to leave.”
“What?!"

Anders glanced between the worried and angry faces of his brothers, his confusion and irritation only growing at their reactions. Simone’s hands grasped his shirt tighter and she leaned into him more heavily at their gruff tones.

“Why don’t either of you just ask her?” Anders proposed. “I’m god damned certain she doesn’t want to be around that abusive madman.”

Henrik and Vidar shared a look that communicated something that went completely over his head. He was used to their near-telepathic looks, as much as they still irritated him. Eventually, it was Vidar who leaned closer to her.

“Simone,” he said with a gentleness one would use on a frightened animal. “You want come with us?”

When she didn’t answer, Anders suggested, “Tell her I’ll take care of her, that she can stay with me and be safe.”

Vidar shot him a withering look, but said to her, “Simone, Anders have you in his house. He… ah… he have you… hm…”

“Safe,” Henrik supplied. “Anders have safe. Understand?”

She wiped her face with the back of her hand, the wetness coming away on her fingers confirming with an additional pang of guilt to Anders that she had been crying, and rasped, “I can’t leave.”

“Anders can leave,” Anders insisted.

A vague desperation in him needed her to say it. She had to be with him. He had to keep her. His hand tightened on her thigh unconsciously and she looked up at him with her gray eyes so full of tears and misery, he wanted to kiss it away. His stare darted down to her full lips, swollen from her biting them to keep herself quiet, and he almost leaned in.

“Why not leave?” Vidar asked, pulling Anders out of his longing.

“Papa… Leif is going to come after all of you if you try to take me away from him,” she answered just above a whisper.

It was loud enough for Kyun to hear as he broke his long silence from the driver’s seat with a friendly, “How is Leif doing lately?”

Simone’s back tensed ramrod straight and she slowly turned to look at their generous driver, her eyes wide and lips slightly parted in fear. Her words came out breathless and small. “You know my father?”

Kyun adjusted his thick spectacles and smiled, “I met him once on a hunt. I was more familiar with Bjørn. I see you’re wearing his watch, is that correct?”

Anders watched as she slowly, stealthily unbuckled her seatbelt and slid away from him. There was a hard glint in her stare behind the strange terror and the muscles of her thigh under his hand were drawn taut. He adjusted his posture to block the door in case she tried to bolt from the moving vehicle, casting a warning glance to Vidar. His brother looked between him and Simone warily and mirrored his posture.
A hunt… What… What were you hunting? Deer?” she asked hesitantly.

“No,” Kyun smiled, shaking his head. “Bjørn would have loved to photograph you. He liked pretty girls. Does Leif ever take your picture?”

Simone’s breathing was noticeably faster. Her jaw flexed as she swallowed before she answered, “Yes. Recently. What kinds of pictures did Bjørn like to take?”

“Oh, all kinds. He liked to catch them by surprise, he liked posing them, all sorts of interesting portraits,” Kyun said, reminiscing fondly. He sighed forlornly, then continued. “The Lord has forgiven him, though. Have you been Saved, sweetheart?”

“What?”

Kyun opened the middle console and pulled out a thick hardbound book, the sides of the pages dingy and the leather worn at the corners. Anders recognized from the faded gold text on the front that this was a bible as the driver handed it to Simone.

“Have you accepted Jesus Christ, pretty girl?” Kyun asked. Simone opened the book and Anders peered over her shoulder at the odd jagged symbols drawn over the text in thick red marker. She flipped through it with trembling fingers, her frown deepening as she scanned the drawings and words scrawled over each page. Anders wondered what the man was saying to her that made her so on edge, but the drawings alone were disturbing. He shifted his gaze to the stranger, suspicious now of his generous offer to drive them out of the middle of the reception. “Welcoming faith into my heart was my salvation. I’ve been Saved and shown the right path. It’s all in His plan that we are here together. It has been shown to me that I must bring you to that path.”

Simone came upon a photograph tucked into the pages and Anders leaned closer to see what it was, but she hurriedly shut the book. Her face was a mask of horror at what she’d seen and he glanced to Vidar questioningly, but his brother shook his head. Neither of them had caught what frightened her so thoroughly. Anders looked once more to this stranger, seeing no obvious threat in the side view of his smiling face that explained the uneasiness of everyone else in the car.

“The Lord forgives.” Kyun went on, reaching once more into the center console and pulling out a paper bag weighted down with something heavy in it. “Even murderers can be Saved in his holy compassion.”

Anders barely caught glimpse of the gun being pulled out of that bag before Simone lunged out of the middle seat.
“I hate to be so forward, old friend, but I must ask,” Marceau said, his French more palatalized than the common Parisian by the bourgeois influence of much time spent in Neuilly. Leif had adjusted his pronunciation to mirror his, though it was with some difficulty as French was his third language. Marceau lifted the bottle of wine and refilled Leif’s glass with a lean across the small table in the spacious hotel suite as he asked, “Did you kill Renfro?”

Leif tasted the wine, an aged verdejo, before answering, “No, but I did shoot him.”

Marceau unbuttoned his white linen jacket, the cream vest underneath sporting no telltale bulge of a gun anywhere Leif could see, but he didn’t discount the possibility.

“We took an oath not to hunt each other.”

“We also took an oath not to extort each other,” Leif said, easing back in his chair and admiring the trees swaying in the wind and rain outside the large windows. “Renfro nullified himself to the protection of that contract when he breached it.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Marceau frowned, his wide jaw tensing in distaste with his words, “Renfro was feeding information to the FBI.”

Leif took a deeper sip, pursing his lips as he swallowed the especially acidic white before placing the glass down and saying, “I suspected that since he was extorting me for hush money, specifically. I helped to hush him.”

“And yet you chose to speak with me in a public setting, in front of scores of witnesses,” Marceau said, crossing his legs. “Did you believe that I am too big a fish for him to have fed me to anyone?”

“Renfro was a lonely hoarder and he kept the ring fingers of his quarry. It would not have served his fragile ego to have given up his biggest secrets early on,” Leif explained.

“I can’t help you if you’re wrong, Valstad.”

“I would never ask you to. Whether I am pursued or caught, you would never hear from me unless you sent for me. I don’t break my promises, not with Renfro, not with you.”

“Where will you go when they come for you?”

“They won’t. Not yet, at least. I have great faith in the good boys and girls at the Federal Bureau of Investigation to at least be aware of me as an entity. I may not collect trophies, but there is an expression of vanity indelible to my work just the same. They will know me by my mark on the world and by my legacy. Simone would enjoy a tropical climate, to answer your question.”

“Ah, Cuba,” Marceau grinned. “Beautiful country.”

“I’m aware.”

“Four generations. Far too considerable a feat to break at this point. There was a time when there were six Valstads in the network once; we are now but down to one.”

“My predecessors didn’t have the forensic technology of today to contend with,” Leif said dryly. “We all have to adapt, Mr. Marceau.”
“Your pet project seems in direct contention to this concern. Where in the modern world is there a place for a monster?”

“The only place for Simone in any world is at my side. I am close to ensuring that,” Leif answered, letting a fraction of defensiveness into his manner. He knew Marceau was greedy and curious like him, which made Leif wary each time Simone was brought up. “Is that all you had to discuss with me?”

Marceau picked up his glass, the chilled liquid having formed a layer of condensation that dripped down the stem and onto his stark white shirt. “I’m afraid you have invited chaos into your life with the killing of Renfro. The knowledge of his betrayal is not widely known, but yours is. I came here today as a deterrence for retaliation, but that cannot guarantee no one intends personal revenge.”

“Renfro had friends?” Leif smirked, though he was inwardly startled. He managed to mask his need to know how large the threat was, but he knew Marceau could smell desperation a mile away. The Frenchman eyed him like a hog catching scent of a buried truffle. Leif tried not to imagine carving the nose out of that wide face.

“Maybe not, but there are those who would seek to undo you out of principle.”

“I’m quite used to that.”

Marceau laughed his trilling chuckle and Leif repressed an irritated sigh. Every second he was without his daughter made him increasingly restless and this information of it being widely known he was implicated in Renfro’s murder made him intolerably impatient for her. There were at least ten others in their midst that evening and, although only Marceau and a few others were aware of Simone as his unconventional apprentice, just being Leif’s daughter made her a viable target for revenge. As though the universe responded to his worry, the burner phone for the private security team to contact him on buzzed in his coat pocket. Either Simone was experiencing a lapse in sanity, his brothers were attempting escape, or vengeance had been implemented.

“Pardon me a moment,” Leif said, rising from his seat as he answered the call.

His blood ran hot at discovering that all three of his suspicions were correct. He didn’t remember what departing comment he made to Marceau as he excused himself from the room, his mind racing with the need to run to the car and find the white Mercedes SUV that had made off with his daughter and brothers. The timing was too deliberate for it to have been a coincidental offering by an outsider. Whoever had taken her had the unbelievable gall to take his entire family while he was with Marceau, telling him this was not for the honor of the oath. Had he been aware that his involvement in Renfro’s death was known, he wouldn’t have employed conventional security. These rent-a-cops could only observe and report and they had waited until his family was off the premises before reporting that observation to him. He could deal with them later.

Heavy sheets of rain soaked his suit and ran into his shoes as he sprinted through the parking lot. He could have stuffed a pick of local bangers into suits and one of them would have at least sucked a bullet before they let a man carry off his girl. He peeled out of the parking lot in his brothers’ rental car, the tires dragging over the deepening puddles as he cursed aloud in an endless string of the four languages he knew well and the three others he didn’t. Simone had a strong intuition and physical sense for attack, but he hadn’t yet even begun her physical training. He could only hope he got to her before whoever had her reached their destination. The engine roared as he punched it through the rain towards the airport, cursing over the sound of his thoughts telling him he wasn’t even sure if that was the right direction. Fear was an unfamiliar guest in his skull, interrupting his planning and throwing him out of his element. There were no plans without Simone. He had contingencies and an entire alphabet of plans A through Z for countless scenarios that checked through the flowcharts.
constantly expanding in his mind, but all of them had counted on Simone being alive. Each thought leading up to the very likely possibility of her death simply ended. It was an unnerving revelation.

Simone’s mind was on fire with a singular command: Don’t think. As she lunged out of her seat and grasped this stranger’s arm, she had to let her muscles work before she could think to command her body. Thinking took time she knew she didn’t have. The car was swerving on the wet road, the squeal of the tires backdropped to human screams. Hers might have been among them, she could not wonder that yet. The force drove her left and she held onto that arm as she caught the center console awkwardly between her legs. They were all going to die. She needed muscle.

“Henrik!” she yelled.

The car spun and screamed like a carnival ride. The man had let go of the wheel to try to push her away and everything lurched to the right. She pulled on that arm as hard as she could, leaning into the force of their direction, and the gun fired into the ceiling. The thunderous boom clapped deafeningly into her ears. She was not strong enough to get the weapon out of his grip, but she couldn’t allow him to lower it. The vehicle trembled and bounced, tossing her as she rode the center console like a mechanical bull. She was aware that he was striking her, but with all the violent jostling, it was hard to tell where exactly his blows landed on her adrenaline-numbed body and she could not afford to care. Under the ringing, she heard herself scream for Henrik again and this time she saw his thick meaty hands fumble over hers.

The gun was wrenched out of the stranger’s hands. The vehicle and the man battered her as she twisted and snatched the revolver from Henrik. Her stiff thumb didn’t falter in pulling back the hammer. Gunpowder and blood - her blood this time- filled her nose and evoked images of red seeping into filthy green carpeting. Don’t think. She leveled the barrel between his brown eyes, noticing the yellowing in the sclera from elevated bilirubin levels. Old Mr. Kyun had found salvation in a bottle as well as with his lord. Don’t think. Simone squeezed the trigger.

The revolver bucked in her hand like a living thing as thick red exploded out of the back of his head and onto the now splintered side window. His head was yanked back from the force of the bullet careening through his skull and his limbs jerked in a rigid spasm before he went completely limp. The transition between a living Mr. Kyun and a deceased Mr. Kyun was abrupt. The car was still rumbling on. She stumbled around the center console and kicked at his feet until she could stretch far enough to press on the brake and put the car in park. The SUV lurched to a jerky stop. It was over.

She could only hear the high-pitched whine of acute tinnitus ringing her ears, but the movement of Vidar struggling with the car door caught her attention away from the wide splatter on the spiderwebbed window in front of her. Muted thoughts trickled in through the thick barrier of her mind, telling her that the child locks in the backseat were preventing Vidar from opening the door. Her joints were rubber as she swung her leg around and pushed a sobbing Henrik until he got the hint and stumbled out of the car. The heavy rain soaked her through as she yanked open the car doors, her stiletto heels sinking into the soppy earth and challenging her shaky balance as she made her way around the vehicle. Operating on automatic, she opened all four doors despite Vidar scrambling after Anders through his side of the car. Mr. Kyun fell partway out of the driver side door, suspended by his seatbelt. His head lolled all the way back and chunks of blood-pinked gray matter fell in the long grass below through the fist-sized exit wound. His yellow and brown eyes were fixed on the sky. Simone looked up to where he stared and didn’t see anything but dark clouds and a million silver needles of rain. There were no angels that came for him, not then and not while
she had pressed the still hot barrel above the bridge of his spectacles before firing. The path his lord had sent him on had ended abruptly in the middle of a field.

“Simone?”

She didn’t know her hearing had already recovered, but she couldn’t say how long she’d been standing there. She turned away from the lonely sky and Mr. Kyun to see Anders standing on his crutches a few feet behind her. The sight of him woke her mind out of its haze and an overwhelming relief flooded her. His brothers huddled together several feet away. Somehow, they were all alive. She had protected them. She could not protect them from how she had accomplished that.

“I’m sorry,” she croaked.

“You are good?” he asked.

Her heels had firmly rooted in the earth, so she stepped completely out of the shoes when she walked away from the gore. Her body and mind were a static hum. She would never be able to doubt she was a murderer. Who she was melted into insignificance next to what she had become. The field was wide and she faced away from the distant road, the vehicle, the men, the gore to look out at the trees and hills stretching into the distance. An ugly tar-like feeling coated her inside and she wanted to sink into it, breathe it deep into her lungs and drown. Killing didn’t feel at all like she had imagined. There was no fulfillment, no spiritual response, no epiphany or greater meaning to be found in the death she had brought. There was nothing she had experienced before to compare this weight to. She could only accept this reality for what it was and, for the first time in a very long time, she felt dreadfully certain this was real.

Neither Henrik or Vidar wanted to be the first to speak. They would then have to speak on what the hell they were supposed to do next, so they sat under a sprawling oak with nothing but the sound of the rain between them for a long while. Anders sat away from them in the open downpour, his shoulders and head visible above the long grass with Simone’s smaller form completely hidden in his embrace. Henrik could not see where or how Anders kissed the girl each time he bent under that cover of grass, so he could pretend it was with the chasteness of an overly-affectionate uncle and not the desperate passion of a man in fear and in love. But he had seen the way Anders had watched her evolve from curiosity to heart-wrenching longing throughout this god-forsaken vacation, so he could only pretend not to have pieced it together by now. Maybe this was what they needed to do to cope with what Leif had made him do to her. Maybe that was all a smokescreen Anders had fabricated to obfuscate suspicion. Henrik knew he should feel something, some sense of injustice or repulsion, but it didn’t seem to matter nearly as much as it should. He glanced to Vidar, but he was not watching them. His eyes were burning coals of hatred fixed on the grotesque Halloween decoration leaning out of the car twenty meters away, his hands clenched on his folded knees hard enough to whiten his knuckles. They were both going to need therapy when they made it back home.

“We have to get out of this fucking country,” Henrik said, finally breaking the stalemate.

“He did this,” Vidar muttered. “He was testing us. Baited us with an escape and I fell for it without thinking. How many psycho friends does the crazy motherfucker have? How the fuck am I supposed to live when everyone I meet might have been sent to play jump rope with my small intestine? Are we even going to be safe in Norway? Hell. I don’t think I’ll ever feel safe again.”

Henrik couldn’t argue or lie. “We should get the police out here.”
“We’re not going to the cops with any of this,” Vidar scowled bitterly. Henrik waited as he clawed at the soaked material of his slacks and rocked slightly. “The fucking legal system of this shit hole... They’ll keep us here for months if we do that.” Vidar sneered at the corpse. “Right between the eyes. Didn’t give him a fucking second chance. God damn. And you gave her the gun.”

Henrik winced. “No, I didn’t. I had the gun, I should have held onto it, but I... I don’t know. I didn’t think. She didn’t have to kill him. I had the gun.”

Vidar barked out a breathy chuckle. “Heh! Letting her blow that motherfucker’s brains out was the smartest thing you’ve ever done!”

Henrik felt the warmth of vomit rising into his esophagus and quickly changed topic. “What are we going to do?”

Vidar stopped rocking and shot up to his feet, a manic energy making his movements jerky as he trudged through the field. When he yanked the corpse out of the car and proceeded to repeatedly stomp on it, Henrik resisted that urge to vomit and ran over to pull his brother away.

A severe weather warning had grounded all flights even if there was room for all of them on the planes bound for Northern Europe. A string of bad weather had compounded the issue further, making their original departure date in three days the best option according to the handling agent at the airline counter. The coup de grâce of bad news was that even though they could fly without their passports, Simone would not be able to fly out of the country without hers. Anders was not proud of having yelled at the clerk. He was not proud of a lot of his behavior lately and it worried him. They sat on a bench far from that counter, trying not to shiver in their wet clothes or pay attention to the odd stares from passersby. Everyone except Vidar, who stared daggers at anyone who looked for too long and spat curses occasionally with the hostility of the truly deranged, which he very well may have been. Anders couldn’t blame the onlookers. Bloodied and battered, their nice formal clothes dripping wet, their faces stuck in a haunted daze, he was sure they were quite something to gawk at. Simone’s nose still slowly leaked blood that he would gently wipe away with the wad of tissues someone had kindly gotten for her when they walked into the tiny international airport. She didn’t seem to care enough to clean it up herself. He wished he had done more to protect her, but he had once again proved useless. In their grim space in the busy airport, he reached over to dab at the blood that had oozed down to her chin when she reached into her jacket and pulled out a wallet. Without looking at him, she dropped it into his lap.

She leaned into his side, still not facing him as she whispered, “745 dollars. Need a no-tell hotel. No Hyatts or Holiday Inns; they want credit cards and identification. There was a place on the way-Golden Key Motel. Try that first.”

His stomach dropped, weighted down with lead when he opened the wallet and saw Edward Kyun’s Maryland driver’s license photo staring back at him before folding it shut in a snap.

“When did you- ah,” he started, then began again in English, “When you do this?”

She took the wallet back and stuffed it back into the jacket he’d lent her, whispering, “When no one was watching. Let’s go soon. Need to clean your wound, get some rest, think.”

“What’s she saying to you?” Henrik asked.
“She’s telling us to get our asses to a place called Golden Key Motel,” Vidar answered gruffly. He stopped his aggravated pacing and pivoted on his heels, a twisted grin marring his frown in a strange amalgamation of bitter anger and glee as he said, “And she looted the corpse of the man she shot to death. Anders, today I have come to understand what you find so enrapturing about our dear little niece.”

Anders and Henrik both gawked at their brother’s bizarre inappropriateness before sharing a meaningful glance. There was something wrong with Vidar. There was surely a lot wrong with all of them now, but Anders had to accept that he would have to watch him more carefully. Vidar seemed to catch their shared glance and they tensed as he giggled.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Vidar grinned, crossing his wiry arms and stepping toward him. Anders placed a reassuring hand on Simone’s thigh. He wasn’t sure which one of them he was reassuring. Vidar bent at the waist to lean to eye-level with him as he whispered, “You’re not fooling anyone, not even yourself.”

Anders felt a cold sweat break out on the already cold and damp back of his neck at those words, their ambiguous meaning sticking to the one thing that was constantly plaguing him. That snapshot memory of the hallucination of Leif holding a limp and bloodied Simone, morphing and rippling until it was himself in Leif’s stead, popped to the forefront of his mind unbidden. Vidar was watching closely for his reaction and he had to be careful not to give him one, knowing how well the razor-witted man could read people. Any outward sign of hostility, defensiveness, nervousness, any reaction at all could reveal where those words stung. Unfortunately, posing no reaction at all was also a reaction and Vidar pulled away with narrowing eyes beading on him in blatant suspicion.

“Vid, why the fuck do you keep doing that?” Henrik asked, exasperation and irritation clear. “Anders has gotten the shit kicked out of him twice – no offense, Anders- so just ease the fuck off him already. Fuck.”

Vidar sneered at Henrik, then broke once more into a grin. “Sorry, you’re right. I’ve been an asshole. I mean, who really cares about what he’s been manipulating our niece into doing? She’ll be fine as long as we don’t acknowledge it.”

The words hit Anders like a punch to his head and left him just as dizzy. He could hear Henrik chewing out Vidar and feel Simone’s hand gripping his own over her thigh, but he was reeling in his own thoughts too far to pay any notice to either. There was no way he was like that. He’d been kind to her, maybe a little too kind, a little too affectionate, but he wasn’t doing that to get anything out of her. Was he? He was vaguely certain that she had come onto him first, but he had responded to and escalated it instead of stopping it. There was bound to be a small amount of unconscious effort on his part to entice her, but he swore that wasn’t his intent. Not at first, at least. Lustful feelings and filthy thoughts didn’t mean he’d approached her with an agenda. He wasn’t a manipulator. He wasn’t like Leif.

The SUV dredged through the high winds and heavy rain with the busted window rolled all the way down and covered with a torn corner of one of the clear plastic sheets and strips of duct tape that were in the trunk. They’d also found zip ties, a hand saw, nylon rope, and a pack of cheap towels there. Simone did not remark on the obvious intended use for these items or the irony that they were using them for their benefit. Wind batted the plastic as they drove past the recognizable chain hotels. Simone leaned forward from the backseat, pointing out the exit to the Golden Key Motel and savoring the warm flow from the car heater. She was still shaking, but it was hard to tell if it was
from the chill or the trauma.

The motel was three rows of ground level, long ugly buildings where you could park your car a few feet in front of your door and look out at it from the single pane window. The stone-faced middle-aged man at the front desk didn’t even ask for identification when she requested two rooms with double queens, nonsmoking if available. They were available with cash upfront and cheap. She took the two keys on plastic yellow tags that read “GOLDEN” on one side and the room numbers on the other. The keys themselves were not even golden in hue. Simone took it as a good sign of healing that she was able to chuckle at that.

“Ay chihuahua…” she muttered appreciatively at how dreary the rooms were when she opened the door.

Pulling open the thick vinyl blackout curtain did not much improve the severely outdated and worn interior. But it was out of the open, had a solid deadbolt, and had two beds. The men followed in after her, none of them sparing a second glance around the room as they sat on the edges of the beds, weariness dragging sighs out of them as they settled. It was too early in the day for them to separate into the second room and their usual chattiness quickly resumed in the quiet and privacy. Simone had long since given up the polite act of seeming to pay attention to a conversation she couldn’t understand, so she ducked into the tiny bathroom in the back and peeled off her clothes. Standing nude in the dimly lit linoleum and fiberglass bathroom with the motor of the fan drowning out her uncles’ deep voices, she washed the expensive dress and panties in the sink and tried not to look at herself too long in the mirror. Her lip was split, the bridge of her nose had an impact laceration and bruising, there was a coffee ring stain of a bruise darkening the outline of her left orbital bone, and her body was loosely littered in baseball-sized patches of blues and reddish purples that added to the ones her father had crafted. The physical onslaught couldn’t have taken more than eight seconds, but Mr. Kyun was obviously a practiced hand. The bruises helped remind her of what she had prevented by taking his life, though it did little to alleviate that awful feeling of having done it.

“Sweetheart!” Vidar’s voice came through the thin door as he rapped on it. “We going to store. You have need?”

There was a general store they passed by off the exit, the catchall kind she knew small towns depended on. She wrapped a towel around her middle as she mumbled, “Um… Just a sec…”

A beat of silence. “You come?”

She looked at the skin-tight dress drying on the towel rack. There was no way she’d be able to shimmy into that thing wet with how much it fought her just to come off. Sick of having a non-conversation through the door, she opened it and noticed how Vidar turned away from her. At first, she was saddened that he might fear her now that he knew she was a killer, then she noticed the stiff silence in the room as she stepped into it. With her brow furrowed in suspicion, she peered at Vidar’s turned face and saw that he was blushing. It occurred to her then that they had never had wives, sisters, daughters, or perhaps even a consistent female presence in their home lives if they were so unsettled by her in a towel. For some reason, the burden of their gaze and sensibilities pissed her off. She’d bled and wept in front of these men, but bared shoulders and a bit of thigh was just too much.

“I’m going to go get ice,” she said. She needed to get away from them for just a moment before she did something impulsive.

She slipped on Anders’ drenched jacket over the towel and began to walk toward the door when Henrik shot out of his seat, his hands raised in front of her to cease her steps as he stammered, “Ah, I go, uh, get ice. You… sit.”
“Sit’?” she repeated, her mouth twisted in a humorless grin.

Henrik eyed her anxiously, a growing nervousness knitting his brow as she glared up at him. She knew that it was puerile to get upset over this after all that had happened. She bit the uninjured side of her lip, trying to stave off that rising anger. These men weren’t her father but they were all tall, strong, and on edge. Fear told her not to test them, but this was an anger that was all her own. She did not want to use the calming techniques the psychologist had taught her. Attempting to walk past Henrik, she was halted by his hand coming across her front and gripping her shoulder. Fear shot through her at the sight of the thickly corded muscles visibly framed by the shirt plastered to his skin in rainwater. When she looked up at him again, part of her expected to see Leif’s slow and cruel smile. Her heart fluttered like a hummingbird in the cage of her ribs even as she met Henrik’s sad and reluctant eyes. He did not remove his gentle hand. That aggression fizzled out as she shrugged out of the overlarge jacket. A week ago, she would have just shoulder checked him and forced her way out of the room. Now, she sat down on the end of the bed, obedient like a good dog. The anger turned itself inward to feed her self-loathing. She could kill a man for them, but she couldn’t stand up to them to go outside when she wanted to.

“Just drop it,” she mumbled, looking down at the thin dingy carpet.

She dug out the stolen wallet and put it next to her on the bed; a white flag of surrender. It became obvious to her then that her uncles terrified her and, with a vicious twist in her gut, she knew that she couldn’t have hoped to do anything but submit to them. Henrik patted her head, his English too weak or his nervousness too strong to convey the proper admission or admonishment, and she shut her eyes against the sting of recognition. The pattern of behavior had been drilled into her. Affection as reward for submission in response to a physical threat. The threat didn’t even have to be real now. Her father had successfully broken and trained her in less than a week.

She lowered her back onto the hard motel mattress, the metal springs creaking with every slight movement, and looked up at the popcorn texture of the ceiling. The same type of ceiling as her childhood home in hot and sunny Los Angeles. She wondered what had happened to her father to have made him the way he was and supposed she could ask him after her uncles were safely away. He didn’t like being asked questions, especially about his past, but it wasn’t like she had anything left to lose.
“Oh, no, Sheriff Boden, this isn’t a ghost,” Leif chuckled into the landline phone in his late father’s bedroom.

He sat on the floor with his back leaned against the bedframe and a joint dangling loosely between his fingers. Beside him was Einar’s black book of names, personal information, and codes detailing what blackmail he had on them handwritten in his neat angular lettering. It was surprisingly up to date, considering how the cancer had ravaged him to nearly bedridden over the past couple of years. Leif thumbed the codes spelling out Boden’s dirty little secret as he spoke.

“Yes, thank you for coming to the service earlier today, it was nice to catch up. Glad to know you made it home alright... Yes, well, you were sitting next to Jackie Olson, so I couldn’t blame you for that. Hey, I was wondering if I could perhaps call in a favor… Yes, that kind of favor… I need your boys to be on the alert for a recent model white Mercedes sport utility vehicle. My daughter went off on a bender with a few tall blond assholes and I just want your men to shake her up a little, put the fear in her and call me when they bring her in… You’re a good man, sheriff. I’ll text you a picture of her in a bit… Yes, you too.”

There was a certain finality in the physicality of hanging up a corded phone that was absent in the modern cellular variety and he dropped the handset on the switch with gusto. He’d called in similar favors from local newspaper publishers, an alcohol merchandising district manager, a statewide hotel laundry service company executive, and now the local law enforcement to aid in his search. All of them commanded many workers who made an honest living driving out to widespread locations and making frequent stops. He may have disagreed with his father’s style on many things, but he had to hand it to the dead man: he knew the absolute worst of the right people. Leif flicked open his Zippo and held it to the halfway finished joint tucked between his lips, taking a long drag off it and holding the smoke in his lungs before exhaling heavily as he rose to his feet. As fit as he kept himself, he had started to feel all the recent activities in his joints. Forty-two years in the mortal coil would also do that, he reasoned.

He made his way through the unlit and silent house; his usual formal attire stripped down to a bathrobe and socks in the absence of other humans to perform before. Standing in the darkened kitchen with only the light from the open refrigerator spilling into it, he briefly forgot why he was there until he saw the bottle of Armand de Brignac in the door. A gift airmailed from someone who had reluctantly been unable to attend the funeral. He took out a glass from the freezer and brought both items into the living room, where flicked on a lamp and sat in the short range of its illumination as he poured the sparkling wine into the frosted cup.

“To the dad of the year,” Leif toasted to both himself and his deceased father with equal insincerity, holding the glass up to the lamp and watching the light catch on the tiny bubbles.

His elbow still occasionally ached from the time Einar had bent it backwards between the stair bannisters, so he brought his arm down and drank deeply. The house was full of unpleasant memories that whispered to him in the emptiness, but he was now the only one alive to hear them anymore. Throughout his hellish transformation in this house, he didn’t believe he’d survive either Einar or Bjørn, yet here he was. Nearly all in one piece, at that. Simone may not have been so lucky. Desperation rallied in him to go back out into that rainstorm and continue the search, but he was exhausted and it was already dark. A fatherly piece of him hoped she was somewhere dry and alive as he heard the rumble of thunder.

Being forced to consider her ending, he turned instead to memories of her beginning. He had been
tainting his girlfriend’s birth control pills for months and had received news of Bjørn’s death the same day she had found out she was pregnant. Grief had not allowed him gratification in that acquisition, nor in his subsequent rushed wedding and then the birth of his offspring. But that was all duty; the joy of fatherhood was never necessary or expected of him. Simone was not just his seed; she was a garden through which all in his line would carry on after death and he tended to that garden with only a practical interest for so long. He’d spent her whole life cultivating her, priming her to activate the genetic memories of her ancestors and reap the full benefits of their bloodline. She had shown such promise, he had never deemed it necessary to sire more candidates. The hunter in her just waiting for him to pull it out and they were on the verge of her glorious actualization. They were meant to bring so much art and inspiration into this world. It couldn’t all have been for nothing.

Three-fourths into the bottle had him feeling the despair of her absence harshly and he devolved into pining. He had not expected the lust that had so unexpectedly sparked between predecessor and progeny. He ached for her soft body and the funny things she would say. God, she could make him laugh, really laugh. He put his feet up on the coffee table as he flipped through the curated selection of photos on his cell phone that depicted a normal life. Luncheons with friends, selfies at landmarks, posed family portraits, pets that didn’t belong to him, and a few of Simone he’d copied from his ex-wife’s social media. There was one in particular he searched for.

The Christmas party two years prior, he was quite drunk towards the end of it and most of the guests had left. He’d spiked Simone’s eggnog with something that made her euphoric and did a decent job to cut up her ability to form memories of that night. Lisa had banished Simone to her room after the girl had brought up a great pile of snow from the sidewalk in an IKEA bag and had attempted to build a snowman in the living room. He was sitting on Simone’s bed with her in his lap, doing the whole mall Santa routine, and she had just whispered what she wanted for Christmas to him. They were both laughing and holding onto each other, both merrily drunk and delirious, when Lisa had stealthily snapped the photo from the doorway. He could feel the phantom of Simone’s rum-sweet breath tickling his ear, though he couldn’t remember her joke.

That was how he wanted to think of her then. Not as an aching absence or a corpse, or even as his definitive legacy, but as the warm and loving girl laughing in his arms. He succumbed to the exhaustion and alcohol while still sitting in the chair, the promise to hold her like that again soon repeating in his thoughts. He always kept his promises.

The store didn’t have everything they needed, but it had enough to make do. Instead of forceps, cotton-tipped applicators, and silicone foam elastomer, Henrik picked out tweezers, Q-tips, and sterile gauze to redress Anders’ wound. He’d have to make do with eight hundred milligrams of ibuprofen for the pain, unfortunately. Henrik was deciphering the English on a bottle of saline solution that turned out to be for nasal irrigation when Vidar approached him holding two different packs of women’s underwear.

“Which ones do you think will fit?” he asked.

Henrik stared at him before deadpanning, “I think you can fit into the smaller ones.”

“Good news! I’ve decided to drown you in a public toilet,” Vidar grinned.

The plastic-wrapped pack hit Henrik in the face, but it was fortunately soft enough not to hurt and bounced off him to land in the shopping cart. Vidar followed his throw with a bulk of dull yellow fabric, but Henrik was ready and slapped them into the cart before they also collided into his face. He
saw that they were eight of the same oversized t-shirts with the words “VERMONT MAPLE SYRUP” and a drawing of pancakes on the front.

“Oh, souvenir shirts to remember this lovely trip,” Henrik smirked.

“Better than staying in your wet clothes,” Vidar groused. As he walked towards the personal care section, Henrik heard him mutter, “Smart ass scum-fuck.”

Henrik watched his younger brother’s lean form retreat, hopeful that he was returning to the prickly jerk he knew instead of sinking further into the deranged stranger he’d seen all day. He couldn’t blame him. He hadn’t been able to feel quite like himself either. Even after seeing how trauma psychologically affected people nearly every day in his nursing career, it hadn’t been enough to prepare him for the first-hand experience of feeling as though reality had been displaced. He reminded himself frequently that they were hidden away as safe as they could manage in the middle of nowhere, but that creeping feeling they were still trapped by a violent madman squirmed in him despite the relief of having escaped relatively unharmed. Anders and Simone were not so lucky. He grabbed another box of non-adhesive gauze pads and tossed it on top of the shirts. They all had to move on and start healing quickly before the damage set in too deep.

He was running through a mental checklist of all the things they should have on hand until their flight when he heard angry voices raising in an argument. He shook his head at the noisy Americans and tried not to seem as though he paid any attention to the aggravated tones until he recognized Vidar’s voice. He could see his brother’s wind-strewn mess of hair over the rows of shelves, the strands that were hand-combed back now flopping forward with the jerking of his head. Henrik walked hurriedly toward him, the aisles blurring in his peripheral, as the back of his neck strained from the tension that ran through his body. The fear that quickened his pace was of having been found by either Leif or another maniac he’d sicced on them, but when he found his brother ranting alone in the back of the store, his fears shifted to an uneasy bewilderment.

“Stop it. Don’t! Stop it! Fucking stop! Christ, I can’t!” Vidar hissed as he swiped at the side of his head in stiff, jerky movements.

Henrik watched until he couldn’t take it anymore, lasting about three seconds before grabbing him by the shoulders and saying, “Vid! What the fuck is it?”

Vidar’s ocean blue eyes, the same shade as his, looked right through him and before he grimaced in anguish and snapped to attention. He jerked out of Henrik’s hold, adjusted his coat and sneered, “Nothing. Don’t touch me, asshole.”

Vidar grabbed a hairbrush from the rack at random and headed toward the cart without looking at him, leaving Henrik once more watching his back as he walked away. Henrik attempted to distract himself from the sickly feeling of worry by focusing on the fact that Vidar had the added detriment of having experienced the previous night’s ordeal through the lens of a hallucinogen. The man must have felt terrors beyond the distress of being helpless while Leif had reveled in violence on their brother and niece. Henrik had succumbed to unconsciousness from the drugged wine as Leif had kneeled over Simone’s prone and bleeding body, so he did not know when Vidar had passed out. If he’d passed out. He simply did not know what or how much Vidar had seen and the consideration was chilling.

“God help us,” Henrik whispered.
Simone heard the clink of his belt buckle and then the slide of the leather against cloth, making her chest clench in anxiety. The several stripes of bruises and impact lacerations along her upper back throbbed all at once as the fresh memory of her lashing replayed in tactile recall. When she heard the belt thump to the floor, she let out of breath she didn’t know she was holding, but the sound of his zipper coming down and the soft sounds of him shuffling out of his clothing brought her right back to that tight core of fear. The coarse motel sheets burned her back and she turned on her side. The vulnerability it made her feel to face away from the source of those sounds made her curl under the comforter, but she couldn’t bring herself to risk seeing him despite logically knowing he wasn’t there. She hated being this sick. Even away from her father, she knew she would never be free of these flashbacks no matter how hard she clung to what she told herself repeatedly was reality. Her father’s rage and disappointment was written in red and purple across her back and shoulders. The punishment she could look forward to for having run away was a morbid concept she found herself incapable of even considering without risk of a panic attack. The whoosh and crack of leather sounded just as loud and clear in her mind as it had echoed in that wide hallway, making her cringe and whimper with each phantom strike.

“Kjære?”

Simone could hear Anders’ gentle tone outside of the memory. She could feel the mattress dip down and the blanket shift behind her where he laid down in her bed. She could even smell the stale fear in his sweat as he scooted closer and felt the warmth and softness of skin to skin contact on her bare body when he molded himself to her. However, she was still on her knees with her father towering over her in mind.

“Det er greit, kjære… You are okay… ssh…”

His whispers against her neck helped soothe her away from that memory and she leaned back into him, needing more to keep her grounded in reality.

“Anders… Anders, I can’t see… oh god…” she whimpered, fear trembling through her as memories clawed the frayed edges and cracks of her mind.

His kisses on her neck made her tremble for a very different reason and she clung to her arousal like a lifeboat tossed around in a storm, the familiar distraction welcomed despite the memories of her body being violated threatening to overtake her mind. But this was Anders. He wouldn’t hurt her like that again; she had to believe that. She turned and faced him, trying to see him but it was like looking through fogged glass with her father on the other side. She shut her eyes, clearing the fog and seeing only Leif lying before her, his gray eyes and slight smile holding an interested amusement to her plight. Anders’ lips pressed sweetly to hers and she leaned into the kiss desperately, but it was still Leif she saw. His hands caressed and pulled her closer, the callouses on his palms and fingers identifiably her uncle’s, helping to diffuse that specter of her father. She needed more. Her arms slid down from his shoulders to his side, caressing down the muscle covering the ridges of his hip bones and slipping her fingers under the elastic band of his underwear. He inhaled sharply when she gently gripped his hardened length, the slide of his foreskin making him growl slightly as he drove forward and locked her into a searing kiss that made the split in her lip sting. She focused on the passion and not the pain; pain belonging in the sexual realm of her father and not the gentle lovemaking of her uncle. It was hard not to let the hurt infect and heighten her arousal. That ghost of Leif was a heavy presence in her mind.

“Kjære!” Anders gasped as she pushed him onto his back and sat up to tug his underwear down.

“Please just… get these off,” she whispered, her aching fingers clumsy with the elastic. He looked at her, uncertainty and arousal conflicting in his pale and haggard face, but obliged by lifting his hips
“You are okay?” he asked, his voice husky and his sky-blue eyes darkened to a shade of early twilight while still somehow holding room for such caring concern.

Her heart ached at the love she saw there, a love she couldn’t help but echo. She knew this was all so messed up, but so was the world they lived in. She didn’t have the will to dismiss this beautiful, horrid thing they shared because of a taboo that spanned both of their cultures. This was never meant to happen in normal life, like so many other things that had happened around her, but this was one of the few oddities that brought her some joy along with the torment. Mindful of his wounds, she carefully straddled him, holding onto the bed frame he leaned back against. His eyes followed her in reverent adoration with a fondness so deep, it made her shiver with want for him. She could never feel ashamed enough to ever reject him.

“Help me feel okay again,” she whispered, reaching between them and lining up his cock. He leaned forward and caught her mouth in an open kiss as she slowly sunk down on him, his girth stretching her delightfully and pulling at that tear in her just a little painfully. His hands grasped her hips and kept her from forcing him inside, pulling her up each time she tried to sink down too quickly. That ache in her heart expanded at how careful and patient he was with her. By the time he was fully seated inside her, they were both panting raggedly with want, but he didn’t let her move yet. He gently gripped the sides of her face and leaned in once more, his tongue sliding into her mouth and stroking hers in another dizzying kiss. Her hips rocked against him almost unconsciously, grinding his cock deep enough to mash against her bruised cervix in a pain that had her already dangerously close to orgasm just from that minimal motion. He moaned into her mouth, his cock throbbing and making her break their kiss to gasp as her pelvic muscles tensed around him in response. He pulled her back into the kiss and the bedsprings began to creak as her hips rocked more insistently, the slow and deep pace making them hyperaware of each slight sensation. His hands slid down her body to grip her ass and pressed her against him hard as he pushed up, driving him even deeper. The added pressure on her clit and cervix brought a powerful clash of pleasure and pain and her back arched as she rocked into it. She was so close, mewling and moaning in a girlish pitch that she was too far gone to be embarrassed by, but he wouldn’t let her do anything but slowly rock against him.

“Oh god, that’s so good, so good…” she moaned, nearly weeping from this much stimulation and affection as he kneaded her ass and kissed her neck. Her cunt was clenching around him, edging both of them on the precipice of climax but he denied them both with the powerful control of his grip and his darkened stare locking their eyes. If it was anyone else, she would feel intimidated by that forced eye contact, but with Anders it felt like safety and reassurance. The edging felt heavenly, they could do this for hours, but they did not have hours. Her other uncles could come through the door any moment, a possibility that both frightened and thrilled her. “Please, Anders, please let me come, please, please…”

“Vil du at jeg skal gjøre det inni? Vil du at jeg skal fylle deg?” he asked, his voice breathless and low as he rolled her hips with just a little more vigor. “Du vil gjøre meg til en far, kjæreste?”

It was enough to push her over the edge, making her see sparks at the corners of her vision as he held her gaze intensely. Her voice rose even higher in a crescendo with each stronger spasm of her orgasm as she cried out for him. At the height of her climax, she felt him throb and twitch as came in her with a strained moan. His hands pushed her down in a bruising grip as he mashed his cock deeper, as though he were trying to fit his semen directly into her womb. The perverse idea of Anders impregnating her filled her with a delirious excitement she knew her sober mind would revile, but made her bear down on him harder as he filled her with come. The scent of him, full of
pheromones and familiarity, made that fantasy of being bred so appealing and she kissed his panting mouth to stop herself from mindlessly begging for it. He sucked on her tongue and wrapped his arms around her possessively, an animalistic manner overtaking him as they both came down, and she melted in his hold submissively. Her body hummed in elation, her mind floated far away from the fear that ruled her, and she leaned into the depth of love she had for him until she felt almost lost in it. This was perfect. She was careful not to think about how much she was going to miss him when he was far away and safe.

“Thank you,” she whispered, dragging her nails gently over his sweat-dampened scalp through his blond hair. He hummed in appreciation, maybe not ready to process speech quite yet, and ran his hands over her back as he coaxed her tongue back in his mouth.

They both jerked away when they heard a car pull up near the door.

Anders felt like he had been yanked down from Heaven straight into Hell as Henrik carefully slid the steel tweezers into his stab wound and pulled out long wet ribbons of gauze. After the bearlike man barred Vidar from entering and sent Simone with his snarling brother to the other room a couple doors down, Anders knew this was going to be an unpleasant ordeal. Henrik was very compelling when he was in nurse mode, but Anders managed to refuse his help while he showered. He might have stayed in that little box shower for longer than necessary as he dreaded the coming agony. When he felt the antiseptic sting just near the wound, he wished he’d never come out at all.

“Quit squirming, trash maggot!” Henrik snapped, following it with a mild, “I’m being as careful as I can. I know it hurts, but please try to be still.”

“Is it all out?” Anders croaked, his knuckles taut white as he gripped the bedsheets. He had to lay on his side with his leg propped up on a towel-covered pillow to help relax the muscle, but it took nearly all his concentration to just breathe deeply and try not to tense up.

“It’s not as deep as it feels,” Henrik said instead of answering. Anders pressed his sweaty forehead into the bedding as another ribbon was pulled out of him.

“Can’t you just stitch it closed?”

“No, that would likely heal improperly and form an abscess. Packing the wound was the right choice.”

A delirious chuckle escaped Anders. “Wow, I guess Leif really does care about me.”

“You were obviously his favorite brother,” Henrik deadpanned. A heavy silence fell between them. It was too soon to joke about, but they were both eager to move on from it too quickly. Anders could only hope that one day they would be able to look back and not cringe. His brother’s bright baritone was gruff in that false way he spoke when he didn’t want his concern to be apparent as he asked, “So, how are you dealing with the shell shock?”

Anders tried to think of something witty enough to throw off the scent of trauma, but he was too affected to make up anything that would make any sense. “I worry about later. Nightmares and stuff.”

“Flashbacks?”
He shuddered. “Simone had one of those while you were out. I didn’t really know how to help, I just kind of panicked and… held her. It was scary to even watch.” A sick hatred churned his stomach. “That son of a whore is going to fry in Hell for what he’s put her through.”

“Deep breath,” Henrik ordered. Anders resisted tensing, then resisted groaning as fire seared outward from his wound. He couldn’t watch as Henrik stuffed the moistened clean gauze into that deceptively small slit in his thigh. “That’s it. I just have to cover it and we’re done for today. You won’t catch infection as long as you don’t get it wet or be a bigger idiot than normal.”

He didn’t feel like it was over. His wound throbbed and burned, making him unable to cuss his brother out for his insult. Find a happy place. He thought of his dogs back home, his pack of rascals with their noisy claws dancing on the kitchen tiles whenever he opened the fridge door. He could see Simone running her fingers through their furry coats like she ran her fingers through his hair earlier. That was it. After a bandage was taped over the wound, the pain began to subside into something less than excruciating.

“You do that a lot,” Henrik muttered as he stood from the bed, the springs groaning almost in relief when he lifted his heavy weight off them.

“What?”

“Hold her.”

Anders felt a flash of fear before it plunged into irritation and defensiveness. “She likes to be touched. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Henrik avoided looking at him while he picked up the tools and supplies for dressing the wound and his tone was cold as he said, “She likes to be touched – by you. I’m sure she likes a lot of things you two do together. Doesn’t mean it’s right or healthy. She’s had a fucked-up life, she probably has a lot of fucked-up coping mechanisms. Don’t be one of them.”

Anders could feel his anger rising as his brother spoke, but his words stung with the truth he’d been avoiding. What they were doing was wrong. He was supposed to address her sexual responsiveness to him as a problem, not as an opportunity, but he didn’t. The sex, no matter how right or amazing it felt, was an unthinkable sin and a violation of trust. He couldn’t stop himself, though. He really wasn’t trying to do anything but comfort her, things just got out of hand. Not that Henrik would know anything about that.

“I’m not hurting her.”

“Grow up,” Henrik groused. “You want me to explain how psychologically damaging it is that someone she’s supposed to trust, someone with every advantage and authority over her, is using her as a sexual outlet? That’s real basic shit, Anders. Even you have to know it.”

“I’m not using her for anything, she’s-!” Anders yelled, snapping his mouth shut before he finished that statement. Sweat beaded his aching temples and his mouth was dry as ash. He messed up, he knew he messed up, and Henrik was glowering at him like he was going to shout him into the ground at any moment.

But Henrik’s voice was deadly calm. “She’s what? What is she? Hm? She came onto you, is that it? She likes it? She’s too good of a fuck to pass up? What?”

“Don’t say that,” Anders muttered. His head was pounding. He couldn’t think. He needed to see her, make sure she was okay. “She’s not just a sexual outlet.”
“Not ‘just’ a sexual outlet? Anders, have you lost your goddamn mind?”

Most likely. “No. Look, I can’t take this shit right now. I want to see her.”

“She’s in the other room. Safe. Away from undesirable influences. I’m going to stay in this room with you tonight and Vidar’s going to keep an eye on her.”

A black, thick feeling coated him. “What? No! She needs me. What if she has another attack or, or starts crying? Vidar’s an asshole, he won’t know how to comfort her!”

“Just tell us how you do it, since your methods are so effective.”

Anders’ jaw clenched and it was all he could do to keep from baring his teeth at Henrik. He hated him in that moment with a corrosive, violent anger. Simone could be hurt or in danger and he’d be none the wiser. They were taking her away from him. The snapshot image flashed in his mind of Leif smirking at him from across the crowded room after chasing off that annoying fly of a boy from Simone. That shared camaraderie in his sharp-toothed grin. His gravelly voice rumbling low You can only ignore it, but it’s never, ever going to ignore you at the dining table. He wasn’t like Leif. He couldn’t be. But he felt, for the first time, a horrible understanding of him.

“That’s not how this is going to work,” he said, that darkness pumping acid into his veins. “She needs me to be there for her. I’m not going to let you or anyone get in the way of that.”

“What she needs is real help, not some guy who thinks he can fix her with his dick.”

“I’m all she’s got.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Hide her all to yourself so you’re the only person she can love. Just like her father. I really didn’t…”

Anders could see Henrik’s mouth move as though he were speaking, but he couldn’t hear the rest of what he’d said as those words repeated. Just like her father. This time, there was no guilt or shame that resounded in him, just a cold acknowledgement that bubbled up from an ugly place in his mind. Maybe he should stop fighting it if everyone already expected it.

“You’re right,” Anders said, interrupting whatever diatribe Henrik was on.

The burly man looked at him crossly and grumbled, “I know I am. About what, though?”

“I would like it if I hid her away so I was the only person in her world,” he answered easily. “But that’s because she wants it to be that way. Why wouldn’t she? The rest of the world hasn’t been kind to her like I have. She’s much happier when it’s just the two of us.”

“Anders… what the actual fuck are you saying?” Henrik asked haltingly, his eyes wide and heavy brow furrowed in alarm.

The words felt like smoke billowing out of Anders’ lungs as he said, “Simone belongs to me now. I’m going to treat her right and keep her happy, so don’t get in my way.”
“Hello, Mr. Marceau,” Leif spoke into his phone, his French clear and unaffected by having been woken on the first ring or the headache throbbing like ice picks trying to escape his skull. The empty bottle of sparkling wine clinked and rolled on the floor when he nudged it with his foot.

“Valstad, sorry to hear that you have not yet found your monster,” Marceau’s cheerful voice came through tinny over the subpar connection in the remote area Einar’s property lied in. Leif’s property, he had to remind himself. This cursed land was now solely in his name, as well as the burden of his bloodline. He leaned forward in the chair he’d fallen asleep in, noticing that it was still dark out, inferring that Marceau was willing to appear eager by calling him so soon after the abduction. The man was too often eager with Leif; it wore quickly on both of them.

“The night is still young,” Leif said, cradling his aching temples in the wide span of his hand.

Even through the haze of a stale drunk, he could hear the subtle condescension in the Frenchman’s polite, “Oh, yes, yes. That it is, old friend. I wanted to personally assure you that you have our full support. All misunderstandings about your implicated breach of conduct have been purged, save for the usual rumor mills and gossip hounding, of course. Have you had any news regarding the whereabouts of your family?”

Leif’s mind clicked rapidly to dissect the motivations behind this call, the alarms ringing in his head before he could piece any of it together. Marceau was more than willing to appear eager, he was wanting to appear eager. He rarely spoke so directly, preferring to play with each topic and preen pedantically with allusions and branch off onto irrelevant subjects before addressing the real issues, but he just delivered three pieces of pertinent information in immediate succession. He was fishing and was careless enough to have laid out his full bait upfront, thinking that Leif wouldn’t be aware the trade was occurring. The clicking was nearly audible in his mind, snapping memory to context to speculation rapidly. The abductor hadn’t been waiting for Leif to be distracted as much as he was waiting specifically for Marceau to pull him away. Marceau, the braggart, had even spoken of Simone as he was having her kidnapped. Where in the modern world is there a place for a monster? Leif needed a motivation and could not find one. He needed to buy time, pull a wager of his own.

“Einar was generous with his friends,” he said, his thoughts still clicking. He ran through the dialogue of his private conversation with Marceau. “His reputation precedes him even in death. I have inherited many pairs of eyes to search for me.”

“The late Valstad indeed had wealth in all things, if not health,” Marceau said.

The last thing he’d said in that distraction: There are those who would seek to undo you out of principle. Principle was a chief motivator to many in their field, enough to have made the threat on the surface of that statement obvious, obfuscating the true threat below it. This was a personal mission to Marceau, one that required as few actors as possible, perhaps too few from the sounds of things. The man had clout, but not enough to have had the patience or resources to avoid whatever desperation had led to this call. Marceau had failed somewhere. Leif’s heart soared with hope that his
daughter may truly have avoided death, but he left his rejoicing behind a shut door in his mind while there was still work to be done. He had to figure out what the game was before he created his role in it. *There was a time when there were six Valstads in the network once; we are now but down to one.*

The entire direct bloodline had been stolen save for him. Had Marceau wanted to eradicate them, he would have absconded the oath and done that as an assassin. No, this was deliberately done to isolate and divide. *Undo.* Marceau needed Leif to believe he was the last remaining Valstad. This was no coincidence that this had occurred at the funeral of the only other Valstad; it fit Marceau’s taste for poetic theatrics. Something to do with Einar, then. Leif could only imagine what that sly, sadistic man had done to earn a blood grudge of this magnitude with the Marceaus.

"*I trust you will keep me informed should anything of interest be picked up by your gossip hounds in the rumor mills?*" Leif asked, careful to recite the banal phrasing Marceau had used and to say it with a thin trace of desperation.

"*You’ll be the first to know if I hear something.***"

"*Thank you, Mr. Marceau. I hope the night finds you well.***"

"*Good luck, old friend. We shall speak again soon.***"

Leif waited for Marceau to end the call before pulling the phone away from his ear. He had several texts, all of them superfluous reassurances from the men and women he’d contracted except for one. The security footage from the hotel finally had a picture of the man who had abducted them and a possible license plate number. Leif forwarded them both to Sheriff Boden before taking a longer look at the grainy image of the slight Asian man in his sixties, trying to place the familiarity. He had never met this man but he had seen that skull structure and sloping posture before. Ignoring his aching head and roiling stomach, Leif went into the tiny room upstairs that was his father’s and uncle’s home office, the draft tables and tall filing cabinets covered with dusty sheets and cobwebs decorating like streamers between them. He yanked up the trick floorboard and pulled out one of the earliest photo albums from the cache hidden there. He flipped through the successions of scenic panoramas, figures caught frozen in motion, sharp focus of panic over blurred backgrounds, all of them invoking the intent of both subject and photographer. While never shown, he could see Bjørn in each shot. However, Leif was not glancing through these photos to reminisce. There, caught purposefully unaware in the woods, rifle slung over his slouching shoulders, was the abductor. Carefully, he pulled back the protective plastic covering and turned the photograph over to read the name written in his uncle’s neat angular penmanship. Edward Kyun, dated thirty years ago, a young man with considerably more hair who would never recover from whatever trauma had turned him into a killer that slouches self-consciously. Leif leaned back in the creaky drafting chair and tapped a corner of the photograph against his long teeth, thinking.

First Renfro, then Kyun. Both men Bjørn had hunted with at least once, now having come after his family at Marceau’s bidding. Marceau had not counted on Renfro going rogue and getting killed because of it, but that’s what the contingency in Kyun was for. Now the contingency had failed as well, perhaps also due to his savage daughter’s contribution. Leif grinned with delighted malice at the big fat nothing Marceau had in his hand now. The game was set, it was Leif’s turn to play. It was both too late and too early to tap the proper sources for information; he should replenish his stamina. He brushed the sour taste of alcohol from his mouth and laid in the bed he’d shared with his Simone, her scent surrounding him as he drifted off into a blissfully dreamless sleep, reassured that he would
have her in that bed again soon enough.

“You are hungry,” Vidar stated, placing the half-eaten box of pizza on what Simone supposed was her bed for the night.

She turned her head from staring at the ceiling, looked at the box and felt her stomach lurch again. “No, no I really am not hungry.”

He breathed out a loud and frustrated sigh, his arms folded over the drawing of a stack of pancakes on his shirt. They were all wearing the same ridiculous matching shirts and gray sweatpants to varying degrees of fit, looking like the sore losers of some brutal contact sport team. The Flattened Pancakes, she thought with chuckle that came out of her trembling chest like a spasm. At least, she assumed they all had the same clothes. She hadn’t seen her other uncles since Henrik shooed her and Vidar to this room hours ago. The look on the strongman’s face when he came through the door and saw her and Anders lying stiffly in their separate beds with the blankets hiding their bare bodies reminded her too clearly of the times her mother had caught her with a boy in her bedroom. Henrik knew, without a doubt, and Vidar had at least suspected. Neither, of course, approved. She felt awful for causing contention between the brothers. It seemed she brought discord wherever she went lately.

“You eat,” Vidar insisted, pointing to the box and giving her a stern look. Her stomach should have been completely emptied after her previous vomiting, but she had to swallow whatever dregs slowly crept up her throat at the thought of eating and shook her aching head. He huffed again, his hands on his narrow hips and his sharp jaw jutting out in annoyance. “You do not eat. Now you are sick. Eat.”

“I wish I could,” she offered with a weak smile that didn’t last more than a flicker.

“I help you,” he announced, rising from his bed.

She watched him, blurred vision and the dim lighting of the bedside lamps not helping her avoid seeing the phantom image of her father in him. At least it was not a hallucination this time, just a simple likeness in appearance between close family members. It was almost comforting to have her eyes play more conventional tricks on her. He sat down on the edge of her bed and she wanted to sink into the mattress and disappear to where he couldn’t reach her; a childish fantasy for safety. Instead, she could only let him pull her arms to sit her up, an action that made her head swim as though her brain rattled loosely in her skull. His hands, the long thin fingers of the long thin man, felt alien on her skin. It had been so long since anyone besides Leif or Anders had touched her that this platonic touch felt inherently sexual just by being skin-to-skin contact. She jerked out of his hold reflexively when that ridiculous notion became too much. She did not want to think of Vidar in that context. The thought disgusted her like incest always should have and it made her suddenly curious as to why her father or Anders seemed exempt from that natural repulsion. She didn’t have long to ponder on the discrepancy as Vidar slung his lanky arm around her shoulders, his flesh all tautly compact muscle and deceptively strong. All these men were horrifyingly strong. That primal fear gripped her and made her cower as the sharp scent of him filled her with recognition. They all smelled distinctive but identifiably similar, tapping into that most ancient method of identification and
sparking through her synapses more directly than any other sense, but they all provoked the same immediate response: this man is related to her father and therefore dangerous. She was so sick of being afraid. She was so sick of everything.

“Now you eat,” he said firmly, shoving a slice of pepperoni pizza to her parted mouth, the pointed tip pressing against her teeth.

She was too exhausted to fight him even if instinct wasn’t screaming for her to submit. The greasy subpar pizza felt heavy in her mouth as she bit off that tip to appease him, the back and roof of her mouth aching painfully as she chewed. Swallowing was a process that made her wince even when it was just liquid, but solid food brought tears to her eyes. It was all she could do not to choke. He watched her with resolve that wilted into remorse, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at him in her shame and embarrassment.

“What is wrong? Why you are cry?” he asked.

“I hurt my mouth and throat, makes eating hard,” she whispered, hoping that would deter him in persisting with this task of hand-feeding her like a baby.

It did something worse. It made him curious. His hand firmly tipped her head up to look at him as he commanded, “Open. Let me see.”

“N-no?” she squeaked.

Her shaking muscles tensed in anticipation of having to physically resist him. His sharp features hardened just slightly, but it was enough to send a frisson of fear through her. This man lacked the jolly manner of Henrik or the gentle compassion of Anders, possessing an asperity and intensity too similar to Leif but without his finesse of deception. She was coming to understand that there was a quality to Vidar that was as open and reactive as a raw nerve beneath that hard intelligence.

“Open.”

She obeyed. Keeping her eyes fixed to the side, she opened her jaw cradled in his hands and let him tilt her head back to shine the dim lamp light into her mouth. Humiliation flooded her at the way he’d handled her all evening. It seemed like whenever he wasn’t ignoring her, he was invading her boundaries and pushing her through these demeaning acts. Far too similar to her father. In their own ways, they were all too similar to one another, like some genetically motivated behavior.

“Fy faen!” he hissed.

She winced at the harsh tone but resisted pulling away or closing her mouth. She could tell he was glaring at the bruises discoloring the soft and delicate flesh inside, her face burning in a deep flush from the memory of how she got them, not wanting to think about that while he touched her. If she
ignored the context, this was not unlike being at the dentist’s office. She latched onto that interpretation, much preferring a clinical detachment as opposed to whatever this was.

“Who did this?” he asked, his voice low in anger, almost growling out, “Anders?”

She took this as an opportunity to close her mouth, but he didn’t let go of her jaw despite no longer even looking at her. His glare was fixed on the air behind her, unfocused as the gears of rage turned in his mind. Seeing that raw anger churning behind his face, she didn’t dare try to squirm out of his grasp.

Her voice was as gentle and submissive as she could manage from her sore throat. “I don’t understand what you’re asking, uncle Vidar.”

“You… fucked,” he said hesitantly. The discomfort she felt at hearing that word used as a verb while he held her face made her want to shrink into nothing. “Who fucked here make this bruises?”

Simone’s blood ran cold at the question. She didn’t think he’d guess the cause so correctly. She wanted him to suppose it was due to illness or anything but the truth.

“Leif, yes?” he asked. That hand at her jaw tightened and his glare sharpened, this time focusing right at her. “Tell the truth.”

She worried that she was going to vomit again, but fear kept her throat from spasming as much as it kept her from doing anything else. Submit and survive. She nodded almost imperceptibly.

His lip twitched once, a quick tick that she would have missed if she blinked. His next question was whispered, “Did you like it?”

Warning alarms were blaring in her mind for her to run, get away, do anything to get out of whatever was happening. His arm around her shoulders and his hand cradling her jaw prevented any hope of escape. His serpentine glare prevented any hope of deceit. She hesitated, then shook her head. His brow furrowed as his head tilted in thought.

“No, maybe not,” he murmured almost to himself, then said, “Tell me all things Leif did.”

A cold sweat broke out on her scalp and neck. This couldn’t be happening. It was too late.

“Why now?” she whimpered. Her ears rang. He watched her, calculating, analyzing, holding back some horrible reaction as he waited for her to answer. “Why didn’t you see before? Where was this… this insight when…”
“He fucked,” he finished for her.

It was awful to hear that knowledge outside of herself. She wanted to stuff it back inside her and hide it away from this thief.

“I did not look,” he said, maintaining that same thin veneer of calmness while anger built within him. She flinched when she felt his hand at her jaw slide down and wrap around her neck, panic making her pant to draw in breath while she could. His eyes, the ocean blue of them appearing almost black in the low lighting, never wavered from hers. “I did not look bruises here…” His hand slid further, pulling at the loose collar of the oversized shirt she wore, poking the still painful bite mark at the crook of her neck. “I did not look here…” He moved his hand away from her finally, her wide eyes following it in both relief and remaining terror. “You… help Leif. Why?”

“I…” she whispered. Her jaw clenched shut. The truth was too sick to say out loud. She was still panting, that panic sticking in her and growing like a rapid fungus, and a terrible feeling of dread coated her mind. She couldn’t let herself succumb to an anxiety attack while alone with this angry, vengeful man. “I need some air. May I be excused?”

Vidar watched her, his piercing eyes boring into her, before his arm pulled back with a friendly pat and he nodded. Stepping out of the cramped room and into the cold night air felt like leaving a hot and noisy kitchen, the relief almost instantaneous as she took a deep shaking breath and let the door shut behind her. Before she walked even three steps, she heard Vidar’s muffled yell and a loud bang of something hitting a wall. She wrapped her trembling arms around her aching body and walked away faster. It seemed as though they both needed space. The smooth concrete of the walkway was cold enough to make the bones in her bare feet ache, but not enough to numb them completely. The quiet and solitude allowed her to focus and she found herself being drawn to the stolen SUV parked in front of the other room as she thought on her status as a murderer. She wondered when the police would find Edward Kyun. They’d broken through a fence off a main road and left deep tire tracks through the mud and the grass, leading right up to where he laid crumpled in that field. Maybe she belonged in a hospital for the criminally insane. She was certainly insane and a criminal, after all. Or maybe she could swallow a bullet.

“But I have to watch Dad,” she told the rain. “He needs me. And I need him not to kill my uncles.”

“There’s no one here. You’re safe now.”

Simone startled at the voice and looked around, but there was no one else there. The front desk was closed. The smattering of other motel dwellers were locked away in their rooms, fast asleep or kept company by the blue green light of their televisions. That dread coating her mind thickened and her chest started to hurt.

“Who’s there?” she called as loudly as her throat allowed. Nothing but the rain answered.

“The water is cool and calm. You’re relaxed. There’s someone in the water with you.”
The man’s voice was close, too close to be hiding. She tried to run back to the room, stumbling with rubbery knees and half-numb feet, but froze when she heard a her own terrified voice from within her own skull.

“Stop it! Stop it! Run!”

“Fuck, oh fuck, fuck!” she panted, the edges of the world curling in and shifting around her. She had to hold onto this reality. No more hallucinations, no more flashbacks. She pounded on the door, barely feeling it against her hand.

“Let the water make him still. Let the water make him quiet.”

The door opened and she fell through it, stumbling into a startled Henrik. When her face planted into the pancake shirt on his muscular chest, darkness swallowed her whole.

Anders was receiving many lessons in how long a minute could possibly feel lately. At Henrik’s insistence, they waited as Simone laid stiffly on her side on the floor, her entire body tensing and then relaxing repeatedly in a seizure. The impulse to grab her and shake her out of it was strong, but beyond rolling her onto her side and putting a pillow under her head, Henrik had said they just had to wait it out. Anders could not do this. He stood up, sat down, gnawed at his knuckle until it nearly broke skin, stood up again, then broke the awful silence.

“Why is this happening?” he asked. “What’s wrong with her? Is this normal? This isn’t normal.”

Henrik shook his head, not taking his eyes off the prone girl. “There’s a lot of reasons this could happen, but I’m pretty sure it’s withdrawals.”

“Withdrawals? Withdrawals from what?”

“Barbiturates, benzodiazepines, take your pick. Leif had plenty of each in his medicine bag. Nothing that was explicitly anticonvulsant, though. I don’t think he was using phenobarbital or diazepam to do anything but render unconsciousness,” Henrik theorized, stroking his beard with his thick hand. Anders wanted to scream; he couldn’t understand how his brother could be so stoic about this.

“Could you explain that in Norwegian now? Or just what the fuck that has to do with why Simone is having a seizure?”

Henrik huffed out of his nose and frowned back at him. “There were a lot of medicines in Leif’s
collection that, if you stop taking them suddenly after having been on them a while, could cause this.”

Anders waited for him to continue and when he didn’t, he tried not to scream, “What else can happen?”

“Well, she has a lot of other symptoms already,” Henrik answered. “Fever, tremor, perspiration, hallucinations… hard to say what will happen. Seizing indicates possible excitotoxicity or neurotoxicity. We should take her to a hospital… maybe.”

“’Maybe’?”

“Well… Hospitals here aren’t really equipped to help people withdraw,” Henrik explained carefully. “I looked into coming out here and working at an American medical facility when Pappa was getting worse. It’s bleak, especially for addicts. There’s not a lot of help available to them without it costing an arm and a leg at a private rehab. If we take Simone in, especially without being able to tell them much or bring proof of insurance, there’s a good chance they’ll just put her on an IV and leave her to dry out while they write up the bill. Most addicts don’t even try to seek help. It’s safer just to keep using.”

Anders’ tasted blood and looked down at his knuckle. He’d finally bitten through the skin. “What the fuck is this country?”

Simone’s body stopped tensing, seeming to almost deflate in exhaustion as the seizing receded, and she lied there panting and still. Henrik leaned over Simone and pressed his hand to her forehead. Anders ignored the insane feeling of protectiveness that urged him to push his brother away as he touched her. He needed to let him work. Henrik lifted her hand and checked her pulse, using the men’s watch she wore on that wrist to count the beats per minute, his heavy brow furrowed in concentration and worry.

“Get Vid, his English is better,” Henrik said.

Anders didn’t want to leave her. He hesitated a moment, letting the weight of logic overthrow these base reactions before bolting to the other room. When Vidar finally opened the door, Anders saw that he’d been crying.

“Simone’s had a seizure. We need you to talk to her.”

“Simone’s as good as dead,” Vidar said dismissively, walking back into the room.

Anders caught the door before it shut in his face and stepped through it. Before he could shout his brother down, he saw that the room was in chaotic disarray. An armchair laid on its side, gutted and broken, its stuffing torn out from it like a disemboweled beast. Bedding had been thrown all over the room and a mattress had been flipped onto a wall. Anders swallowed the sour dread and anger at
having let them put Simone in a room with this broken man. He could lambaste his brothers later; he needed them to help her first. He looked back to Vidar’s miserable and red-rimmed eyes, conviction hardening his voice.

“She’s sick, Vid. She’s withdrawing from whatever shit Leif had her fucked up on for so long. Just help us talk to her.”

Vidar smiled without humor and turned to the wall. His voice was slightly hoarse as he said, “She’s going to go back to him, you know. She loves him, or at least she thinks she does. He made sure of that.”

At first Anders didn’t understand what he was saying, but when recognition hit, it hit him hard. He couldn’t stop himself from yelling, “Would you please just fucking come with me and help?!?”

Vidar shook his head and calmly said, “She’s probably going to die, if she’s lucky. Let’s not waste her good fortune.”

That simmering rage and frustration boiled over in Anders in a flash of motion. He didn’t know he’d moved on Vidar until he saw him stumble backward with his hand raised defensively in front of him. His older brother stared at him in the wide-eyed shock they both shared and Anders shook his fists loose. He hadn’t intended to hit Vidar, but he also hadn’t intended to close in on him like that either. It just happened. He pressed his bleeding hand into his hair, tugging at the roots nervously as he assured himself that it was just stress. He wasn’t a violent man unless it was necessary. Beating Vidar wouldn’t have been necessary, even after the terrible things he’d said about Simone. It didn’t happen. It wasn’t anything.

“Listen, just… just come and talk to her,” Anders said, unable to even look at him.

“Sure, okay…” Vidar muttered.

Anders tried to think of something substantial to say to excuse his behavior, but he couldn’t. He left ahead of Vidar, eager to get back to Simone. These hours without her had him on edge believing something terrible would happen to her without him there, but it was still surprising to be proven right. He shouldn’t have ever let them separate her from his sight. It was a terrible, awful thought, but there was a part of him that felt validated that something had happened. She needed him.

“How is she?” he asked as he propped open the door for Vidar to squeeze into the cramped room after him.

“I don’t know,” Henrik answered, rubbing his face. “Maybe we should call an ambulance.”

“We might as well shoot up a flare for the freaks to come after us if we do that,” Vidar quickly interjected, his irritated tone fully recovered from being shaken by Anders’ sudden aggression. “No
cops, no hospitals, no institutions where we can be identified. Fuck, going to the airport was probably a mistake. Don’t Americans just throw drug addicts in a box to dry out anyway? Hell, we could do that here.”

“Vidar, just get down here and ask her some simple questions,” Henrik grumbled, then said, “Actually, Anders, you get down here. Vid, tell him what to say.”

Vidar crossed his arms, seeming to take personal offense to this as Anders carefully lowered himself to sit on the floor above her head. His wound pulled painfully at the maneuver, reminding him that he’d been walking around without the aid of crutches, high and stupid on adrenaline. Simone’s eyes were blinking slowly, her sweat-drenched forehead furrowed in pain as she panted heavily through her paled lips. He took her shaking hand and held it between his to try to warm it.

“Ask her if she knows where she is, if she knows what happened, the last thing she remembers, that kind of shit,” Henrik said as he sat heavily on his bed, running his fingers through his beard.

“Okay, ah…” Vidar began. “Say, Where are you.”

Anders leaned over her face, bending close enough to whisper, “Simone… Simone, where are you?”

At first, she could only groan slightly, her blinking eyes unseeing even as they looked through half-lids up at him. Then, in a tiny whisper, “Water… but… everything is so dark… There’s someone in the water…”

“Now ask, You know what has happened,” Vidar instructed above him, not having heard her bizarre response.

Anders didn’t know what else to do, so he whispered, “You know what has happened?”

Her eyes darted around, still unfocused and bleary, as though she was dreaming. Her whispers between panting breaths were stronger, more fretful, “I know what… has happened… I… he… he said to… so I made him still and… so quiet with the water.”

Henrik handed him a towel and he used it to wipe away some of the sweat from her brow, her skin hot to the touch even through the material. She kept whispering the strange nonsense, her words becoming more disjointed as she kept repeating something about water. Anders sighed as he accepted what he had to do.

“I’m going to go back to my room if that’s all,” Vidar said.

Anders quickly lifted his head, stopping Vidar’s retreat by asking, “Could you actually help me tell her one more thing?” Vidar shrugged, but stayed.
Anders touched her face, his thumb smoothing over her soft fever-heated cheek as he worked up the nerve to let his brothers hear this. She was far more important to him than his fear. “I want to know how to tell her that she’s with me from now on. That I’ll take her in and take care of her. Forever.”

“She can’t even leave the country, dumbfuck, how are you going to tell her all that and just leave her in a couple days?” Vidar groused sourly.

Anders accepted the disposable plastic cup of water Henrik brought him with a small smile as the large man watched him warily. He lifted and cradled her boneless form against him as he said, “I’m not leaving without her. We’ll figure it out.”

“That’s insane, Anders. We’ll be lucky to make it to that flight. What do you think Leif is going to do when he catches you? It’s suicide!” Vidar sneered.

“Leif isn’t going to catch me,” Anders corrected him. “I’m not running from him anymore.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Henrik asked grimly.

Anders held Simone’s head up as he tipped the cup into her mouth and she automatically accepted the drink. The memory of trying this and being rewarded with a face full of bloody water when she spat it out at him seemed so funny and distant now. It was actually far from either, but he chuckled anyway. His brothers stared at him as though he’d gone completely insane. Maybe he was. He hugged her to him more tightly, feeling her soft hair under his cheek and breathing in her fevered scent as he said, “I’m going to go to him.”

“S-stop… stop… stop…” Simone whimpered, her body trembling and curling into him. Her hand tightened into a fist over his chest, twisting the pancake drawing on his shirt.
Chapter 31

When Leif next awoke, it was to the golden light of sunrise trickling between the blinds. In that space between sleeping and waking, he was devoid of memory or identity, existing only to see the light shimmer and feel the warmth of the bedding. The scent of his absent daughter was the catalyst that birthed his mind, ushering in the terrible reality of his existence and unfurling the tangled web of his thoughts. It was with practiced ease that he pushed down his emotional reaction to living, focusing past it in meditative technique, letting it dissipate into vaporous nothing until he was empty again. Only once he had made himself hollow did he allow carefully controlled thoughts and feelings to trickle back in. First the acknowledgement that he was still somehow alive, then what that meant for him. Today, his still being alive meant finding his daughter and vengeance. Without rising from the bed, he took his cell phone from the nightstand and checked for any messages. None. Disappointment was a feeling too close to failure. He wanted blood, but he could settle for coffee for now.

Walking through the empty house in the daylight, he toyed with the idea of burning it to the ground, contracting one of the mafia-based construction companies he had good relations with, and turning this graveyard into a proper home for him and his daughter. No more bodies to keep him prisoner to these grounds. No more memories that go bump in the night. The coffee in the pantry was stale, but it was a beautiful morning for a drive.

Jay’s Grocer and General was just opening when he pulled up in Einar’s old truck. Leif’s work boots crunched over the loose gravel that made up the parking lot, the noise alarming a small flock of chickens to take their pecking elsewhere, but for all this country kitsch, Jay’s had gone from a pit stop to a supplier of gourmet foods and fine wines to suit the rapid gentrification of this rural community. Unfortunate for Einar’s original neighbors who were now on the fixed incomes of retirement benefits, but fortunate for Leif to get a decent bag of fair trade, ethically-sourced coffee. The brand he chose touted its support of a small village in Ethiopia and he figured it balanced out the destruction he helped wreak on this village of retirees by feeding that gentrification. Irony was its own reward.

“How ya doin’ this morning, Mr. Valstad?”

Leif turned to the young man who addressed him and, seeing him in the apron that marked him as an employee, relaxed. He recalled that this was the same gangly boy that was all over his daughter during their first supply run and, inexplicably, at the funeral reception. He glanced at his name tag and returned his greeting with a warm and neighborly, “Good morning, Bryce! You know, I didn’t get a chance to ask you how you knew Einar.”

Bryce’s body language was loose and oddly unworried for someone who was on the receiving end of an unspoken threat just the previous day, no matter how covertly implied. Leif wondered at this as the boy turned to him more fully as he spoke.

“We knew him as Ernie,” the boy said, his tone the respectful narration that the genteel took on when speaking of the dead, “He was pretty well known to just about everybody. Well, half the town was there yesterday, so that’s kinda obvious. I’d, uh, take him his groceries on the bad days he couldn’t make it on his own. We got to be sort of friends.”

Leif was accustomed to his father being sort of friends with hundreds of people, but those people were usually useful to him to further his agenda or as potential resources. It wasn’t the man’s modus operandi to chum it up with the local bag boys.
“Well, I owe you my thanks,” Leif smiled.

“Oh, that reminds me…” the boy said, digging into his pants pockets and coming up empty with an apologetic shrug. “I should give you the key, I guess, but I, uh, forgot it today. Sorry.”

Leif’s surprise was enough to engage his interest. He wasn’t aware that his father had grown so pathetically decrepit that he had to resort to allowing near strangers access to the property. The old man had been aggressively private for as long as Leif had known him, but sickness can weaken more than the body. It was a shame he’d been too committed to life to take his own before the cancer had reduced him. Leif would have gladly done it for him, but etiquette required he wait to be asked. The disappointment that came with the call letting him know Einar had died by natural causes was a thing that still stung, now all the worse with this scenario before him.

“You know, I’ll just drop it by on-”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Leif interrupted. It was troublesome enough that Einar had been handing out keys to two - no, three- generations worth of evidence without having to worry about anyone dropping by. “We’re having the locks replaced today.”

“Oh, well then,” Bryce smiled, adjusting the broomstick in his hands. “It was nice seeing you both yesterday. How is Simone? I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye before she left with Eddie.”

Leif felt his façade collapse under the weight of all this boy had implied with such breezily-delivered small talk. His relaxed brow and easy smile fell into his natural impassiveness, his hostility displayed only in the eager glint of his steel-gray eyes and the straightening of his posture. Whether the boy knew the full meaning his words carried or not was difficult to say, but Leif was hopeful that he could find out through pain. He was not a cruel man, though, so he would give him the chance to avoid that method.

“Is Eddie a friend, Bryce?” Leif asked. The friendly tone he retained was a disconcerting contrast to the cold anger behind his thin veneer of control.

The boy was already nervous, which was always gratifying but not helpful to either of them. Not yet, at least. “Um. Eddie was, uh, he, um, he and Ernie used to work together, I guess? Right?”

“Is that so? Please, tell me more about Eddie,” Leif said, stepping closer to him, the package of coffee still clutched in both hands at his front.

Bryce glanced around, too automatically to be surreptitious about it, but they were alone in the back of the store. “Well, uh… I don’t know much. A quiet guy. He just came in with Ernie sometimes and, um, later… he was there sometimes. At the house. Not a lot.”

“What was he doing there?”

“Um… they were friends? Look, I really didn’t know him that well,” Bryce said, stepping backwards as Leif moved closer.

Leif took that as his cue to put a hand in his pocket, the antler handle of the folding knife fitting pleasantly in his palm. “You know more than that, Bryce.”

The boy seemed as baffled as he was frightened, which was disappointing. He probably didn’t actually know anything. It seemed as though both of them were victims of bad luck and inadequate information, but Leif was quickly coming to lean towards the idea of making this boy’s luck a lot worse than his. It would only be prudent to be thorough. He pulled the knife out of his pocket, watching the boy’s widening eyes follow it as he slowly slid the blade out with his thumb.
“Mr. Valstad…?”

Leif’s phone vibrated in his other pocket. He sighed, disappointed yet again as he traded the knife for the phone. “Excuse me, Bryce, I have to take this.”

The boy nodded and stiffly walked away, his face as pasty as it was when he had seen the gun tucked at Leif’s side during the reception. The impression that young man must have of him by now didn’t matter, but it did illuminate to Leif that his social graces may have atrophied after having had a taste of the carrot that had been dangling in front of him for so long. He was chasing that carrot all over again and was more impatient the second time around.

“Good morning, Sheriff Boden,” he spoke into his phone, placing the bag of coffee back on the shelf as he walked towards the exit.

“It sure is morning, but I don’t know if it’s a good one, Mr. Valstad,” Boden said. He didn’t wait a beat before continuing; a forwardness that Leif appreciated more and more lately. “Kyun, the driver you had us on the lookout for? Turned up dead in the mud with a hole punched straight through his head. Property owner found him at the asscrack of dawn when his goats got out into the road from the fence he – or whoever- broke through. You wanna tell me what the hell kind of a bender your daughter is on or are we just gonna dance around that one?”

“Family dispute,” Leif responded. “Send me the location. I’m on my way now.”

“The feds took this one, so I can’t permit you a tour of the scene.”

Leif didn’t pause on his way to his vehicle, though he wasn’t entirely aware of getting in it until he was sitting in the driver’s seat. The FBI must have been following Kyun closely to have descended upon his corpse with such immediacy. Perhaps Renfro had fed him to the Bureau, perhaps they had long been in pursuit of him, but between two links to the FBI even with Marceau’s knowledge, it was madness for Marceau to have used them in this scheme. Unless that was his intent. Where will you go when they come for you?

Marceau knew he was capable of slipping the Bureau but he wouldn’t leave without taking Simone. He would be pinned and vulnerable the longer he stayed looking for her. Even if he ran, Marceau had power over him for as long as he held Simone hostage. But Marceau did not have Simone.

 “… you there? Mr. Valstad?”

“The vehicle had been driven through a fence. Was that intended?” he asked, his mind still clicking rapidly.

“Skid on the road indicates they lost control of the vehicle. We only got a glimpse of the scene before it was swept up from under us. Musta been ‘bout a baker’s dozen of them feds come swarmin up on us like locusts just twenty minutes after we got the…”

Leif placed the phone down next to him on the cracked leather bench seat of his father’s truck, Boden’s tinny voice still rambling through the weak reception, and pressed his fingertips to his grinning mouth. His daughter had killed her captor, he was certain of that. He wasn’t familiar with Kyun, but a seasoned hunter wouldn’t have entertained the natural hesitation to violence present in his brothers. The level of threat required for his darling girl to make such a reckless move implied that the weapon was made visible to her, a mistake on Kyun’s part that turned out to be fatal. His savage girl had attacked while Kyun was driving. Leif leaned his head back and closed his eyes, listening to the overtures of pride and relief lifting in the symphony of his mind. Beneath that music, the clicking metronome of thought processed a plan. He decided to search out Marceau to do
breakfast with him.

Light brought Simone out from a fever dream of dozens of hands pulling her down deep into the earth, but the engine hum and swaying of the car in motion lulled her back into that fitful rest until the light pulled her out again. This repeated, waking to the light and then being pulled down into dense darkness by those hands again and again, making her delirious mind forget there had ever been anything else to existence until one of those hands curled over her face. The gentle caress of its calloused fingertips on her cheek sparked memory and grounded her to the light this time. She blinked blearily in the golden sunshine of the morning to see Anders watching her, his beleaguered and ashen face close.

“Are you okay?” she whispered, the short question half-wheezed out of her dry and cracked throat.

She nodded then started to feel the pull of those hands again before her eyes even shut, but he was pulling her away from them and muttering Norwegian at her as he propped her to sit up with her back leaning against something cold and leather. It was then that she was able to comprehend her surroundings. She was in the trunk space of the SUV, the motel comforter wrapped around and under her. She looked into his eyes, noticing they were the exact shade of the open sky behind him as though it shown straight through him. He was bruised and exhausted and beautiful.

“Is it time for you to leave?” she whispered. She’d never noticed the lines in his forehead or at the edges of his eyes so pronounced before, the slight shift in his expression deepening them in something between contentment and sadness. Her heart wrenched at the likeness he held to her father in that concealed emotion and age but she couldn’t tell if she ached with longing or apprehension. Recent experience had taught her it was likely both.

“No,” he answered, that sad smile tugging wider.

He held a glass of water out to her and she had to use the meager strength in both of her arms to lift it to her mouth. Everything hurt but thirst was a powerful drive. She had to go slow with it, her battered throat threatening to choke with each swallow, and tried to ignore how he watched her with that intense stare. He was always so patient with her, but there was a heat in his eyes even while she was in this deathly condition. Being the focus of such heavy attention made her nervous, especially when she was this vulnerable, but this was Anders. He only ever wanted to help.

“Thank you,” she said more clearly now that her throat had been wetted.

Her head was clearer as well, though still throbbed with the fluff overstuffing her skull. A thin ringing sound whined in her ears and her body was shaking and weak. It occurred to her that she must have slipped further into sickness, shame following that knowledge at how burdensome and weak she was. It was an old shame, as old as the disappointment hidden in her mother’s gaze, motivating her to push herself harder to at least seem less sick than she felt. He caught her shoulders when she tried to push herself up, his unpracticed help at assisting the debilitated doing more harm by throwing off her already reeling center of balance. She had to work up the nerve to lean up and wrap her arms around his shoulders, encouraging his hold to go lower. When his hands went to her waist, his attempt at assistance crumbled under his seemingly endless impulse toward affection and he pulled her to him in an almost desperate embrace. Under the soft materials of their t-shirts and sweatpants, she could feel the hardened tension in the lean musculature of his body pressed against
her. Danger burned in the back of her mind. Something was wrong. These trees were familiar, the dirt road under them was the same as… She turned her head and saw her grandfather’s house, the wide oak front door open to the darkness within like a gaping maw. A cold chill ran through her fevered body.

“Anders… Anders, what have you done?” she asked, her voice shaking with the renewed trembling in her.

“Sshh, ssh, kjære,” he whispered. He reached behind her and she caught a glimpse of the revolver in his hand before he was hauling her up. Understanding what he intended was worse than the mindless fear of not knowing.

“No… no, no, no…” she panted as he carried her, limping with his bad leg up the steps. She began to weep as she pleaded, “Please, please don’t- You can’t go back, you were away from him! You’re supposed to go home! You’re supposed to leave!”

“Together,” he smiled, a grave expression that wasn’t at all comforting as it was intended.

“I can’t- I can’t protect you from him, I can’t! You have to turn back! He’s going to- to… Oh, God…”

She gagged on a sob, the cold of the water crawling up her esophagus but she kept it down just barely. The shadows beyond the doorway were thick with the curtains drawn, growing only darker as he carried her through the wide hallway. Each uneven step grew more muffled in her ringing ears as consciousness began to wane dangerously, but she had to stay lucid even in this mad fever dream. He laid her out on a couch in the parlor, nearly dropping her with how bending pained him, and sat heavily on the edge next to her. He set the gun on the coffee table and gripped the area above his wound, holding it tightly as he breathed heavily in pain, sweat glistening along his temple. She tried to sit up, tried not to look like she was going to snatch the weapon, but he pressed her back down with one wide hand on her chest.

“Rest,” he insisted, his voice as ragged and tired as he looked. He didn’t stop pressing her down, his fingers cold where the collar of her shirt dipped low to bare the skin below her collarbones. She felt sicker at the comfort his touch brought her even now.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

He looked at her, his weary expression hardening with resolve. She didn’t want his resolve. Resolve was for people attempting to accept a terrible decision they think is right. Whatever he thought he was doing by bringing them back to this house, back to her father, with a gun and steeled resolve, it was only a terrible decision.

“I love you,” he answered. His hand sat like a stone upon her chest.

Simone bit her lip until the sting of the split there throbbed in time with the ache in her chest. Ghosts stood in the archway behind Anders, but she couldn’t look at the headless woman or the blood-soaked man in fishing gear. Only this living, breathing man mattered and she had to prevent him from joining the death this family had wrought.

Her voice shook as she spoke. “I don’t… I don’t love you. Not like that. You’re my uncle, there’s just no… it’s impossible for me to feel that way about you. I can’t be with you. Ever.”

That terrible resolve didn’t falter, but his warmth did. “Stop.”

Her tears hit the dark blue velvet of the tufted couch with an audible sound, assuring her that the
asthmatic wheezing echoing up from the basement darkroom was only in her mind. In that same space, the pop of an old manual camera made her flinch.

“No,” she said, focusing on the bruise her father created along his cheekbone. “I don’t want to be with you; it’s sickening. What we’ve been doing is wrong, Anders.”

“Stop,” he growled through clenched teeth, twisting his body to lean over her and grasp the sides of her face.

She couldn’t look at how it pained him to hear this, so she shut her eyes and pretended her throat wasn’t closing around the sobs that threatened to wrack her as she spoke, “It’s been hurting us both and I can’t do it anymore. You need to leave. Get out. Get-!”

His mouth settling over hers cut her off in a kiss that felt too gentle for the forcefulness behind the intent. She grunted in effort to turn away from it, but he held her head still and tilted to offer her mouth more easily to him. He’d never done anything like this with her before. She pushed up against his chest, at first only to signal for him to stop, and then in earnest to push him away. Her pulse pounded in her ears and her panic began to rise. This wasn’t like him, but those were his thumbs stroking her cheeks and his lips pressing hers shut. Her breaths became short and quick through her nose, the pounding in her head worsening from rising fear stealing her oxygen. Guilt clenched her gut and drained her resistance. His hands moved to cradle her head after she stopped trying to twist away and his mouth slid more sensually over hers. She needed him to escape, but she wasn’t strong enough to lie to him. She leaned up into his kiss and slid her hands down his body, giving into this weakness for just a moment before jabbing her fingers into his stab wound.

He broke away, grimacing and gasping in pain, and she pushed him as she lunged for the gun. Her body was weak and disjointed like a newborn fawn and she stumbled away as fast as her rubbery legs could carry her, making it only a few paces before he slammed into her back. She shrieked as they both fell in a tumble, the revolver clattering and sliding away from them into the hallway. He pinned her down when she struggled to get out from under him, restraining her arms behind her and straddling over her ass.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry…” he muttered, squeezing her jerking wrists together with one hand. Her hip bones ached where his weight mashed them into the oriental rug.

The gun lay between the gray feet of the decapitated woman as she stood over it. Water flooded into the house, tepid and slow as oil, rising quickly over Simone’s nose and mouth. This was all a hallucination, she reminded herself even as she held her breath. She wanted so badly to wake up in a motel room hours away from there with all her uncles bickering in Norwegian. Her lungs burned for air but she couldn’t bring herself to breathe in that water, phantom or not. Her struggles became jerky and convulsive, static humming loud in her mind and darkness narrowing her vision. They had to get out. She had to find a way. She heard Anders calling her name and felt him turning her body as unconsciousness took her again, those many hands coming up out of the water to drag her down into the dense earth.

There were dozens of different capsules and tablets, liquids and powders, syrups and blotter papers in that pack. Anders didn’t know which would help pull Simone out of withdrawal, but he couldn’t wait for Leif to show up and administer it. She had seized again, her body jerking and shivering in his arms as he cradled her to keep her from knocking against the floor, and she was now burning to the touch. The pack was open on the coffee table and she laid on the couch once more, wavering
between unconsciousness and something near it, sweating and muttering incoherently. She was only
getting worse. He had to decide.

“God help me,” he murmured, picking three of the most plentiful pills.

He propped up her head in his lap and prayed, his eyes squeezed shut and the pills pressed between
his clasped hands. This was foolish, he knew he could very likely hurt her even more, but he
couldn’t let her go on like this. He had to do something. So, he prayed, willing them to help her. His
fingers shook as they pried her mouth open and placed them on her tongue. When she didn’t
swallow, he pursed his lips together to gather his resolve before putting his hand over her mouth and
pinching her nostrils closed. If it worked on his dogs, it might get her to swallow reflexively. He
waited, holding his breath with her, watching for her throat to bob. Her eyes moved rapidly under
her closed lids. His own lungs began to ache. She twitched. He burned. Her head began to jerk and
then, thankfully, she began to swallow. He released her face and she drew in a rattling breath as he
gasped to catch his.

“Work,” he whispered, putting all his will and hope into the command.

He ran his fingers through her hair as he waited. There was no working phone in this house he could
use to call an ambulance if he had chosen incorrectly. As her breaths relaxed from the ragged panting
and her shaking reduced, he dared to be hopeful. Minutes dragged by. He watched, checking the
pulse point at her neck and the steady rhythm of her breaths under her shirt perhaps too frequently,
but he needed the reassurance. He glanced to the pistol, trying not to wonder what he would do if
she slipped away. If he’d killed her. She had to get better.

The watch on her wrist let him know that a half hour had passed by the time she seemed to relax into
a more natural sleep. The next time he looked at her watch, it had stopped. Frowning, he took it off
her wrist and wound it. There was something odd in the construction of the timepiece. Carefully, he
pried his fingernail into a slight notch under the face and the back of the watch popped off. It landed
on her neck, right over the line of stitches holding her skin together, and he gingerly picked it up.
There were three sets of numbers and a strange symbol written in neat, angular pen. He stared at that
symbol, trying to remember where he had seen it before. A knock on the front door tore him out of
his pondering and he popped the back onto the watch and set it on the table before maneuvering off
the couch. Whoever it was knocked again as he limped the short distance to the door, the revolver
ready in his hand with the hammer pulled back. Peering through the peephole, he didn’t recognize
the two men in suits standing on the patio. He waited for them to leave.

“Leif Valstad, this is FBI special agent Thompson, I have some questions for you!” one of them
yelled, pounding again on the thick oak.

Anders considered letting them in. If they were really who they said they were, they might help
protect him and Simone from Leif. Watching them through the peephole, he was about to ask them
to show their badges when he flinched at a loud bang from outside and saw one of the men go down
in a splash of blood from his neck. Anders’ pounding heart leaped into his throat when another shot
rang out and the other agent’s forehead cracked open in a splatter of gore before he could react to his
partner’s death. Anders stumbled back from the door, rushing back into the parlor, but Simone was
gone.

“Fuck,” he breathed, backing away from the empty couch. The watch was missing from the coffee
table as well. “Fuck. Fuck! Simone!”

He stumbled quickly down the hall, adrenaline numbing the pain in his leg, as he called for her. He’d
seen three men shot to death in the last two days. He’d been beaten, drugged, and forced to do an
unspeakable act. This had to stop. They had to get out of this country. He had wanted to threaten
Leif into giving him Simone’s passport and papers at gunpoint before leaving, but seeing those men shot dead fled any intention of that in him. Whoever was out there didn’t hesitate to pull the trigger, swiftly and accurately, on two federal agents. Anders had never fired a gun in his life. A sound caught his attention and he nearly ran to it, finding the door to the bathroom locked as the noise of pouring water echoed inside.

“Simone?” he called, trying the knob and knocking. He could hear the faint sound of her voice within and knocked again. “Simone, open please!”

Bracing himself, he slammed his shoulder into the door, the antique lock breaking on the first blow and sending him tripping into the bathroom. He caught himself on the counter, righting to see Simone bathing in the tub as it filled with steaming water. She had her bare back to him, not seeming to be aware of his intrusion into the room as she soaped her body and sang softly to herself.

“Simone, what… we have need to leave!” he grimaced, limping towards her.

He tried to grab her shoulder but she jerked out of his grasp, sinking her lathered body under the rising water. He sat on the edge of the tub to take his weight off his injury, still not feeling as much pain as he should yet knowing it would be much worse later, and reached into the water. When his hands grabbed her narrow rib cage, she shot out and pulled him in. He slipped off the edge and landed in the tub, splashing as he failed to escape her surprisingly strong hold.

“Agh, fuck, what the fuck! No, we have to- need to go! Simone, let me go!” he said, trying to clutch the sides of the tub to pull himself out.

“Be quiet and still,” she muttered as she flipped over to straddle his front and pushed him down.

The water rushed over his face, hot and smelling of berries and rose, and he began to desperately push at her. She held him down by his throat and he looked up at her blurry image through the water, wondering why she was doing this and why he was unable to push her off him. The strength with which she held him under wasn’t natural. With a shock of horror, it occurred to him that she might drown him. His hands pressed up onto her slippery skin wherever they could grab as desperation filled him. The panic and fruitless exertion depleted his oxygen within seconds, the burn in his lungs expanding through his muscles and tingling in his mind unpleasantly. He clawed at her, not wanting to hurt her but needing her to stop as spots danced behind his eyes and a disconcerting heaviness began to drain his strength. Just before those spots completely overtook his vision, she vanished off him and he pushed himself up to gasp in gouts of air. His lungs ached as he panted, his body exhausted and buzzing, and it took several breaths before he was able see Leif clearly as he stood clutching a naked and sopping wet Simone in a tight embrace. Mortal panic returned to Anders in a heated flash, but Leif didn’t even seem to notice him as he hugged Simone. When his brother finally glanced at him, Leif smiled.

“You have my gratitude for bringing me back my darling girl,” Leif said, moving his arm from the embrace and leveling the barrel of a gun at him.
Chapter 32

Henrik shouldn’t have been surprised that his now apparently insane baby brother had somehow sneaked out in the early morning with their niece, the gun, the car, and half the cash. He shouldn’t have been surprised at that after walking into the motel room yesterday to find them both bare but for the sweat of their sin. He shouldn’t have been surprised after Anders had said that he was going to go to Leif, a prospect so clearly insane that neither he nor Vidar had assumed it might have been meant literally. But he was surprised that the lunatic had actually done it. He was also furious at himself for not kicking his ass for perving on their vulnerable niece. Life had been trying so hard to teach Henrik that words and decency were just smoke and shadows in the face of all this madness, but he had refused to learn.

“I’m calling the cops,” Henrik announced.

Vidar jerked out of his pensive and angry silence at that. “Fuck all, you’re not! You want to be stuck in this country forever?”

“Anders is going back to Leif, specifically to do something impossibly stupid,” Henrik frowned. “He’s endangering himself and Simone. I can’t let that happen.”

“We don’t know that,” Vidar countered. “Maybe they’re headed towards Las Vegas to get married by an Elvis impersonator.”

Henrik slowly turned his incredulous stare toward him, unable to comprehend how the man could be so flippant while their baby brother and only niece were in danger. “Didn’t you hear him last night?”

“Sure, I heard him, dick meat. I just think he’s earned the right to kill that psycho son of a whore. Someone has to do it. Neither of us wants to get close enough and Simone won’t ever say no to daddy dearest, so it’s down to sweet baby Anders.”

“Are you listening to yourself right now? You’ve fucking lost it, Vid. I didn’t want to say anything, but you’re out of your mind.”

Vidar shrugged in response. Henrik picked up the corded phone from the nightstand and dialed 911, only to be met with dead air. He tried again, then tried dialing an extra 9, then gave up with a huff as he slammed the receiver down. Vidar watched him in blatant amusement from where he sat cross-legged on the bed Anders was supposed to be in.

“You’re better off not interfering!” Vidar grinned at him as Henrik marched toward the door.

Henrik ignored his deranged brother’s patronizing tone with a sneer. If he had to be the only sane one in the family, then so be it. He swung open the door to find two men standing just outside it. Henrik flinched back, fear gripping him immediately and freezing him in place.

“Good morning,” the brown-haired man smiled at him. Henrik grit his teeth at the motion of him reaching into his coat, grimacing in the inevitability of being shot. When the bullet didn’t come, he looked at the badge the man held up to him. FBI. “I’m special agent Carter Thompson and this is detective Murphy. We were hoping to ask you a few questions. Do you mind stepping outside for just a moment of your time, or would you like to invite us inside?”

Henrik’s mind worked to unscramble the English, but his panic was not subsiding. His throat wouldn’t cooperate until he yelled, “Vidar, talk to them!”
“Hmm… No, I think not,” his younger brother responded lazily.

“Could you just fucking do it, you sack of dog shit!” Henrik growled.

“What do you speak English?” Agent Thompson asked.

“Yes! Ah, yes, a little,” Henrik stammered loudly. He took a deep calming breath, trying to shake off the anxiety that refused to leave him. It did not. “How… how I can help you today?”

“Uh… well, we were looking for a white Mercedes SUV with Maryland plates. Have you seen one parked around here lately?”

Henrik stared blankly at the Americans. He should have been able to understand that, he knew the English, but his scrambled mind couldn’t translate anything. He turned and gave his brother a pleading look. Vidar waved at him and smiled.

“We could have an interpreter call you,” Thompson offered.

“No! No, I can speak,” Henrik hurriedly said. He could. He could do this. He focused on the American and slowly said, “We are seeing car, yes.”

“And was this man the driver?” the agent asked, pulling a photo of Edward Kyun out from his pocket.

Henrik looked away from the photo quickly, nausea twisting his gut as the image of Kyun’s body leaning out the car door with his brains leaking into the grass flashed in his mind. “No.”

“Leif Valstad did yesterday take us here in the car, go away, and today retrieve of the car,” Vidar said. Henrik nearly leaped out of his skin at how his brother had sneaked up beside him, but he was immediately thankful. “Edward did give us ride from funeral. He is with Leif now. You are wanting address of Leif?”

The two Americans turned to each other and shared a smile before the quiet Murphy said, “Yes, yes, we would.”

Henrik shared a smile with his brother, as well. He recognized that Vidar, the quick-witted fox, had both given reasonable doubt to their involvement in the murder of Kyun as well as shifted both the blame and police interest to Leif in just a few short statements. They just might be safe from the madman and Anders might be rescued from whatever violence he had foolheartedly charged towards. Henrik clapped his large hand on Vidar’s narrow shoulder and relaxed with the hope that this was going to work out.

Leif shut the door to the Kyun’s SUV with the fed and the cop in the backseat, their slack-jawed heads lulled backward and staining the leather headrests of the luxury vehicle. He wiped his hands on his slacks as he walked back toward the house, his soaring spirits putting a spring in his step and a smile on his blood-splattered face. His hands still ached from Marceau’s face crunching under his knuckles and then digging up Renfro’s corpse, but it was the good pain of a hard day’s work. For the first time in a while, Leif found a heightened gratification in this necessary violence, nearly fulfilling his bloodlust for now. This glorious day might sustain him for months. Walking down the hall, he caught the scent of his daughter nearby and the sweet bath oil wafting from further down. Instantly, the tension in his muscles relaxed in a wave of relief. She was here. The symphony inside him
swelled in victorious fanfare; a playful and uplifting Schubert to enhance his likewise mood.

The sound of splashing from the bathroom announced her presence to him before he turned to the open door and saw his Simone bathing in the tub, but he wasn’t prepared for the unexpected rush of emotion upon seeing her. There was no meditative technique that could have dulled the impact of finding his precious child alive, her body bared to him so whole and beautiful. He stepped toward her without thinking, his body compelled by the need to touch her, and he didn’t notice that she was pressing down on Anders beneath her until he was nearly upon her. He paused, observing the familiar way she held Anders beneath the rising water with such intense focus as he pushed and clawed at her with increasing frenzy. Fate had not so much bestowed him the privilege of witnessing this pivotal event as it had brought him here to correct it. She was only recreating a previous kill, caught in a flashback of a memory he had buried deep in her subconscious, and she would not remember this moment for the splendor that it was. She had consciously and willingly taken a life; there was no use or place for these dissociative states now that she was a hunter with her own willpower and agency. It was time to begin teaching her to embrace her nature now that it had bloomed.

He reached out to her, tracing the trembling and flexing muscles along her bruised back, feeling the life he had created and cultivated. His plans had gone so awry but here they were: father and daughter, progenitor and progeny, master and disciple, more prepared than he had thought to begin the next phase in their life together. The needle sunk into her neck and fed the sedative into her jugular just in case, but his darling girl didn’t even flinch from the sting. She did not resist him as he pulled her out of the bathtub either and her body easily followed his prompts to embrace him as he drew her dripping form close. He indulged in the feel of her shaking form pressed to him, the scented bathwater soaking through his slacks and shirt as she wrapped her arms tightly around his middle beneath his jacket. Ignoring the coughing and gasping from Anders as his lungs fought to recover lost oxygen, he dipped low and tilted her chin up to kiss her. The inside of her mouth was hot and tasted of fever; his daughter was sick. An unusual fatherly instinct commanded him to comfort and protect her and he enticed her tongue into reciprocating his kiss, soothing them both through this familiar affection. She relaxed in his arms, that murderous intent draining out of her tensed muscles as he coaxed her from of that flashback and into the void of the mild sedative. When he heard Anders’ panting shift from necessity to panic, he took the gun out from under his jacket and gave his daughter one more squeeze before aiming it at him.

“You have my gratitude for bringing me back my darling girl,” he said, meaning every word.

His brother stared at him, frozen in wide-eyed terror, as Simone nuzzled his chest in animalistic affection. He stroked the inward curve of her waist to calm her but that only seemed to rile her further as she brought her hands to his sides and lethargically clawed at his torso. He glanced at her, seeing the adoration and need she practically radiated as she stared up at him with bleary and widely-dilated pupils, and reengaged the safety on his father’s old Glock 21. They had some time before anyone would come looking for the fed or the cop; there was no need to rush this. They could have some fun before they had to work. He leaned over and closed the taps on the faucet, pretending not to notice when Anders flinched away from his approach.

“So, you have survived Edward Kyun. Were our other brothers so lucky?” he asked. His brother only nodded, confusion mixing into his fear at this line of questioning. Leif smiled. “I see they did not come with you. Were you intending to kill me alone, spare them the horror in this good deed to an undeserving world?”

“I’m not a murderer like you,” Anders spat.

“A murderer like Simone, you mean?” Leif smirked at how his brother’s brow twitched at that.
There’s the rub. He lowered his weapon, not needing to keep it aimed on him with how quickly he’d be able to draw it if need be, and his brother was well-behaved enough not to move at this first opportunity. “Did you watch as your dear niece murdered a man at pointblank? Tell me, did she look him in the eyes as she took his life?”

Anders glanced at Simone and Leif observed his reactions carefully. Sorrow. Pity. Regret. Longing. His brother looked away from her before nodding. Denial. That’s not unexpected; most people refuse to see what they don’t want to see in those they love. Leif could make use of him with that. He tapped the revolver on the floor with his foot and tilted his head curiously.

“If not to kill me, then why did you come back here with a gun?”

“Simone needed medicine.”

She looked at Anders when she heard her name. Leif placed his hand on her cheek and turned her to face him again as he said, “How selfless and noble of you. Did you fuck her before or after she committed murder yesterday?” Anders’ lip twitched, wanting to curl into a snarl, and Leif nearly laughed at his transparency. He didn’t need full use of his observational skills to dissect this man’s simple desires. “It doesn’t bother you as much as you want it to. None of this does. You’ve been ashamed at your lack of shame since this started, made all the worse by how present your morals are each time they are confronted and remain far too unbothered. You don’t have to regard it in any way than you already do, you know. How immoral is incest if it means protecting those you care about? It’s not so black and white now, is it? I hate to say this, but we’re quite alike. The only difference is that I’ve been forced to embrace what I am while you have been allowed to deny it your whole life. Tell me the truth: Do you find nourishment in the idea of taking a life?”

“No,” Simone answered.

Both Leif and Anders looked at her in surprise. She couldn’t have responded to him. She didn’t understand Norwegian and even if she did, her ability to comprehend anything beyond a simple command was severely limited if she was at all present in these dissociative states. He kissed her burning forehead and pinched her cheek lovingly before turning his attention once more to his youngest brother, changing tactics.

“If you wish to protect Simone from the fatal consequences of her crimes, then there is something we will need your cooperation with,” he said, then added, “Aside from not attempting to murder me quite yet.”

Anders’ wary tension twisted into a suspicious frown. “What is it?”

“Leave. Don’t say anything to anyone about what has happened here. Nothing unusual occurred, everyone was normal. You had no idea about any murderers within the family and, should it ever be brought up, you will deny any questions that I was ever anything but fatherly toward Simone. Tell our brothers to do the same and I will not come for any of you.”

“Leif, you murdered an FBI agent. You’re not going to get away with this.”

“No, I’m not.”

Anders watched him, his brow creasing further the only tell that he was thinking on how to interpret that before his expression darkened. “She’s not going with you.”

“The rental car is still parked outside, the keys are in the ignition,” Leif continued, ignoring his
brother’s rudeness. He picked up the revolver from the wet floor, tucking it under his belt as he spoke. “Your things are already packed upstairs. Take them, as well as Henrik and Vidar’s suitcases.”

“I’m not leaving without her!”

Leif leveled a doubtful frown at him. “She doesn’t belong to you, Anders. You’re not her master. If you want a new pet, pick up another dog.” He unholstered the Glock for emphasis, knowing how stubborn his brothers all were. “Now, if you would be so kind…”

The sound of wind rustling through the trees woke Simone with a short gasp and she opened her eyes to find herself facing the sky. Lighter branches swayed and leaves quivered in the cold breeze. She knew the exact scrape of the brush to create those cirrus clouds drifting slowly in the blue, blending out the bottom to leave the sun-tipped whites crisp and bright. Taint the white with just a little red to diffuse it, changing into degrees of lavender and gray to give the impression of shadow and dimension as it buffers out into the blue. Her fingers twitched with the motion of the brush, feeling the drag of the bristles across the canvas before her nails scraped the fibers of cloth. Blankets were spread out both above and beneath her, protecting her from the chill and the long green grasses beneath, but a solid presence beside her provided warmth to the pocket of fabric she laid in. The apparition of the canvas and brush vanished when she turned her head and was met with her father’s face, so near that he filled her field of vision and she could see the cracks of amber and blue behind the shattered effect of his irises.

“Is this a dream?” she whispered.

The arm he’d laid across her slid up her body from under the blanket to cup her cheek before he answered, “Not anymore.”

That rough, dark pitch of his voice alone made him seem so different from the man she’d grown up with. He watched her without any mask; his layers of disguise fully peeled away to reveal this stranger she was just beginning to know. It felt dangerous to be so close to him while he was this raw, as though they risked blending together without anything separating them, but she wasn’t afraid. Her sense of self had all but dissolved, anyway. A bleak sort of freedom came with that acceptance, making it easier to feel the obsessive love in that raw core of him. It was a thing that burned and consumed, but she had craved nothing more fervently than love from him her whole life. As he pressed his lips to hers, it felt as though she was trying to swallow the sun through his kiss. She tasted his heat and his heady essence as he moved to loom over her and delved his thick tongue into her mouth. He didn’t close his eyes as he kissed, opting to watch her as her body began to warm and tingle in response to his hunger. She shivered from how vulnerable that made her feel.

His fingers curled and his nails dragged lightly down her face as he pulled away and smiled, “I’d thought I had lost you, but you came back to me.”

“I can’t leave you,” she responded.

His smile grew into a grin and he leaned down to kiss her again. She didn’t want to correct his interpretation of that statement. Thinking of her uncles’ safety, her heart clenched in the first wave of fear she’d felt since waking. She couldn’t remember when it was she’d last seen them. She couldn’t remember how she’d gotten here. Leif moaned into her mouth as though he could taste her fear and found carnal enjoyment in it while his hands fondled her bare thighs to spread them open. His
caresses along her thighs as he maneuvered his much larger body between them stirred that encompassing lust in her and muddled her thoughts as she scrambled to remember. She was in the motel room with Anders. No, she was sharing a room with Vidar. She’d gone outside to get some air and then there was a wide hole in her memory, filled with terrible nightmares.

Leif’s mouth traveled down her jaw and neck, nipping at her and making her want to squirm with each spike of exhilarating desire the gentle scrape of teeth provoked in her. When his head disappeared under the blanket and she felt his wet mouth and sharp teeth open over the still-healing bruise around her nipple, her back arched and she gasped at the shock of pleasure melding with the pain. His thumbs just barely brushed her vagina as he kneaded her inner thighs, making her wriggle just to increase that brief contact. His dark chuckle at her eagerness brought her out of her frenzied trance as he worked her body. There wasn’t anything she could do to fight it, but the shame hung heavy over her just the same. His tongue trailed down her abdomen, erupting goosebumps across her crawling flesh at the slick sensation of it gliding wetly along that vulnerable plain of her belly. Her breath caught in a hitch and then exhaled in a trembling moan when that tongue slid lightly over her clit and dipped into her. He swirled his tongue in her slowly, as though savoring it, and the deep rumble of his groan made her mouth fall open in a chorus of breathy gasps as her hands ran through his sleek hair. How often he’d violated her body and the violence he’d wreaked upon his family were far from her mind as his tongue stroked her towards orgasm, a betrayal of her biology that she could now only expect he’d make use of whenever he’d see fit.

“Papa…” she whimpered. Her legs were shaking and her muscles tensed in the effort of chasing her climax, but she needed more. He was being far too gentle on purpose. “Papa, please…”

“Hmm?” he hummed, the sound vibrating against her and making her toes curl.

The blue sky stretched on bright and wide above her, those feathery clouds rippling across it like the foamy crests of waves as the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves mimicked the sound of the sea. The slide of his lips languidly curling around her clit tilted her mind in a frenzy of tormented pleasure and she believed in madness that she would fall into that ocean above her. The impression of drowning as orgasm crashed down on her body and mind was met without fear of dying, but only anticipation of it. She couldn’t let herself die yet. He held her trembling thighs in a bruising grip as she cried out and tried to twist away from him, the suddenness of his effort focused on that sensitive concentration of nerves lifting her too high too quickly. Her cries cracked into a sob and she tried to squirm away but his grip on her only tightened. She tried to kick and he growled, his teeth rubbing against her and making her freeze at the threat of being bitten. The blanket was thrown off her when he sat up and pulled her beneath him as he unbuckled his belt one-handed, the other gripped around her neck. He squeezed and her stitches pulled dangerously when she tried to look down to see what he was doing, so she had no choice but to continue directing her panicked stare towards that terrifying sea. She winced as he slid into her, his rough entry burning the injury inside her as he pumped into her deep and hard. She winced as he slid into her, his rough entry burning the injury inside her as he pumped into her slickened cunt and she whimpered from the overwhelming sensation of being filled with him. He leaned forward, covering her view of that sea above her, and she felt as though a rip current dragged her deep under the waves as he kissed her and fucked her to the hilt. She was drowning in her father’s warped love as he invaded her body.

“We’re leaving soon,” he said, his voice husky and strained as his hips drove his cock deep and hard into her. “To where we can be together as we should be. Ahh… Fuck, darling girl…”

“What are you…” she started to ask, but she was cut off in a gasp when his hand left her neck to grab her ankles and pull her legs open wider. The angle allowed him in deeper and she nearly yelped with each thrust mashing his tip against her abused cervix.

“Marceau attempted to have you kidnapped by Kyun as leverage,” he explained, not faltering in his
rhythm even as sweat began to bead and drip down his face. She was struggling just to keep from falling apart, barely able to listen above the turmoil and delirium his sex submerged her into. His hands greedily fondled and groped her body as he continued, “He wanted to take the network out of the shadows, the fool. I don’t value the world enough to want to change it, but you, oh, I would burn the world to ash for you. You did so well against him, my sweet little monster…”

Her head swam with this barely intelligible information that stitched thought together in her clouded mind. The man she’d killed wasn’t her father’s friend or hire, he was his enemy. A strange sort of comfort came with this revelation that she carefully identified as relief that Leif wasn’t actively trying to murder his family. She would not allow herself to feel gratification in taking a life even if it was one that had threatened her and her loved ones. She searched herself and found that well of tar marked as murder to be still as black and bitter within her, as it should always be. But vengeance and protection carried much more honeyed connotations than murder.

“I took a life,” she reminded herself aloud, her voice tight and high with tears and breathless with sex. “I killed him. I’m a murderer.”

Leif’s hands slid up to cup her cheeks and he pulled her up into a kiss that nearly felt reassuring until he whispered, “Yes. And we have so many more to kill.”

Despair burst past that thin dam of nihilism that had kept her emotions at bay and she threw her arms around his neck as she sobbed. He held her to him tightly, pulling her into his lap and fucking into her as she wept. His hands grasping her hips rocked her to a steady rhythm, pulling shivering sighs and gasps from her along with her sobs and he whispered a stream of both comforting words and filth into her ear. She pressed her face into the crook of his neck, her tears soaking into his shirt collar, and focused on the soothing tone of his voice and the warmth of his body. She couldn’t ignore the pleasure that thrummed through her with each slide of his cock into her throbbing cunt, but she could pretend this was normal. This could be a way fathers comforted their daughters.

“Daddy…” she moaned, rocking against him more fervently as her pleasure climbed. The pressure on her clit in this sitting position was coaxing another climax for her, helped along by the deep stretch of his cock filling her almost painfully even in these gentler thrusts.

“It’s all right, darling, I’ve got you,” he whispered. He groaned low, his cock twitching in her and making her hips stutter with the sensation. “Hmm… You feel so good, sweetheart… You’re going to come again, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Papa,” she breathed.

“Good girl… Such a good girl…”

He kissed her cheek, a gesture so chaste and sweet that it caused a hollow ache in her chest. The way he was fucking her, while still exerting his power and dominance, felt almost caring. With a deep revulsion, she realized this was a reward for murder. This soothing tenderness, this focus on her pleasure, all for a job well done in killing that man. This couldn’t be what her life would become. He could train her to his will, he’d been doing that her entire life without her awareness until recently, but she had to stop this. She moved to get away from Leif, but his hold on her kept her anchored firmly on his cock and he thrusted into her harshly as she tried harder to escape. The pure power in his muscular frame made her quiver in the drive to submit to him, but she couldn’t let him think he could condition her this way.

“I’m not a killer,” she said, trying to be firm but it came out weak and shaking. She was dangerously close to orgasm and she could feel him holding his back in the way he panted against her.
“You can’t resist your nature,” he nearly growled out. His intense stare was focused on her face, his tense mouth pulled back into a halfway snarl to show sharp teeth as he spoke and fucked her harder. “You were given a gift and it compels you to use it. Embrace it or let it consume you, but it will not be reduced by your denial. Come for me, darling.”

“No, I-”

Her words jammed in her throat when he pressed her hips down on him hard and growled out his climax, the sensation of his cock swelling and throbbing deep inside her throwing her forcibly into her own orgasm. Whatever she was thinking was blanked out completely by the white light that flashed across her vision and whatever she was saying came out in a wordless moan nearing a scream as her climax seemed to only climb with each throb. That animalistic fog she’d been fighting off this entire time descended over her mind fully and she clutched to him with fingers curled into claws. His teeth sunk into those same grooves they’d made between her neck and shoulder, reopening and deepening them as he bit her savagely. She howled in pain but her hips still rocked against him, drawing out her pleasure from her father’s cock. Wet lines of blood dripped down her chest and back from what he missed as he sucked from the wound. This was his raw self, tearing through and devouring her. As she came down from her high, panting and whimpering in both agony and ecstasy as she leaned limply against him, a vivid image of Goya’s deranged depiction of Saturn stuck in her mind. Isolating the painting from the myth, she wondered if it was madness that drove the figure in that painting to devour his child or if it was the devouring that drove him further into madness. Considering the myth, she wondered if it was her role to overthrow him.
Chapter 33

Anders drove the rental car aimlessly for what felt like days, but the clock on the console had told him it had only been two hours by the time he parked the rental car behind some bushes several yards away from the end of the driveway. It wasn’t the best camouflage, but he didn’t want the car too far away in case he needed to run for it. Both the truck and the SUV were gone, making him wonder how they were driven off the property when he hadn’t seen either on the driveway or the road at any point. Regardless, he approached the house from the side that had fewer windows just in case, wishing he had worn something less noticeable than a stupid yellow shirt that was wet and freezing. He should have taken the time to change in the car. He didn’t seem capable of thinking very far ahead when he knew Simone was once more in the possession of that psychopath.

Considering the bulk of his recent actions, he seemed plainly incapable of thinking as much as he should and he wondered if perhaps he had sustained a concussion or if he really was this stupid all along. He’d delivered her right to him, pumped up on frantic desperation. Any harm that madman brought her, he may as well have dealt to her himself. The key to the backdoor was still beneath a loose brick under the patio, just as his hazy memory had recalled from childhood summers. At least some of his brain was still functioning.

The house was deathly still and quiet, but he still stepped carefully, checking every room and listening for any sign of either Leif or Simone. The pack of medicines was still open on the coffee table in the parlor and he picked up a small brown bottle clearly marked as morphine sulfate. He held the bottle to the light, looking at the remaining liquid and wondering with a sick twist of his gut how many times Leif had used it to turn Simone into his drugged up little plaything. Even after having been on the receiving end of his violent madness and having seen him murder in cold blood, Anders still couldn’t fathom how a man could purposefully engineer insanity in his own daughter. He couldn’t understand the level of inhumanity that went into carrying that out on anyone, but to his own child was something that went beyond horrible.

Anders had to push down the rage that quickened his breath and trembled in his hands. If she was his, if Simone would accept him as her father, he would do everything in his power to enable her to feel safe and happy again. It should have been strange to consider her in that familial role, but he had found that limiting their dynamic to just one facet was unfitting. It wasn’t immoral if it was out of love. He wasn’t like Leif. She simply belonged with him and he was going to do whatever it took to ensure that would happen. He filled one of the thin syringes to the top with morphine and capped the needle to take with him.

Finding the first level to be completely unoccupied, he ascended the stairs slowly, grimacing with the pain in his leg and the noise of every creak at each step. He pulled out the needle to be ready after the third step groaned loud enough to echo down the wide hallway, but made it all the way to the second floor without incident. Leif very well may have carried her off elsewhere, a prospect that Anders couldn’t decide was lucky or not. The presence of his drug collection still there helped allay the fear that the maniac had already fled, though. Leif would return and this time, Anders would have the benefit of surprise. It was his only hope against him.

He was about to walk into Leif’s room to wait for him when he noticed the door to Einar’s home office open. That door had been locked for as far back as he could recall. Keeping alert for any sounds of his brother’s return, he gave into his curiosity and stepped inside. The room was small and narrow, everything inside covered in dust-grayed white sheets and the tall window at the end had been taped over with paper. He flicked on the light only to have the bulb burst in a flash.

“Shit,” he murmured.
There was a flashlight in Einar’s bedroom. He’d always kept one in his nightstand, frequently
retrieving it to lend to Anders until he’d got over his childhood fear of the dark. The bedroom still
had a faint odor of rot, only detectable thanks to the family curse of an overactive olfactory sense, but
the lingering presence of death made him want to retrieve the light quickly. In his haste, he dropped
the flashlight and muttered another curse when it rolled under the nightstand. With a considerable
pain to his wounded thigh, he knelt to the floor and felt around for it, but his hand blindly groped
something larger and oddly shaped. Curious, he slid out a corded phone and when he picked up the
receiver, he was shocked that it had a dial tone. He should call the police, tell them everything and let
them take over hunting for the madman, but a morbid curiosity overcame him first. Before he lost his
nerve, he hit the redial button and held his breath as the other line rang and a tinny, honking voice
came through.

“Mr. Valstad, I was about to call your cell. We just got some good news and some pretty fuckin’ bad
news. Good news is we found that Mercedes. Bad news is it was lit up like the fourth of fuckin’ July
with three stiffs and some poor sonovabitch unlucky enough to survive the fire. Still no sign of your
kid but that’s probably in the good news category from the looks of things right now. Look, I don’t
know what the hell you folks got yourselves mixed up in, but the F B fuckin I are getting pretty
squirrelly about why I’ve had my boys lookin’ out for that fuckin’ car. I don’t know how much longer
I can keep them feds off your trail, sir, so you better start tellin’ me what the hell you brought into my
town.”

Anders held the phone away from his ear as he worked to sift out the unfamiliar American
colloquialisms from the words he knew. His rusty English had improved vastly over the past few
days. He nearly dropped the phone when it clicked in his mind. He couldn’t fathom why Leif would
taunt the FBI, especially in such a startlingly provocative and brazen way, but he couldn’t understand
much of what his insane brother did.

“… Valstad? You there? Hello?”

Anders gently hung up the phone, feeling all at once sick with this information. Adding this to the list
of horrors he knew Leif to be capable of and, worse, knowing that he had people other than Kyun to
aid him in those horrible acts was too disturbing for him to fully comprehend at that moment. The
terrors that had surrounded him without him knowing seemed ceaseless; the world was a far darker
place than he had known it to be just a week prior. The syringe in the pocket of his sweatpants
reminded him of how far he had fallen from his previous view of himself as well, but this would be
different than the murders Leif had committed. He wasn’t like Leif. Anders was only protecting his
beloved. He hesitated as his hand rested on the phone, reconsidering the choice to call the police. If
Leif suspected the cops were anywhere around, he wouldn’t return to the house. He intuitively knew
that when Leif ran, no one would find him or Simone again. Anders couldn’t risk losing her. He slid
the phone back under the nightstand and left the flashlight, entirely forgetting his previous curiosity
of the office.

If Leif were the type of hunter who collected trophies, he would have liked to have kept Marceau’s
garish signet ring that bore his family’s crest. He would have collected them from each of the
remaining Marceaus as he hunted them down one by one and then fashioned them into napkin rings
to set out at dinner parties. Carrying his nude daughter over the threshold of his father’s house like a
bride or a fresh slaughter, he grinned at the amusing idea. However, the authorities were probably
still carving Marceau’s melted fat from the upholstery of the charred Mercedes he’d left burning in
front of the morgue Kyun currently resided in, removing the temptation to retrieve that ring. Now
that he had burned him, Leif knew he had been added to the network’s burn list, but he was glad to be finally free of their demands. The enterprising and artful Marceau was certainly not the only one who believed the Valstad bloodline was too tainted with insanity to be left to their liberty, after all. They were not exactly wrong. Leif had been entertaining the idea of going rogue since his initiation and to have finally absconded their restrictions was indeed as freeing as he’d often fantasized. He’d long since known they needed him far more than he needed their resources or protection, anyway. He stroked his daughter’s back and sighed in the bliss of vengeance and victory, looking forward to dismantling the order he and his ancestors had helped uphold for well over two hundred years. The world felt fresh and ripe for him and his precious disciple.

He placed Simone on her unsteady feet and held her to him in a tighter embrace, wiping her tears away as he asked, “Where would you like to go, Simone?”

“Home,” she answered, her voice thick and cracked with sorrow.

“Your home is with me, darling girl,” he smiled. It felt so easy to be open and natural with her now. There was no reason to hold back or disguise himself anymore. Every expectation that he should produce an heir suitable to their standards had been vanquished and he was now free to condition her only to his desires. “We can go anywhere you’d like that we won’t be recognized. Fiji and Tahiti have lovely beaches. I would love to watch you lose yourself in the Louvre and the Uffizi. We’ll go to them all, just tell me where you’d like to go first.”

“I want to go back to LA,” she said, her words muffled as she buried her face into his chest through his unbuttoned shirt. “I want things to be like how they were before.”

He loved how she sought comfort in him even when he was the cause of her pain. He’d seen the same behavior in infant mammals whose mothers had rejected them, reaching and crying out to them even as their need was rebuked with fatal aggression. Usually seeing something so helpless inspired an impulse in him to crush such a creature, but that aspect in his daughter was a thing he’d crafted in her early on and adored in her now. He nuzzled her lovingly, closing his eyes to indulge in her devotion as he reinforced this behavior. No matter how much he hurt her or how hard he drove her, she would never turn that hereditary instinct to kill on him. She loved him as indefinitely as he’d designed her to.

“There’s a boat on the coast of Maine that can take us anywhere you’d like, but we can’t go to where we’ve been before, not for a while,” he explained, then in a more somber tone, “They’re going to be looking for you. They’ve found Kyun’s body and they know you murdered him. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to hide this one, but it was only a matter of time before someone found out.”

Her shaking sniffs grew into panicked panting and her rapid little hyperventilated breaths rustled through his chest hair pleasantly as he could almost feel her process this information in the tensing of her body against him.

“How many lives have I ended?”

“Don’t think of it in those terms, darling,” he whispered. “Those were lives that left such a miniscule mark on existence that they might as well not have existed at all, or their influence was a poison you’ve only cured. The world is better for their absence. We are the wolves that thin the herd and make the sheep step a little quicker. That’s part of what we do.”

He allowed her to move away from him, her bare feet making it a few steps before she sunk slowly to her knees and wrapped her arms around her shivering body as she whispered, “Please, please, this… none of this, it can’t be real…”
He sympathized with her pain. It was a hard truth to bear when the knowledge of his purpose in life had been revealed to him, as well. He placed his hand on her bowed head, her hair still damp and heavy with the scents of black berries and roses, before retrieving the woven throw from the living room and draping it around her shoulders. They were both embarking on uncharted territory, their dynamic having been far outside the realm of the typical master and disciple since he’d decided to alter her mind without her awareness, but he had seen what she was capable of in her subconscious and unadulterated form. They’d unlocked so much of her genetic potential through those methods. He’d been merciful in allowing her an entire childhood and adolescence to remain unknowing of her ultimate role, but the time had come for her to accept who they really were.

He knelt before her, his hands gently rubbing the blanket over her trembling arms folded over her middle as he explained with all the patience he was capable, “Your work will inspire many to value the preciousness of life by taking it. That’s why I couldn’t let Marceau strip the art and meaning of what we do. Valstads are not consumable, we do not operate based on our place among lords and serfs, nor are we motivated by such mundane matters as politics or power. We are artists, and art is a response that can be felt even through centuries by the conductivity of human connection. Do you understand?”

“I don’t!” she spat, shaking her downturned head aggressively. “I don’t understand any of this! I’ve… I’ve killed someone, that isn’t art! There’s no ‘meaning’ to it, just… ugliness. I’m not a murderer.” Her trembling abruptly ceased, her stillness like the sudden silence in the woods when a predator stalks nearby. “Papa… how many people have you killed?”

“Some would consider it to be many, though my accomplishments pale in comparison to others,” he answered. He didn’t know. He’d lost count long ago. “It doesn’t matter. Once you’ve taken down your first quarry, you are a hunter ever after.”

Her arms jerked away from his gentle hold and lashed out at him, her hands grasping his forearms in a clawed grip as she snapped, “God damn it, I’m not talking to you about quarry or art or wolves and sheep! Just please, please talk to me like a normal person and not a… a serial killer.”

“A rather distastefully clinical term, but apt enough,” he conceded.

She flinched away when his phone buzzed in his pocket, falling backward onto her haunches and gripping the blanket tightly around her in alarm. He frowned at the interruption, but that was the prepaid uncontracted cell phone he used and replaced monthly to be contacted by the order. He hadn’t expected a call from them so soon after disposing of Marceau. Curiosity alone drove him to rise to his feet and answer it.

“Speak,” he commanded into the phone.

At first, the line was crackling silence, then a whispery and distantly familiar voice spoke, “They’re coming for you. They’re all coming for you now. Move.”

The line cut out abruptly. Leif tried to place the voice, but couldn’t over the urgency the warning spurred in him. Leaving his bewildered daughter huddled on the floor of the hallway, he bounded upstairs to grab his go bag. The FBI or the network assassins could have whatever they wanted of the house, it didn’t matter anymore. The caches of horror, the photo albums, the keepsakes, the weapons, all of it could either end up in some collector’s personal museum or in an FBI evidence warehouse to rot for decades. He would have liked to have watched it all light up in flame, but that was a pleasure he’d traded for one last good fuck on state soil with his daughter. A fair trade, he considered with a smirk. He was almost giddy with how quickly things had progressed in such unexpected but ultimately beneficial ways. It was almost divine influence how so many unfortunate
interferences had derailed his plans and set him on a better path for it. Had he believed in any god or spirituality, he would have been thankful for such glorious blessings in disguise.

In his bedroom, he pulled the desk back and reached to grab the backpack stuffed into the hole carved out of the wall when he caught the scent of roses and blackberries. He hadn’t heard his daughter follow him. He moved to turn to her when the blur of a fist came at him from his peripheral. Reflexes and hard-wired training were all that swung his arm and deflected that blow, his body twisting to follow the motion with a hook that connected with his assailant’s abdomen before he could recognize him. He nearly lowered his defensive stance when he saw it was his baby brother hunched over from the blow.

“Anders?!” he yelled, disbelief piercing through his anger. “I was hoping you weren’t dumb enough to come back, but you’ve exceeded even my lowest expectations.”

“Rot in Hell,” Anders snarled, glaring at him with a searing hatred Leif found frankly amusing, but not as amusing as the syringe clutched in his fist.

“Trying to pay me back for sticking you, I see,” he smirked. “Do you even know what you put in that thing?”

Anders charged at him, his free hand opened towards him to grab while he reared the syringe back, and Leif slapped it away while he dodged the offending hand. The plastic syringe clattered and slid along the floor, freeing his brother to attack him with both fists. Leif cut through his offense by dodging his strikes while unfolding Einar’s pocket knife before lunging forward and grabbing his throat, dragging him bodily over the desk with the blade held in his line of vision over his heart. The younger man grabbed his wrist, trying to push the knife away from him and grunting with the effort, but Leif had been in this position many times before and he had both leverage and brute strength on him.

“This is the last time we’re doing this, brother,” Leif grinned, pushing the blade down to just barely pierce the skin. Anders grunted as blood spotted up around the tip, his hands shaking around Leif’s wrists. “But before I kill you, I think I should tell you something.”

“Fuck off!”

Leif let the knife sink in a little more, blood now forming a circle of red on that stupid shirt. “No, not that. I just wanted to let you know that I’m proud of you, Anders. For the longest time, I’d believed you were a toothless, weak sap, but you’ve proven me quite wrong. You want to know why you can’t seem to keep out of your sweet little niece’s body?”

Anders roared as he tried to kick him away, an attempt Leif reproved by pushing the blade in a few more millimeters. He reveled in the anger and denial in his youngest brother’s grimacing face as he tore the truth out and forced him to hear it.

“It’s because her distress, her submissiveness, her vulnerability excites you. You saw how I fostered her dependence on me and you wanted that for yourself. You don’t want to help, you only want to be the one who wields her distress and controls her,” Leif grinned, then whispered, “I know exactly what you are. You and I share the same appetites. It’s a shame you won’t be able to fulfill them.”

Anders groaned and his arms trembled in strain as Leif began to sink the blade slowly into his muscle. This was the part Leif had often enjoyed most. That instinct to survive crashing against the inevitability of death. The terror in the realization that this was their final moment and the disbelief in that knowledge even as their life leaked out of them. Not many people were able to comprehend death, let alone their own, but Anders refused it with burning fury. Forcing his father’s steel into his
brother’s flesh millimeter by millimeter, he watched as Anders’ rage frenzied ahead of his fear and pain. He would not go gentle into that good night. No Valstad ever had. That yellow shirt was staining a dark red as his blood spilled generously from the deepening hole, leaking to pool under him on the surface where Simone had worked so dutifully to hide her scars and bruises. It really was too bad that Anders had disobeyed his will. The Valstad legacy would now be entirely Leif and his daughter’s responsibility to carry out and carry on with this final farewell to his family. He bore down harder into his brother’s chest, the antler handle hot in his hand, and felt something sting in the side of his turned neck. He ignored it, thinking it a spasm, but a cold sensation spilled into his veins along with the sting. He glanced to the side and, seeing the glint of sunlight reflecting off the syringe, turned to find Simone with her thumb pressed on the now fully descended plunger as she pulled the needle from his jugular.

Time seemed to slow. Leif could feel the poison pulling him under like a shadowed hand enclosing around his brain. His daughter watched him with eyes wide with fear and a deep sorrow, her honey brown skin cast in a gray pallor, and she drew in a shaking breath through her parted mouth. She’d held her breath to sneak up on him, he realized. How quietly she’d entered and found the syringe impressed him even through his shock. His vision blurred and darkened, his awareness flickering like a candle in a storm, and he forgave her as soon as he realized her betrayal. This was ultimately how it was supposed to end, but not this soon. There was so much she didn’t know, so much he had to tell her and teach her. They were supposed to have years before she fulfilled her vengeance against him. The knife clattered to the desk as he sunk, the floor seeming to float up and pull him toward it.

Her small hands were easing his descent until her whole body was pressed under his chest and she collapsed to her knees as he heard her frantically gasp out from afar, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Leif’s breath rattled out a faint chuckle at that. His softhearted daughter had killed him with her mercy toward a man she would undoubtedly slaughter later for his hand in her transformation. There would be no sating the beast of vengeance in her when it came to fully bloom in her psyche. She could hunt down every last one of them and still scream for blood. He had built a shrine of illness in her very essence that would stand long after he’d gone and he felt as victorious in that achievement as he was repentant of that crime. The darkness enveloped his mind and the sensation of a rapid descent gripped him while he was vaguely aware that she held him cradled to her. He could still feel her warmth and her love. He felt himself slip into the garden of her being, finding his own self planted there among the innumerable dead that had coalesced into the impossible Eden of her life. He slipped further. Nothingness devoured everything that he was, but he would still be there inside her and every life afterward. No peace or rapture came to him in that depth of absence. There was a spark of knowing and then there was nothing.

There was something wrong with her father’s face. The wrongness struck Simone almost physically, leaving her disoriented and confused, but it was like there was a block preventing her from knowing exactly how or why. She held his face toward her, staring at him in bafflement, and she had to remind herself repeatedly that this man was the same Leif Valstad she knew. There was a veil of unfamiliarity or absence of the man, leaving something her brain refused to recognize. He was standing as her father one moment and in the next, there was a heavy prop in her arms wearing a mask of her father.

The grays and blues at the edges of his paling features reminded Simone of the Saint Sebastian depicted by Nicolas Régnier, a painting she had once stared at for hours when she was having
trouble depicting the translucency of white skin using oil on canvas. However, his discoloration was due to cyanosis, not paint. Her mind fidgeted uncomfortably between art and medical knowledge, the two modes of thought clashing and converging in ways that she knew made little sense. Sitting on the floor, cradling his head in the crook of her arm and holding his body to her as best she could manage with her much smaller size, she saw him as two separate beings occupying the same space. A collection of color, shapes and dimension, the late morning sunlight offering his features unmoving and fixed to be transferred onto canvas. A body exhibiting signs of respiratory depression, requiring mouth-to-mouth and possibly cardiopulmonary resuscitation to raise insufficient oxygen levels before damage occurs to the brain. She touched the blue-tinted lips, feeling no breath brush over her fingertips, and tried to reconcile her split mind.

“Yellow ochre, cadmium red light, ultramarine blue…” she whispered as she carefully lowered him to lie flat on the floor. “Prussian blue, titanium white…”

She pressed her fingers over his cheeks, testing the depth of his well-defined zygomatic bones as she constructed the shape of his skull in her mind’s eye before trailing her fingers down to check his pulse at his neck. The absence of a heartbeat helped shove her thoughts towards medical procedure.

“Simone…”

She heard her uncle Ander’s voice, tight with pain and stress, and glanced up to see him clutching his blood-covered chest. Penetrative trauma to the chest cavity risked pneumothorax or hemothorax, hemorrhage of a major systemic or pulmonary vessel. He was alert and upright, no difficulty breathing yet, no apparent jugular vein distension. It was possible that his rather thickly developed pectoral muscles were not fully breached by the time she’d interrupted Leif’s progress in stabbing him.

“Maintain a sealed and constant pressure on the wound,” she told him mechanically, turning to the more urgent needs of the man on the floor. The man who had been her father a few minutes prior, she reminded herself again.

Anders limped to stand over her as she did this and said in his halted English, “Simone, you have… you need stop.”

On her knees, leaning high over the prone body, she placed her left hand flat against his sternum and interlaced the fingers of her right hand over it. With her elbows locked straight, she pushed down into the heel of her hand, his sternum springing up again under hands to repeat the compressions to a rapid tempo. Hard and fast. She had to be his heart to keep his blood flowing to his brain.

“Stop.”

After thirty compressions, she gingerly cradled the base of his neck and his mandible, lifting both to tilt his head back slightly. Working quickly, she pinched his nose shut and sealed her mouth over his parted lips. He tasted like her father.

“Simone, stop.”

She watched to ensure his chest rose with the two breaths she exhaled into his lungs before locking her arms over his chest and beginning compressions once more. Deep, hard, fast. Anders placed his hand on her bare shoulder. She was aware but uncaring of her nudity, the woven blanket strewn on the floor under her and the prone man after she’d dropped it when her father had collapsed on her.

“Leif is… ah… død…”
It was so strange. Just a few minutes ago, she was trying to save Anders by stopping her father from killing him, but somehow this was now happening. Anders was alive, so she must have succeeded, but something had changed. The world had shifted. The space this body occupied was where her father should be. Her father was in there, she had to bring him back. Anders’ hand on her shoulder jerked her away and she looked up at him in shock for impeding her attempts to resuscitate this man.

“Anders, what are you doing?!” she snapped, shoving his hand off her and reassuming her previous position. “His heart has stopped!”

“Yes!” he nearly shouted. “Leif is… is dead!”

That didn’t make any sense. She’d just seen her father and he was alive. She’d just seen him, with the curve of his neck so available to the needle, take the full dose of whatever sedative was in that syringe. No one had to get hurt. He would just pass out and by the time he awoke, Anders would be safely far away.

Between her labored breaths, she said, “You have to get out of here before he comes back.”

She yelped when Anders grabbed her and pulled her backward, forcefully this time, as he said in a loud and stern voice she’d never heard him use before, “Leif is dead! La ham bli død! He is not come back! Stop it!”

Simone’s ears rang at the volume and fury in her sweet uncle’s tone, his words pressing on her mind until something snapped in her brain with a painful twinge. Her hands gripped her forehead where a pounding agony resounded. Leif lied unbreathing, his heart silent and still, for all the definition of the word to be dead. She had killed her father.

Pain spread throughout her body, her muscles cramping and clenching, reducing her scream to a whispered, “No… No, I… I didn’t mean to… Please, don’t…”

She rushed back to the prone body, her father’s body, and locked her shaking hands over his sternum once more. Her movements were jerky, but they were hard and fast and deep as she’d been taught in CPR class back before any of this had happened. Before her mental illness had swallowed her whole. Before her mother had abandoned her. Before her father had violated her. Before she had been twisted into this monster. She breathed into his lungs, watching his chest rise, praying for it to begin rising on its own but it did not. Her face was hot and wet with tears and sweat, her arms and back trembled with exhaustion as she continued chest compressions, trying to trick that heart into beating again.

“Come on,” she panted, pressing blood through his body. “Wake up. Wake up, Papa!”

She had to keep his brain alive. If she could just continue to deliver enough oxygen to his brain, he wasn’t dead. He was still there, he had to be. He couldn’t have left her after everything he’d done to her. It wasn’t fair that she should have to live alone with this curse.

“Please, Papa!” she whimpered, her voice cracking in a sob.

She could hear and feel movement and voices nearby, but her world had narrowed to just her and her father. Angry, loud voices and heavy, stomping footsteps. She breathed air into his lungs, moved back to continue compressions, and was slammed to the floor by black-gloved hands that yanked her arms viciously behind her. Booming voices commanded her to stay down, put her arms behind her back, all things she was already being forced to do as she watched black boots rush around her limited field of vision. She couldn’t see Anders from her position or hear him over the din and action, her worry going to his open wound being stretched by this restraining method. She could see the
muzzle of an assault rifle poised above her father’s face while someone reached for him. She had to get to him. She had to keep him alive.

“STAY DOWN! STAY DOWN OR YOU WILL BE PUT DOWN!” someone barked above her, yanking her arms back until she could feel a burning pain sear through her sockets.

Someone was patting her father down, taking out his cell phone, wallet and keys before announcing, “We got a warm one! Stretcher, stretcher!”

She could taste blood from her teeth cutting into her cheek from being slammed, the numb swelling and her panic making her words come out slurred as she yelled, “NALOXONE! Give him naloxone! He’s overdosed!”

“Shut UP!” she heard before her temple took the brunt of the force when the man above her grabbed her hair and slammed her to the floor again.

Her vision flashed white before the ringing in her ears drowned out the cacophony of stomping and shouting, but she breathed as calmly and evenly as she could manage in her harshly restrained position to stave off the threat of unconsciousness. Seconds ticked by like minutes, the heavy knee pressed into the small of her back and the gloved hand holding her face to the floor not letting up the entire time. Only when she saw them place a bag valve mask over Leif’s mouth and lift him onto the thin plastic stretcher did she let her eyes fall shut. Unconsciousness did not come, but reality didn’t matter as much for now. With practiced ease, she submitted to the aggressive male above her, letting her muscles go slack and accepting that she was to finally pay for her crimes.
Chapter 34

The paper lining on the medical exam table crinkled as Simone shifted on it, trying to make her lap more level to place the clipboard on. Her hands shook as she tried to sign the consent forms, the pen jerking out a rough approximation of her signature on the line under the words “admissible as evidence in court”. She tried not to read it.

When she began to slowly fill in the date and time below, the nurse practitioner reached over and turned the sheet to the next form as she spoke up in a polite and vaguely Fijian drawl, “I’ll fill that in for you, honey, you don’t need to do anything more than sign.”

Simone didn’t look at her as she nodded and signed where it was marked. She reasoned that it must be the cold that numbed her fingers and chattered her teeth. The hospital gown wasn’t much protection against the air conditioning in the building. The feeling of vulnerability was far worse than the chill. When she’d seen a different nurse stop in to place a bundle of folded clothing on the counter, the nurse practitioner had to stop her from immediately dressing. Simone hugged the billowy gown around her tighter when the clipboard was taken back.

“So is my dad alive?” she asked. It was the first time she had spoken since arriving at the hospital. She had asked this question to every new person who approached her and was met with varying degrees of non-answers. There was no longer dread in anticipating the response at this point, only the increasing willingness to hear it.

“I’m sorry, dear, I haven’t been told anything about that. Is he being seen here too?” the nurse responded, her deep matronly voice soothing the sting of disappointment in Simone.

The slight contact of her gloved hands touching her as she wrapped the blood pressure cuff around her arm made Simone want to flinch. She observed that the nurse was curiously silent about her vitals, a schooled stiffness to her features as she jotted them down. Simone wondered at that briefly, but it was difficult to maintain a sense of significance in anything for more than a flickering moment with the chorus of shame drowning it out.

“When did you get these sutures put in?” the nurse asked conversationally.

Her chest tightened at the memory of Leif meticulously sewing the cut across her neck, the small and exact stitches providing a neat line at her throat. It would heal nicely. She blinked away the sting of tears at that token of his affection.

“My dad did it the other night.”

The nurse hummed in approval. “Does he work in the medical field?”

The police officer that had stood silent and uncomfortable in front of the closed door got the nurse’s attention with a stern and slow shake of his head. Simone observed as the woman raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips in annoyance at the quiet command to not continue that topic. They both resented his presence. Simone decided that she liked this nurse.

“What we’re going to do here is called a sexual assault forensic examination. I’m going to ask you questions about the incident. If you don’t want to or can’t answer them, we can skip them for now and come back to them. After that, we are going to photograph your injuries and then I am going to swab for evidence, okay? We can skip whatever you want to skip, but I want you to know that every part of this exam is important to collect evidence. Did you ingest any drugs or alcohol during or prior
“What… I’m sorry, which incident?” Simone asked, slightly flabbergasted.

“Whichever incident that brought you here today,” the nurse answered plainly, but not uncaringly. She adjusted her bifocals with a push from both of index fingers along the stems, a habit that Simone identified as a peculiar and very personal tick. It was remarkably soothing to be around a woman again after this past week of being inundated with male sexuality and aggression. A woman of color, too. It was enough to make her suspect that the staff had assigned this nurse to her for that reason. Nonetheless, it did comfort her and she found herself relishing the glimpses of personality behind the professionalism of this nurse.

“This examination isn’t to interpret the evidence, just to collect it. Understand?” Simone could only nod numbly in response. “Okay, honey. Remember, these are all voluntary but important. Let’s get through this so I can do my job and get you healing, all right? All right. So, drugs or alcohol?”

“I… I think so, when he, um…” Simone muttered. She took a deep breath and focused. It was harder to identify a moment when she wasn’t in some form of chemically altered state. She might as well tell the truth. “Yes. I was involuntarily drugged today.”

The nurse flipped to the third sheet on her clipboard and wrote something as she asked, “Can you briefly describe the assault?”

“I don’t think I was assaulted today…”

The woman repeated that double-handed adjustment of her glasses. “Then can you tell me when and what was happening when you got bitten?”

Now that the time had come to start giving voice to those details, a cold sweat broke out all along her body and her tongue felt like lead. She looked down at her feet dangling above the floor, aware of both the cop’s and the nurse’s attention as she tried not to mumble, “It was… late this morning. I don’t remember how I got there but I was out under the sky when I woke up and… he was there.”

“Aside from the bite, did he put his mouth on you anywhere else?”

“Yes.” She could feel the cop’s pity like a moist breath on the back of her neck and she rubbed the sweat-dampened skin there nervously. She hated him for hearing any of this. It didn’t belong to him. It didn’t belong to anyone. She wanted to see her father badly. “My face, neck… breasts… um… genitals…”

“Did he put his genitals anywhere in or on you?”

Simone’s mouth was dry; she was too nervous and ashamed to ask for water. She reminded herself that this was a medical professional who didn’t seem aware of the incestuous context and she tried to ignore the cop who seemed to have at least guessed it. His straight-ahead stare did a poor imitation of politely pretending not to hear from four feet away. These details would be in the case regardless; she supposed she would eventually have to get used to saying them all out loud. “Yes…”

More jotting down on the clipboard, checking boxes and crossing out sections. Her sweat-slicked hand at the back of her neck slid around her unbitten side to rub at the ache in her chest. This wasn’t what she had been expecting. She’d imagined herself in handcuffs, locked in a small room with a one-way mirror and two stone-faced cops interrogating her for the hard truths her memory couldn’t supply. Instead, she’d been given a cozy ride to the emergency room in a normal SUV almost immediately after the SWAT team had cleared for the cops and EMTs to enter. Everyone aside from
this nurse had been, if anything, avoidant of her when they weren’t gently asking her questions or reassuring her with sympathetic eyes. In a way, she preferred being slammed into the floor by the SWAT officer over that vague pity from law enforcement. She didn’t want or deserve pity. They would see that from the evidence on the men she had murdered.

“Did he use a condom?”

“No.”

“At any point, did you notice him bleeding from anywhere, like a cut?”

“No.”

“Have you showered or bathed since the incident?”

“No.”

“Any other form of penetrative intercourse with his genitals via oral or anal?”

“No.”

“Have you had consensual intercourse within the last five days?”

“Yes.”

“How many hours prior to the incident was your last consensual intercourse?”

The memory of Anders’ rough and callused hands gripping her hips and rocking her on his cock as he panted in Norwegian flashed in her mind, bringing the heat of a flush from her chest to her forehead. But the sex with her father had been consensual too, in as much as consent hadn’t occurred to her as a factor anymore. Recalling how Anders had told her to stop even as he had enthusiastically reciprocated, she wondered when the role of consent had left her sexual lexicon, but couldn’t pinpoint the moment. It left an odd, hollow pit in her to be able to objectively see this subtlety of the insidious change her father had wrought and not know how it functioned. This wasn’t the blaring outrage to her values and sense of self that had come with committing murder, but something that had occurred entirely outside of her detection until this moment. A foreboding guarantee that this was far from the limit of his redesign to her psyche resounded in that hollow pit like a drum. She could almost hear him whispering from the dark of her mind, too quiet to be much more than just a presence. A horrible whisper of the price she had paid for his love.

“I don’t think I can answer that,” she said. She didn’t know she had been breathing hard until she spoke and she pressed her hand down onto her sternum to calm her heaving gasps. “I don’t want to answer any more questions. Can we just skip to the next step?”

The nurse nodded, but frowned. “I know it’s hard, honey, but every part of this is important to collect evidence. I can ask the officer to step into the hall if that would make you more comfortable.”

The cop broke his fly on the wall act and finally spoke in a hushed but authoritative tone, “No, you can’t. My orders are to protect her and I can’t do that if I can’t see her.”

The nurse’s face pinched into a frown and she swiveled in her stool to shoot him a withering look. “What’s the difference of you just standing on the other side of that door? There’s already another two of you in the hallway. Ain’t like anyone gonna come busting in here past them!”

Simone’s ears perked up at their wording. A mad spark of hope caught fire to her fevered brain.
“Why would I need protection? Did something happen?”

She saw the cop’s expression twist into the discomfort of being caught out as he stiffly said, “You don’t have to worry, you’re safe with us now.”

“But is it him? Is it my father? Did he live?” She knew her tone was manic. It was an impossible hope but she couldn’t stop it from filling her heart. “Did he escape?”

“That’s not information I can divulge to you at this time,” the cop responded tensely.

A wide grin pulled at the cut on her lip. She didn’t care how it revealed her insanity to them. “It is him, isn’t it? That’s why there are so many cops here, right? Are you hoping he’ll come for me? Please, please just tell me if he’s alive.”

“Listen, everything is going to be just fine,” he assured her, misunderstanding her elation as panic.

She would take a thousand lashes from her father’s belt if only to see him alive to do it. If he was alive, then she hadn’t committed a senseless murder. Kyun and the nightmarish memory of the old man in the filthy wood paneled house were lives she would forever carry the guilt of having taken, but they weren’t senseless murders. She was a monster for being able to do it at all, but there were people she had to protect from those men. She wasn’t a killer unless it was the only option left. If Leif had lived, then she could really believe that. But if Leif was alive and out there, that also meant he was a danger once more. That heated hope in her was doused with the cold reminder of her duty.

“Where’s my uncle Anders? The other tall, blond man that was there? In the house. He’s being guarded too?” she asked, that giddy energy transferring into real dread now. “And Vidar and Henrik. He might go after them. Where are they?”

“Baby, don’t you worry about anyone but yourself right now, all right?” the nurse interjected with a resolute but mollifying tone.

Simone didn’t have time to be placated. Her family didn’t have time for her to bow to the insistence of law. So long as her father was free, her prison was at his side. She turned to the nurse and, though she hated to leave her soothing reminder of a life outside of this madness, said, “I revoke my consent to this examination and I refuse medical treatment until I see that my family is safe.”

“Calm down, baby. Ain’t nothing bad is going to happen to your family. We are all here to help get the evidence they need to protect you in the long run.”

Simone slid away from the table in a tearing of paper and a flourish of blue checkered hospital gown. She was sick of other people dictating the purpose of her body. Monster though she may be, she was not a murder weapon, she was not a sex slave, she was not a crime scene, she was not property. For the first time in what must have been ages, a fog lifted within her mind and she was solid again. It was an overwhelming sensation, like the first steps on land after being at sea for too long. She swayed on the lost foundation of her identity and when it didn’t crumble beneath her, she stood taller than she was before.

With deliberate and careful words, Simone spoke evenly, “I know my rights as a patient and a citizen. I know who I am and where I am. I’m aware and alert. I’m of sound body and mind and I am revoking my consent.” She held her arms around her torso tightly, hugging the thin gown to her as she collected the courage to look the policeman in his eye. She settled for his cheek. “If you force me to undergo examination, I will sue the fuck out of your department and this hospital. Keep me in the dark, you’ll get nothing from me on Leif, and trust me, he’s shown me more than he thinks. So please, enlighten me. On everything.”
The cop’s lips thinned into an uncertain frown, but he reached for his shoulder radio.

Bolle’s paws weighed down in four points on the bed, shifting the blankets as she stepped around Anders’ feet until she pressed a heavy paw directly on his thigh. He turned away from the dog with a pained groan and shoved a pillow over his head to block out the chorus of expectant breathing from the other three as they watched him from the floor.

“No, too early… let me sleep,” he grumbled from under the pillow, only exciting them further.

The eruption of clicking as their claws danced over the floor officially pulled him out of any hope to return to unconsciousness, but he lied in stillness out of spite. His gang never could grasp the concept of a lazy Sunday morning. He cracked open a groggy eye and was greeted with Balder’s long muzzle resting on the edge of the bed as the hound gazed at him with doting affection. Balder’s tongue peeked out to run over his snout as evidence of his excitement for breakfast came leaking out the edges of his mouth. Anders gently pushed the drooling face away from the bed and turned onto his other side, only to engage the playfulness of Bolle when she saw movement under the blankets. She slammed her front legs rather painfully over his turning torso, her fluffy tail wagging fiercely as she tried to bury her nose in the comforter.

“Oh, okay! I’m up!” Anders surrendered.

“Hey, dipshit. Are you really waking up this time?”

He gasped at the unexpected voice, squeezing his eyes shut in a grimace when that deep inhalation sparked a tight agony in his chest. When he opened them again, his room and his dogs were gone, replaced by a dimly lit hospital room and a very irritated Vidar looming over him. For a moment, his mind was blank, his confusion the only thing existing in the blank fog of his thoughts before memory tumbled over him. The knife slowly sinking into him, his blood hot on his skin, Leif’s words like poison on his mind. Simone pressed into the floor, a masked and armored demon shoving her down with a rifle to her head. Her distress, her submissiveness, her vulnerability excites you.

“No, I- I- what-” he stammered, trying to sit up in his panic until that harsh reminder of his wound sent him throwing himself back onto the mattress.

“Looks like you’re awake enough to me,” Vidar remarked offhandedly. Anders turned his head and stared at his brother in a wide-eyed plea for something, he wasn’t even sure what, but Vidar glared coldly at him as he leaned close and whispered, “Listen, here’s what you’re going to say when they ask you what happened: Kyun gave us a ride to the airport from the funeral reception yesterday, but when we couldn’t get an earlier flight, he was nice enough to take us to a motel. Then Leif showed up and drove off with Kyun in Einar’s truck. That’s why the Mercedes was at the motel overnight and that’s when Leif ends Kyun, got it? You don’t know that yet, so act surprised, just not too surprised, if they let you know that Kyun is worm food. Because we all knew Leif was crazy, right? Those details don’t change. This morning, instead of your dumb ass driving out there, waving around a gun you don’t even know how to shoot like you’re John fucking Wayne, you’re going to tell them Leif drove you and Simone in the Mercedes back to the house to kill you. Got it?”

“What are you talking about?” Anders rasped, bewilderment running chaos in his already hazed mind.

“I’m talking about the police interrogation,” Vidar hissed through gritted teeth. The raw and barely
constrained hostility in his sharp features alarmed Anders, reminding him too closely to Leif’s predatory focus. He looked away, seeing the door ajar and the shadow of a man standing in the hallway. It came back to him then that he had been in an ambulance before waking up in this room. The image of the cop staring at his gushing chest wound as the EMT dressed it floated into his mind like a memory of a dream and he was thankfully able to push it away as easily. None of that mattered. He had survived. He had to forget.

“You want me to lie to the police?”

“Anders couldn’t bring himself to examine his brother’s face to see if he was simply ignorant or absolutely insane. As nightmarish as this day had been, there was one fact from it he was certain of.

“What happened at the house, Anders? I need to know,” Vidar insisted firmly. Anders could feel his intense, demanding stare but his mind was back in that room, watching Simone desperately labor over her father’s body. “Tell me what happened and I can tell you what to say to keep us all out of trouble.”

“I was supposed to do it,” Anders whispered. His mouth twitched as he spoke, his anger at himself drawing his lips into a snarl while he fought back the tears of guilt and shame. “I… I was the one who filled that god damned syringe. I was the one who was supposed to stop him. But I was too slow, too weak… I let him win. And she… she picked it up and she did it.” He bit down on his quivering lip, trying to stabilize his emotions but there was no getting a handle on this. Vidar waited, his steady stare heavy and focused, a sharp contrast to the disorder inside Anders. He continued in a shaking whisper, needing to confess his part in this sin. “She didn’t know that it would kill him.”

“He slid his hand down over his face, holding back his pain. “She still loved him. I was so blinded by rage, I couldn’t see that. And when she tried to breathe life back into him, I… I tried to stop her. I made her kill her own father, Vid. I did that. You don’t come back from something like that. I did that to her and I was glad when it happened. I’m not…”

He couldn’t speak. His throat was tight and clogged with grief, so he just gnashed his teeth and held down that heavy flood of emotion until he felt as though he might drown in it. It was a terrible thing to see what he was becoming and not be able to stop it.

“You didn’t see any of that. You didn’t know anything about any syringe. When they find your
prints on it, you tell them you went through his bag before and they’ll see that you did,” Vidar whispered, his decisive tone brooking no argument, then more quietly, “Did she know it was you who filled that syringe?” Anders couldn’t do more than shake his head in response. “Good. Keep it that way. Don’t ever tell anyone, especially her, about that.”

“No, no, I have to tell her!” Anders nearly shouted. “I’m the one who she should blame, not herself!”

“Keep it down, asshole!” Vidar hissed, but the shadow in the hall was already approaching.

“He up?” a gruff voice came from the doorway.

Vidar pressed his hand to his forehead and sighed deeply, the edge of his breath carrying an irritated growl, but he responded with a calm, “He is awake, yes.”

“We’ve got some questions for you, Anders Valstad. We have a translator present should we find it necessary, but we’re going to need to question you alone. Vidar Valstad, please step into the hall. Officer Brody will escort you out.”

Anders could feel Vidar’s warning glare as he stood up and left the room, but he couldn’t meet his eyes. He knew he had to tell the version of events his brothers had committed to for the sake of protecting them and Simone from the consequences of Kyun’s murder, but Vidar’s story about the syringe was something he couldn’t bear the distaste of telling. That wasn’t supposed to be her sin. Looking up at the uniformed police officer, he made his decision. He couldn’t change the past, but he could start taking responsibility for it.

Henrik nearly screamed when the door to the hotel room opened, making his relief to see it was only Vidar returning from the hospital all the greater. Every moment he wasn’t with his family, he was plagued with the certainty that Leif had caught up with them and had begun picking them off. As safe as these cops had assured him they were, he couldn’t feel it. He doubted he would ever feel fully safe again. He didn’t know how much he had taken that base level of safety for granted until it was torn from his life.

“How is he?” Henrik asked.

Vidar threw his coat on the table, the vehemence in the action and the clear frustration in his face making Henrik edgy. “He’s fine.”

He closed the curtains with a rough jerk of his arms and sat down heavily on the other bed. When he didn’t elaborate, Henrik nervously asked, “But is he going to be okay? How did the surgery go?”

“He’s fine. The surgery was fine,” Vidar answered tersely, yanking the buttons open on his shirt.

The police had brought them clothes and had put them up in a nicer hotel, all courtesy of some nonprofit set up to help victims of violent crimes. It was odd to consider himself a victim in comparison to what Leif had put Anders and Simone through, but Henrik wasn’t about to refuse the assistance based on such a ludicrous imposter syndrome as that. He scooted to the edge of his bed and faced his younger brother, observing the hardened lines of anger in his features that he had always tried to hide his troubles behind.

“You’re not fine, though,” Henrik said, trying to keep any excess gentleness out of his tone. He knew sympathy was not a thing his brother received gracefully.
“Mind your own fucking business.”

“What is it? What’s bothering you?”

Vidar pried off his too-small sneakers, then leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his forehead resting in his hands. His voice was raspy with weariness as he said, “I slept under the same roof with a serial killer. I ate dinner and laughed with a rapist. I had no idea. None. He had me completely fooled for years. That’s what’s bothering me. Now leave me alone.”

Henrik pursed his lips and nodded, but he continued to press him. “Did you get him to tell the story? What did he think?”

“I don’t know and I don’t know.”

“Did he tell you anything about what happened in there?”

“He was out of his damn mind. Probably the anesthetic. Or he’s really lost it.” Vidar rubbed his shoulder, winced at the ache in it. “Now, could you shut the fuck up?”

He couldn’t. He had to get Vidar to talk about whatever it was before it hardened in him like a kidney stone. “Well, what did he say that was so crazy?”

Vidar groaned in annoyance and stood up, shooting him a heated glare that would have phased anyone who hadn’t grown up with the short-tempered man. “He was talking some nonsense about Simone killing Leif. As if that weren’t complete bullshit enough, he said that he’d set her up to do it. I don’t know what the hell happened there, but dead men don’t escape police custody. There’s just something about all this that stinks. They’re not telling us the whole story.”

“Sure, but why would they? Doesn’t a police investigation require a certain amount of discretion? They’re still mostly undecided if we’re suspects or victims, too.”

“Discretion, yes. But they’re going beyond just withholding details for the sake of investigation. They’re obfuscating the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we can’t trust them,” Vidar answered in a low whisper. He sat down on the edge of the bed and faced Henrik, his brows furrowed in grave regard as he whispered, “They didn’t just fuck up in letting Leif get away. They asked me if he had any friends in law enforcement. That’s been bugging me all day. Why would they ask me that? The answer is because he did. That’s how he escaped. Now these motherfuckers are scrambling because they know they’ve been infiltrated.”

“Like a terrorist thing?”

“Maybe. Terrorist murder cult. You notice how all the cops who are guarding us have been oldfuckers?”

“I guess?”

“They don’t know who they can trust. They’re using everyone who has enough of a reputation in their departments to staff this case, especially around us.”

Henrik looked toward the door, knowing a white-mustached cop was standing just outside of it, and started to believe this insane conspiracy theory his brother was ranting on about.
Vidar slapped his knee, grinning like he’d just won a prize as he perked up. “That’s why they’ve been keeping us separate from Simone! They think she knows about it! That she’s part of it!”

Henrik usually hated it when his brother went into crazy Sherlock mode, especially when it all started to make too much sense. His gut twisted as he waited for Vidar to point at him and laugh about how gullible he was to have believed something like that, as he usually did when he got going like this, but when Vidar only continued to grin and glance around at the thoughts bubbling behind his mind, he became nervous.

“You don’t think she’s part of it, do you?” Henrik asked. “A terrorist?”

Vidar almost didn’t seem to have heard him, lost in his own thoughts, but muttered out an absent, “Hm? Oh, no, of course not. Leif was still grooming her.”

Henrik watched as his brother continued to grin and silently postulate like a maniac. The entire thing should have seemed impossibly bizarre, but these past few days had moved the bar of what he’d considered too bizarre. The distant dots Vidar was able to connect started to form a disturbing picture that came into focus the more he looked at it. That slim grasp of safety he’d managed to take hold of with the police protection crumbled. They had to get out of this God forsaken country.
Simone spread her hands open on the narrow table separating her from Special Agents Maier and Gladwell, letting the cool of the smooth laminate surface fund her composure. It had been nearly one hour of her trading answers to their questions for information they had about her father and she did not have the social stamina for this even on her best days. There was no time for the delicacy required of her to properly navigate this give and take and it was showing in her rapidly decreasing patience with these men.

Gladwell took off his glasses and rubbed at the pink imprints the nose pads left on his white skin. “Simone Valstad, although we do sympathize with what you’ve been through, we need your full cooperation. If you’re not helping, then you are obstructing. Do you understand the seriousness of that charge?”

Simone met his weary gaze with the false poise of indignance. When she spoke to them, the only thing subduing her tone was the physical pain in her bruised throat. “Refusing to answer questions is not an obstruction of justice, sir. If I’m wrong on that, go ahead and arrest me so I can invoke my right to remain silent.”

Both Gladwell and Maier shot her the same brand of exasperated glare and she met it spitefully. In her experience with lawmen of any stripe, there seemed fewer things they despised more than having to interact with someone well-versed in their rights. Not that citing such knowledge had always protected her; she had a scar hidden on the back of her scalp to remind her of that, courtesy of the NYPD. For all the destructive force afforded to them by the power of law and biology, these weren’t men she had to fear. Their threat was toward a freedom that had already been taken and a body already bled and bruised.

“We have no obligation to provide you any information,” Maier said, his gentler tone playing the good cop to Gladwell’s bad cop. The cup of coffee Maier had set down in front of her at the beginning of the interview sat cold and untouched. As dehydrated as she was, she understood these little power plays and gestures too well. Being in her father’s company for so long had made her hyperaware of manipulation and resentful of it. “We’re willing to extend you the goodwill of considering your questions, but only if you answer ours. Fully.”

“Goodwill is only as good as it gives. So far, your goodwill has given me bullshit,” she responded dryly. “I can’t abide bullshit. Why aren’t you telling me anything? He escaped, so he’s alive, right?”

“Why is that so important to you?” Maier asked with genuine curiosity in the lilt of the query. “After everything he’s done, you’re still so concerned for his wellbeing. Why is that?”

“I’m concerned for the wellbeing of my uncles,” she answered, careful to steer away from the topic of her feelings about her father. “As long as he’s out there, they’re in danger.”

“Yeah, well, them and everyone else in this town,” Maier added. “Except not everyone else is under police protection. Your father killed a lot of people, Ms. Valstad. We think you know that.”

“I don’t know that,” she insisted. “You keep saying he’s some kind of prolific murderer, but present nothing further to support that accusation. What are the crimes he’s been accused of? What evidence do you have? If you’re building your entire case against him on a witness statement from me, you might be fucked.”

“You’re getting awfully defensive of a man who beat you black and blue,” Gladwell interjected.
“Maybe you’re not his victim at all. Maybe you’re his accomplice.”

Simone’s chest tightened with the memory of bloody muscle ghosting over her teeth and tongue as she clenched her jaw and swallowed her nervousness. “I’m not like him.”

“But he wanted you to be, didn’t he?” Maier asked. “His obsession with you demanded intimacy but his sociopathy prevented him from ever truly achieving that. What better way to simulate emotional intimacy than having you become something he felt he could relate to?”

“He had no trouble achieving intimacy with me,” she muttered sardonically, trying to shield herself from the effect of those words but pain drained the blood from her face and pooled nausea in her gut. She withdrew her hands from the table in the need to wrap them around her body. They didn’t know the details about what Leif had done with her, let alone why. They only knew him as a murderer. This framing of his psychological dysfunction was something she found distasteful; even she, in all she had managed to gather about the guarded man, wouldn’t assume anything about his motivations. But they weren’t seeking information only on Leif. They were pricking her to see where she bled and she tried not to show it, but emotional control was far from her strongest skill. Her neck was tense and disgust rose to the surface of her features before she could compose herself. Gladwell misread her distaste and poked her somewhere she didn’t expect.

“Smart, creative, clever daughter. So much potential. You know, we talked to his ex-wife- your mother- and she mentioned that you were interested in a career in surgery,” Gladwell said. He fixed his gaze on her as he smiled, “Did you know that surgeon is in the top ten preferred professions of psychopaths?”

A bead of sweat dripped down her temple. Throughout all of this, she somehow hadn’t even considered that her mother would be questioned. She couldn’t imagine what she might be going through in knowing that Leif had a secret life as a serial killer for who knows how long. A wave of nausea passed over her in a shudder as she wondered how much her mother now knew about what he did. What they did. She wanted to both speak with her immediately and never face her again. She wondered which option her mother would prefer of her and found that she couldn’t guess.

Shoving down that line of thought, she lifted her face determinedly to Gladwell and said, “I went to art school instead. Did you know that artist is in the top ten careers with the lowest rates of psychopathy?”

That wiped the smug grin off his face.

“How long have you known Leif Valstad was a murderer?” Maier asked, quickly changing the topic as his partner’s face reddened. “Did you ever suspect or have a feeling he could be a murderer before he began threatening them?”

“I’ve suspected that my father might be a murderer since catching him attempting to murder my uncle this morning,” she lied. Even as a child, she’d had a funny feeling that there was something off about him, something dangerous and fascinating. Her mother had often touted the value of intuition, but intuition felt too close to delusion to Simone for her to trust it. To her, intuition often felt as though there were a dozen ghosts reaching for her through peoples’ eyes and whispering from innocuous pieces of her surroundings. Now that she had come to distrust even her own experiences, anything less than fact backed by more credible sources than herself seemed as illusory as a daydream.

“Has anyone aside from Leif Valstad assaulted you?”

Her hands clenched at the scratchy wool of the sweater the hospital had given her. “Care to unload that question a bit?”
“Don’t do that,” Gladwell frowned. “It’s obvious Valstad had assaulted you in at least one way. You’d do well to remember that the accounts of events from your uncles will point out any ‘discrepancies’ in your story. Don’t go telling us you fell down the stairs or some shit.”

Simone’s tenuous will to retain a cohesive appearance of normalcy disintegrated. She tried to hold her breath to keep herself from hissing out the acidic response burning in her lungs, but her hands clutching at her sides shook with the transferred energy. These weren’t men she had to fear, so she was finally free to hate. Hatred crawled out of that well of tar she had buried her murder in, coating her with that thick blackness wherever it writhed. The seams at the sides of her sweater began to rip.

“You think you have any power over me?” she sneered. The warning bells in her mind were muffled under the din of the hatred that buzzed loudly in her ears. Her whispered pitch was frantically rapid. “You don’t have anything. How… the fuck did you manage to lose him? You have nothing. Nothing to offer, nothing to take. Nothing to take, not him, not me. No, not me, not me anymore. You lost him, you don’t get to have me. It was a mistake to believe you could help us.”

She knocked over the flimsy plastic chair when she abruptly shot up and Gladwell rose with her, a hostile slant to his stance that she met gleefully. At last, the blossoming of violence. A venomous grin pulled at her mouth.

“George,” Maier warned. Gladwell didn’t back down, but he didn’t move either.

“Better make it count, George,” Simone taunted, her grin pulling wider. He was almost as tall as her father, but not as in good of shape. Her bones seemed to resonate in the anticipation of pain that buzzed audibly through her. She wanted to take his violence and devour it.

“George!” Maier repeated, raising his calm and level voice for the first time throughout this interview. “Go get a cup of coffee.”

Simone’s bones still hummed even through the disappointment that loosened her aching fingers when Gladwell left with a fuming huff. Her eyes were fixed to the closed door after he’d slammed it, but the click of the audio recorder being shut off drew her gaze to Maier. He rose from the table, his slight frame moving with the stiffness of calculated calmness that betrayed some sort of nervousness or excitement. She turned to him fully as he stepped around the table and approached her, that hunger for punishment abating in her to be replaced by curiosity.

“I apologize for that, Miss Valstad,” he said, stopping just a foot from her. She looked down at his brown leather shoes on the thin gray carpet, his even stance and proximity tickling that treacherous intuition in her. The thrum of danger bled into her curiosity as he continued in his sterile clinical tone. “Everything said and done here for the moment is off the record. We both have objectives here we would like to resolve, so let me propose an agreement to trade. Information on Leif Valstad for your full cooperation. Once my partner returns, we will both continue on as though this moment never happened, understand?”

Simone’s flesh crawled in a wave of goosebumps with the realization at how close she stood to the knowledge of her father. Her stare raised in alarm to search his patrician features, glancing over the eyes that screamed too much at once. This was surely a trick. Turning off the recording device didn’t change anything.

Her desperation divided into a scatter of opposing urgencies, but the need for her father swept her focus away from the threat that lied in proceeding. “I understand.”

Maier lifted his hand tentatively over her shoulder, pausing to ask, “First, may I see it?”
Her brow creased in nervousness, unsure of what he was asking, but she nodded. His hand brushed her hair back from her neck and she watched in mounting uncertainty while he pulled the loose collar of the sweater to the side. She held herself from flinching away when he peeled back the gauze taped over her bite wound. There was a fascination that gleamed in his dead shark-like eyes while he looked at the bite, a detached but very interested curiosity that reminded her of a child pulling off a butterfly’s wings. A slight smile curved his thin lips. She felt naked before him despite being finally fully clothed. Her stare attached to his neck, to the writhing pulse under his skin, and she flushed hot at the memory of blood this time.

“Do you know how long he’s been killing?” Maier asked, his voice lowered to accommodate his proximity as he leaned closer to examine the bruised and pierced flesh.

Simone licked her lips nervously, trying to remember if he’d ever told her. “No.”

“He took his first life at age fourteen,” he said. “Coincidentally, or perhaps not, you were fourteen when he began testing sexual interaction with your unconscious body. Although, he did not fully consummate that interaction until you were seventeen, the night before you began college.”

His words shoveled coal into the furnace of her madness and made her want to scream from the searing knowledge, but she had to focus. She forced herself to look in the direction of his face, not really seeing him even as she stared right at him, his features wavering like heat off a paved road. She swallowed her mounting terror. “How do you know that?”

Instead of answering her, he slowly began to peel the bandage the rest of the way off, the tugging at her wound making her pant in agony while he continued to calmly speak. “I was looking into your family history and saw a pattern. Of course, everyone has patterns, that is often highlighted and manifested in our line of work. But the Valstads, as far as the documents show, all had the same pattern. That’s not just noteworthy, it’s troublingly odd. Each Valstad, regardless of their personality, their place, their time, did not hunt to exert some vengeance into the world or to make up for their own lacking. Despite the horrors they were capable of or the number of hunts they executed with any varying level of professional detachment or artistic revelry, it all boiled down to nature.”

She watched in revulsion as he held up the bloody bandage to the light before placing it in his pocket. The buzzing became a hundred voices humming in unison, a sound she felt might rip her flesh from her bones as the humming crescendoed, but resounding clearly above that was a rapid clicking and then a pop. Panting through her discomfort, she lifted her head towards the sound and felt her stomach drop when she saw a thin man holding up an old camera behind Maier. He seemed unaware of the photographer even as the camera loudly popped and whirred with each photo he took, the flash making her blink and squint, but she’d recognized him in that split second before being blinded. She knew those gaunt features, that blond beard, those silver eyes that glittered with madness. Bjørn, carrying with him the sour smell of the darkroom, slowly glided towards them as Maier continued to speak.

“Generation after generation derived the same purpose, lasting through cultural and social changes. We could never make you do anything unless it was within your own interest. We could never give you orders so much as try to direct and coincide our requests with your nature. You’re like wild animals, never completely to be trained or trusted. Leif Valstad had his humanity chipped away until all that was left were jagged pieces that cut into him when he tries to be anything other than what he has become. That’s why we need you, Miss Valstad.”

She tried to calm down and focus away from both the hallucination and Maier’s terrifying words, but was met with a horrid pain that shocked through her brain when she resisted the pull of Bjørn’s haunting image. This wasn’t supposed to happen when she was stable. Despite all the emotional
turmoil, this was the most whole she had felt in months, possibly years. But there he was, as real as the agent still admiring her wound but entirely within her broken mind.

“Tick tock, darling girl. You have to keep it wound though, understand?” Bjørn said in Leif’s voice, grinning to reveal a mouth full of pointed and jagged teeth just inches behind the agent.

“You… w-what d… d… you want?” she sputtered, her mouth struggling to form the words.

“We need you to be why he must obey,” Maier answered instead.

Bjørn fell to the floor in a hiss of ash that instantly dispelled that intense humming. The silence in the room now felt solid, like she could feel it enclosing the air around her, pressing tighter and tighter. Her fear transmuted into rage in an instant, the meaning and implication of his knowledge igniting an instinctive wrath in her like a spark in gasoline. Leif hadn’t escaped, he had been taken. Simone grabbed Maier’s shirtsleeves and slammed him into the wall, her muscles tensed and bunching with an adrenaline-fueled strength that took them both by surprise. Her words tore painfully from her throat in a snarled, “Tell me where he is!”

Maier didn’t resist her as she pressed him to the wall, his crooked smile seemingly amused at this escalation. “You’ll see.”

The click of the door opening made her stagger quickly away from him, backing into a corner where she could see both men and give neither the opportunity to sneak up on her. Her body thrummed in the need for vengeance, a viciousness running through her that she was unaccustomed to but carried with it such seductive certainty that these men must pay for what they’ve done. Gladwell entered the room with a weary bewilderment at what he’d walked into, seeing her crouched in the corner with a death glare and his partner leaning nonchalantly against the wall.

“What the fuck is her problem now?” he groused.

“I believe Miss Valstad is too thoroughly fatigued to continue this interview toward any useful end,” Maier explained. “I’ll have one of the officers escort her to the hotel and we may resume once she has recovered in the morning.”

"Give me back my watch first,” she demanded. "I need to wind it."

Anders was prepared to face whatever consequences came with confessing to the murder of Leif. He’d had no idea what this country’s courts would consider it, but from what he had seen of the justice system of the United States in movies and television, he’d anticipated a long haul of costly legal fees and inevitable jail time. Whatever came would be what he’d deserved for tarnishing Simone’s soul, first with the sin of their love and then with the unimaginable burden of patricide. Anything he could have done to ease her pain would have been worth the cost and it was rightfully his crime to bear. She didn’t fill that needle with a lethal dose, he did. It was self-defense as much as it was premeditated murder. He was ready to give his life to protect her from that, but when he’d confessed to the officer and said he’d been the one to inject Leif, the cop didn’t even write it down.

Anders sat looking out the hotel window into the night, the little two-bed room a far upgrade from the motel they’d been in and not at all the holding cell he’d expected to be thrown into. The painkillers they’d given him swam pleasantly in his bloodstream, numbing the minor aches and pains he didn’t even notice had collected in his body as well as the agony he was careful not to aggravate.
in his stab wounds, but the pills also clouded his mind and made him feel off. He was irrationally insulted that his life-altering confession had gone ignored. The officer had the nerve to nod along with his entire confession as reiterated through the translator only to thank him for his time and take him to the hotel directly afterward. Anders was certain that he was going to be taken to the station and was still shocked at having ended up in this cozy room instead. It didn’t make any sense. He had been glowering at the window for the better part of an hour by the time a knock at the door startled him out of his consternation.

“Come in,” he called out in English, hoping he wouldn’t have to limp over to answer it. Thankfully, the door cracked open, the white-mustached police officer having unlocked the door for Henrik to squeeze his hulking mass past him. Anders immediately brightened at seeing his brother still alive and well. “Henrik! When did they pick you up? Is Vidar here too?”

“Yeah, uh,” Henrik began, waiting for the door to shut and latch behind him before walking over to one of the beds and sitting nervously on the edge of it. “Way earlier. We’ve been stuck here all day. Did you give them Vidar’s story?”

Anders wrinkled his nose in distaste at having done it, but nodded. “What choice did I have? Not that it mattered. I don’t think the cop even paid attention to a word I’d said.” Henrik let out a huff of relief and Anders waited a beat before continuing. “I told him I killed Leif.”

Henrik’s heavy brow fell. “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you nuts? Leif isn’t even dead!”

“Bullshit,” Anders spat. “I watched him die. I had a syringe filled all the way up with morphine; there’s no way he could have lived through that.”

“Then why are we getting the whole witness protection treatment if he’s no longer a threat, stupid?”

“Maybe because he’s not the only threat. Remember Kyun? For all anyone knows, there could be a whole squad of killers ready to avenge Leif.”

Henrik paused, his glare growing distant as he considered this. “That’s… That’s surprisingly astute of you, Anders.”

“Would it kill you to admit that I’m smart?” Anders smirked. His brother returned his smirk, neither of them feeling the lighthearted teasing they feigned but needing the reassurance that beyond this hell, they could return to normal. Neither of them quite believed that either. A heavy silence fell between them and their smiles waned under the weight of it. When Anders spoke, he couldn’t fake his way past the haunted edge of his tone. “I killed him, though. It doesn’t matter who injected him, I’m the one who murdered him. He was our brother, Henrik.”

Henrik slouched over his folded hands in his lap, his head hung silently for a moment. “Leif stopped being our brother a long time ago. You did what you had to.”

“No. No, I didn’t. That’s the problem,” Anders muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Have you seen Simone yet? Is she here at the same hotel as us?”

Henrik lifted his head to frown at him, his lips pursed into a thin line before he sighed heavily and said, “I don’t think you should consider seeing her.”

Anders sat up straighter, his concern roused at the wording. “Why? What’s wrong? Did something happen to her?”

Henrik’s frown shifted to discomfort, the wide plane of his forehead wrinkling deeply as he stood up and walked to the desk in the opposite corner of the room. He tapped the surface of it in thought and
didn’t turn to Anders as he spoke in a carefully guarded tone. “I just don’t think it’s healthy for you to be around her. For either of you. You haven’t been thinking straight. I’m not blaming you for anything that’s happened, but you… You took her back to Leif, for Christ’s sake. You were almost killed because of that. I mean, can you explain that?”

“And what was your plan again? Wait around and see if she dies?” Anders asked bitterly. “Oh, wait, you weren’t even going to do that much. You’re just going to run home and leave her here. Don’t talk to me about what’s healthy for other people when you don’t give a fuck about anyone but yourself.”

He could tell he’d hurt his brother with his words, but it felt good to wound him. Anders was sick of them assuming the worst of his intentions with his niece when he only wanted to make her happy and keep her safe. He was the only one who really cared for her and that much was made all the more evident in how his brothers would rather just leave her to die rather than accept his relationship with her. They could never understand. Simone was more than just his niece, she was his, and they could either get used to that or stop interfering. He hadn’t yet let anything get in the way of what he had with her, not Leif, not them, not anyone. He was now glad that the officer hadn’t taken his confession seriously. A new plan for their future began to hatch in his mind, one where they could both be free to be with each other as they should.

“I’m sorry, Henrik,” he began, adapting a subdued tone to make this more convincing. “You’re not the one I should be angry at. You’re a victim in all of this, too. And you’re right; I haven’t been thinking straight. It’s hard to stay sane when it feels like the whole world’s gone mad. We’re going to need a lot of time and therapy before we can go back to being who we are, right?”

Henrik smiled sadly and nodded. Anders took three calming breaths to suspend his withered patience before his appeal bore fruit in his softhearted brother.

“Well… I think I heard her just a little earlier,” Henrik conceded, rubbing the back of his head in the awkwardness of accepting an apology.

“You heard her? What was she saying?” Anders asked.

Henrik diverted his attention once more to the desk in his discomfort, shuffling the scant items the hotel had provided courteously. He pretended to be very interested in a box of tissues while he spoke, “Well, we couldn’t hear much through the wall… but she’s not in a hospital, so I’m sure she’s as okay as she can be. Just promise me you won’t go searching her out, alright? Not without me or Vid.”

“Allright,” Anders lied. If they were hearing her through a wall, then she was in one of the rooms next to them. Anders would need to bring her back to his room if he wanted any privacy with her. He was suddenly impatient for his brother to leave. “I should try to get some sleep. Don’t think it’ll happen, but… Oh, what’s your room number? I might want to try to stretch my good leg and come visit.”

“Yeah, come over anytime,” Henrik smiled. “We’re in room 217. Just ask Officer Grady in the hall. He won’t let us even go to the fucking vending machines without him.”

“Goodnight, Henrik,” Anders smiled back, trying not to appear to eager for him to leave.

The large man turned toward the door and paused, his voice just above a whisper as he looked back and said, “Oh, and, about the police…”

“Yes?”
He blinked at Anders, hesitating before shaking his head and resuming his exit. “Never mind. Goodnight, littlest brother.”

Anders stood up once the heavy door latched closed, using the cane from the hospital to walk into the bathroom to clean the blood and antiseptic off his body. He barely noticed the wound in his thigh, but he had to remember that was due to the painkillers and he constantly reminded himself not to overdo it. As he quickly rinsed off the remnants of his surgery, he wondered if he should have felt guilty for deceiving his brothers. He didn’t and that struck him as odd. Perhaps he just didn’t have enough room to feel much of anything else or maybe it was the drugs. As he towed himself dry in front of the mirror, he nearly didn’t recognize his reflection. The skin over his eye sockets had darkened to a violet hue, giving him a gaunt appearance, and the lines in his face seemed to have advanced several years. That was aside from the mottled bruises adorning his jaw, cheekbone, and encircling his right eye. Looking down at his body, he took note of the large patches of blue and purple standing out prominently against his pale white skin. He hadn’t pissed blood again since the first time after the fight in the dining room, so he didn’t feel too concerned with the damage. The knuckles on his hands were purple where they weren’t red from the skin splitting. The bruises would vanish and the stab wounds would close into puckered pink lines with time. He’d go back to being himself eventually, then he would be able to make up for these mistakes and strange behaviors. They just had to make it through this. He tugged on the softer clothes from the box that had been left on the desk and limped out into the hallway with the cane.

“Officer Grady?” he addressed the cop sitting with a newspaper spread in his lap. The old man looked up at him with a weary regard, his thick mustache giving him the appearance of a permanent frown. “You take me to Simone, yes?”

Grady’s bushy brows screwed up in confusion before raising in recognition. “Oh! The little mulatto girl! Yeah, no, she’s sleepin’ by now I imagine.” He turned his attention back to the newspaper. “Soundin’ like someone givin’ birth in that room since she got in, all the blubberin’ she been doin’. Finally got some peace and quiet goin’ on, can’t have you goin’ and stirrin’ ‘er up again.”

Anders looked down the hallway, the patterned carpet and wallpaper giving him a headache after only five seconds of staring while he gathered his English. “I need sleep with her.” When this was met with a dubiously raised eyebrow and a cockeyed glare, he followed it with, “She sleep… not so good. Mare, ah… bad sleep. Bad dream.”

“Is that some kinda thing they do in Europe? Like a touchy-feely family bed thing?”

Anders smiled and nodded. Whatever the old man thought was fine, so long as it got him Simone. Grady folded the paper and hissed out a strained breath through his teeth as he rose to his feet, muttering something Anders could guess he wouldn’t be able to understand even with a perfect grasp of English as he led him to the end of the long hall. He gave two raps of his gnarled knuckles on the door before inserting the keycard and turning the knob.

“Well, good luck with that,” Grady nodded, shuffling back toward his chair and muttering all the way.

Anders walked into the dark room and depended on the layout to be the same as his until he blindly stepped his way past the bathroom that made up a short hall. Strangely, the only source of light was coming from under the bed. After a moment, his eyes adjusted enough for him to see that the room was empty. The bed was still made. He thought that perhaps Grady had taken him to the wrong room until his ears picked up the faint sound of breathing. His wounds ached with the effort as he knelt to the floor alongside the bed, bending further to peer into the narrow space beneath. Simone laid on her front, her sleeping face turned toward him and illuminated by the glow of the flashlight.
that had rolled out of her outstretched hand. He stared in wonder at why she would be doing something as ridiculous as sleeping under the bed, then stared in shock at how young she looked.

He’d seen her asleep before when he was too drunk to recall it clearly and he’d seen her in a drug- or illness-induced unconsciousness, but he’d never seen her in a natural sleep. She looked far younger than her barely 20 years of age, making him feel all at once paternal and guilty. Without the illusion of maturity in her sensual poise or the haunted burden of experience in her gaze, she looked more like a lost little girl than a very young woman. To add to his guilt, he still felt that familiar stab of hunger for her even as he realized this. His stare settled on the slight part of her full lips, the knowledge of just how soft and plush they felt against his mouth stirring the beginnings of an erection, and he knew it was far too late to stop this forbidden lust even in light of this new shame. He had vowed to replace her father, so there was already the knowledge that she was much younger than him. He just hadn’t fully appreciated how much was much younger beyond a simple number. He lightly brushed her outstretched hand, embarrassingly hard for her already. It had to have been the drugs or the trauma. They said being around death often made people want for sex, to feel as alive as possible by indulging in the act that created it. But he didn’t come here for that.

“Simone,” he whispered.

Her silver eyes slit open, the haze of sleep still heavily clouding her awareness until she blinked it away and mumbled in a cracked and raspy voice, “Anders? What... what are you doing here?”

He gently squeezed her hand, smiling in adoration of her sweet confusion, and softly said, “Come. Sleep in bed with me.”
Chapter 36

The aging cop stood in the center of Anders’ suite, his sagging bloodhound eyes glistening in wet fatigue from under the folds of skin that hung over them as he delivered a rehearsed lecture on parameters and protection Simone struggled not to sneer through. Nothing he said mattered. He wasn’t there to protect them, no matter how many times that word hit and sizzled away in the heat of her hatred. Anders sat on the edge of the bed, waiting with considerably more patience for this man to finish lecturing them on why it was important for them to remain in their assigned rooms while also contradicting himself in saying they were free to move about this secured floor. She watched her uncle, her eyes automatically scanning for signs of injury or distress as he nodded along with the cop, and she wondered if she would ever look at him normally again or if she would always be wary of his wellbeing first. It reminded her of the way her mother started looking at her after she picked her up from that first psychiatric appointment with a printout detailing the antipsychotic medication she was to begin. She didn’t want to make anyone feel the way that look made her feel, but the discomfort displayed in his rigid posture and the nervousness in the way his thumb rubbed rhythmically over his tightly folded hands agitated that responsibility to his wellbeing. At the moment, this stranger was impacting his wellbeing and she responded to it with mounting hostility.

“… safety is our primary objective. In the midst of a chaotic situation, we can’t be-

“You can cut the crap, Officer Friendly,” Simone interrupted his third recitation of that point. He stopped with a sputter and, sensing his immediate offense, she responded to it like a shark smelling blood in the water. That it might be her blood in the immediate future did not matter to her. The taste of her own venom spilling into her words was hot and sweet on her tongue. “You have no legal or constitutional obligation to protect us from the sick fucks you’re attracting with all the cop cars parked at this hotel. We’d be better off not being used as bait in this trap, so you’re fucking welcome we aren’t lawyering the fuck out of this fucked up game your bosses are playing with our lives.”

Grady’s complexion reddened with an anger she had no patience for as he stammered, “Now, see here, young lady, I will not be talked to-

“If you want it so bad, I’ll fucking give you a reason to force my compliance!” she snapped abruptly, her teeth baring in that snarl finally unleashed in her hunger for conflict.

“Did you just threaten an officer of the law, little lady?” Grady seethed as his posture straightened into the practiced authority of a seasoned beat cop. She grinned at the way the officer’s eyes bulged out from under his sagged lids before she was suddenly pushed back by a hand grabbing her shoulder.

A shocked and panicked Anders shot out between them, one hand placatingly held up to Grady as he stammered, “Sorry! Sorry! Simone, she-she not okay, yeah? She is not understand, she is a, ah, sick, yes? Yes.”

“You mind her, then!” Grady bellowed, poking a gnarled finger at Anders. The mad urge to lunge for his neck passed through Simone like a rogue wave, rocking her already cracked composure, but her uncle kept her shoved firmly down onto the mattress. “That mouth on her is gonna get her brains blown out if she goes off on the wrong guy, hear? Mind her!”

“Yes, sir!” Anders responded quickly.

Simone slowly dragged her tongue over her bared teeth as the officer fixed her with a pointed look, making him scoff out a frustrated huff and stomp away. Once the door shut, Anders slid onto the bed
and gathered her up in a firm hug from behind, the arm on his uninjured side squeezing her back into him uncomfortably tight. She stiffened at the pressure. Her body ached from the violence of men and pumped fear into this contact, but this was Anders. He wouldn’t hurt her unless he had to. As his arm pressed between her breasts and his fingers dug like claws into her shoulder, she had to remember that it was her sweet uncle behind her.

“Hvorfor fornærmet du ham?” he whispered harshly, his breath shaking out of him and brushing along her neck and reopened bite wound. She squeezed her eyes shut against the urge to shiver as each word vibrated so close to those vulnerable spaces, the hard consonants bringing a chilling reminder of teeth. Fear and a thrilling exhilaration quickened her breath and stirred a strange excitement in her as he spoke. “What… Why you are… angry? The politibetjent help you. Do not speak bad to him.”

“Are you… mad at me for that?” she asked, genuine surprise rising over that insistent tingle of fear. She tried to turn her head to look at him, unable to comprehend how he could be upset with her, but he grabbed her chin and kept her face forward as he pressed himself closer.

He was nearly on top of her, his much larger frame molded to every inch of her he could touch, and her heart began to pound quick and loud in that confusing fear response as he whispered, “Yes. Do not speak so bad to men. You are… liten… small and delikat. It is not good. Men hurt you.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being protective or punitive but either way, he was mistaken. “He’s not our bodyguard, Anders, he’s our warden. We’re not being kept here for our safety.”

“No, no, listen, Simone! Do not! Do not speak to men!” he scolded, his voice lowering harshly. Her breath hitched to a stop in response to this obvious anger in his tone, his embrace now feeling much more like a restraining hold and she tried to wriggle out of it. “You need be careful! Men hurt you!”

“You’re hurting me!” she grumbled, trying in vain to move away from him. His grasp didn’t allow her an inch of success in this attempt, feeding that reflexive fear to border on panic. “Let me go!”

“Do you understand?” he demanded.

“I- No! No, I don’t understand! I won’t grovel to these assholes!”

He rolled them so he laid on top of her and she groaned in protest of his weight pressing her front into the bed. This was undeniably a restraint, disabling her from being able to move much at all or even breathe as deeply as her lungs burned to pant in the rising panic of this position. She stopped her voice from whimpering in fear as he growled out, “Do not speak to men! You need understand! It is not safe!”

Her thoughts were a blur of confusion, wondering why he was acting so strangely while her fear warred with her anger. She was intellectually aware that this was coming from a place of concern from him, but that knowledge did little to curtail the gut reactions to this method of displaying that worry. Her struggles redoubled and she managed to get one arm out from under them, blindly grasping above her for purchase to haul herself out.

“Fortell meg! Do you understand?!” he snapped, his deepened voice and suffocating hold pulling out memories of a cloth gag muffling her screams.

Are you sorry yet?

She tried to tell him that she understood, that she would be good and stay safe like he asked her to, but her voice wouldn’t cooperate. Panic seared through her, making her yank down the bedding with
her free arm in a futile but uncontrollable effort to escape as she tried to writhe beneath him. Choked little noises worked past that thick block in her throat, but no words would form from her arrested vocal chords. This was too similar to how her father had crushed her into the mattress, pressing her chest down until she couldn’t draw in breath unless he allowed it. Flashbacks to so many horrible punishments threatened the edges of her mind, each fighting to overpower her consciousness and pull her back to those moments. She couldn’t lose any more control than she’d already lost, not while he was pressing down above her, not while he was so incensed, but a thick veil fell over her mind.

She had to survive. He was wounded, she could use that to her advantage and attack those weak points to gain escape, but in this position and with him blocking the point of exit, the risk was too great for that approach. She needed to deescalate the violence, direct the trajectory toward something less likely to result in her injury or death. Unable to speak, unable to move away, unable to think, she gave into that instinctive drive to submit and to please. Her rigid muscles relaxed, surrendering to him, and her panting slowed to trembling breaths. Her freed hand slowly slid down to caress the fingers that still grasped her chin and she could feel him drawing back cautiously.

“Simone?” he whispered, his anger now gone from his voice, but she couldn’t trust that he wouldn’t still lash out. He lifted himself off her, resting his weight on his good leg and arm as he loomed above her prone body. “Kjære? You are okay?”

The question drifted through her, heard but not as words. The sound of his voice only reinforced that drive to please, the success in mollifying his anger feeding her hunch to use touch to display her submission. Not wanting to accidentally convey a challenge, she remained lying on her front as she trailed her trembling fingers up his arm and hoped this would calm him further. When he grabbed her hand, her heart jumped in a stab of panic, but his thumb traced the inside of her palm sweetly and his body lowered to cover her in an affectionate contact that didn’t crush or suffocate.

“I’m sorry, kjære,” he said, nuzzling into her hair. “Jeg har ikke tenkt å skremme deg.”

Her mind was still too muddled with fear, that trancelike state of submission drowning all thought under the overwhelming need to survive this aggressive male. It would be so easy for him to kill her. Anything less than that she could distract him with was far preferable. The way he aligned their bodies so his pelvis pressed into the soft flesh of her backside hinted at what she could offer as an appeasement. With a shaking sigh, she took the risk and tested this hunch with a slight roll of her hips, resisting the urge to freeze up when his hand tightened around hers and his body tensed.

“Fuck…” he whispered, a throb from his groin encouraging her to move against the growing bulge. His hand moved to trace her hip in a languid caress that confirmed his desire to her. “Vi trenger ikke å gjøre det, kjære…”

Heat spilled over her fear, his scent penetrating that thick fog of this dissociative state with a tug of familiarity. Thought trickled into her mind, telling her that she knew this man, but she shoved it back down. It was easier not to think while she did this. Thought only brought pain and unnecessary complication to this necessary act. Closing her eyes, she fell into that pool of heat that made this so simple and easy. Sex was useful to this man, and if she could stay useful, then she could stay alive. There was no point in feeling sad about it. She focused on delighting in her survival as he helped her slide her pants down. His mouth was hot and wet against her neck, dragging out sighs and moans as pleasure radiated so close to the stinging bite, and that heat of arousal tingled through her body to drown out any stray thought to the unwilling nature of this act. His touch was pleasing, his scent was enticing, and his lust was intoxicating. She could accept her role under his domination with little difficulty. She had no choice. There was no point in crying, but the tears came anyway.
He really didn’t mean for any of this. He just needed her to understand that she shouldn’t provoke people like that. She was so tiny and fragile, it was madness for her to be so hostile to anyone. But she was mad. It was hard to remember her insanity when she seemed so normal most of the time, making the reminders of her mental status harsh to witness. Officer Grady was right; Anders had to mind her or she would really get herself into a situation she couldn’t walk away from. Holding her down beneath him, he struggled with how he was supposed to do that when he couldn’t even convince her that what she had done was wrong. As much as it pained him to do so, he had to make her fear. When she had stopped speaking and just trembled beneath him, however, he worried that he had gone too far. In truth, he knew he had no idea what he was doing. He’d wanted to fill that role Leif had left, to take care of her and be whatever she needed, but at the first sign of adversity from her, he fucked up. When she touched his hand with that gentle caress, the relief that washed over him was powerful, but when she pressed her ass against his crotch and shivered, he was once again plunged into that uncertainty of how to handle her. Her behavior was so erratic, he wasn’t sure what the proper response was to any of it. But she was soft and warm against him, her motions so gentle but so intent, it made trying to think nearly impossible.

“We don’t have to do it, dear…” he whispered even as he ran his hand over the sensual curve of her hip.

Looking down at her beneath him, seeing her back arch to slide her ass against his rapidly growing erection, his chest tightened in profound affection for her. The searing lust she invoked was something uncontrollable and strange to him even still. For all the mental resistance he tried to guard himself with in knowing that this wasn’t the time or place to engage in sexual activity with her, especially right after such a traumatic day, feeling her heat and inhaling her scent was enough to make him question that very set logic. He shouldn’t allow this to happen. He had to take care of her, but he was sliding her pants down and he couldn’t stop his hand from tugging that offending barrier away. He’d brought her into his room to provide her comfort, but he’d ended up doing quite the opposite. Maybe she needed sex to comfort her.

The moans she made when he sucked at the side of her neck made his cock throb and weep with precum, those raw and beautiful sounds wiping those trifling thoughts from his mind. Maybe they both needed this. He yanked down his pants far enough to free his cock and pressed it to her slippery entrance, the pliancy of her soft flesh stretching around his tip as he teased it inside her making him gasp. She felt too good. Each time, she surprised him with how good she felt around him, her impossible softness threatening to make him come too soon.

“God damn,” he groaned, sinking his length into her slick heat as she tensed and mewled in panting breaths beneath him.

She was almost uncomfortably tight around him this time; he regretted not engaging her in more foreplay, but there was an urgency in her as well. Almost a franticness, as though her life depended on getting his dick inside her. While he couldn’t deny that played well to his ego, he had to remember that she was a small and delicate thing. He leaned his weight more heavily on his good knee and arm, concentrating on holding his fervor back as he penetrated her more slowly. They had plenty of time to go slow. Her hitched and shaking panting was interspersed with high little girlish whimpers that made him want to drive into her harshly just to hear her cry out loudly for him, but he resisted that idea, keeping firmly in mind she was still injured from before. He pushed down the memory of before quickly. That would never happen again. He leaned down, dropping to his elbow to lay over her more closely, and kissed her neck. She turned her head to expose more of that sensitive skin to him and he greedily lapped at the salt of her sweat, but he wanted her mouth.
“Look at me,” he whispered, kissing up the side of her jaw. “Look to me, dear.”

When she kept her face hidden from him, he nuzzled her until he felt the damp of tears on her cheek. Alarm had his hand grasping her shoulder and turning her upper body, his terrible suspicion confirmed in the fear he found so clearly etched in her features. He froze, bewildered at what exactly was happening and worried at her sudden change in mood.

“You are okay?” he asked. She shut her eyes and bit her lip as she slid him in to the hilt in one harsh thrust, the sudden motion making him sputter out a curse and grip her tightly. “Ah! Fuck, wait! Stop, dear!”

She didn’t listen, rocking her hips back against him to fuck him into her, and he tried to still her but found that he couldn’t do that and hold himself up at the same time. Her fists gripped the bedding tight and her breaths hitched into a high feminine grunt with the effort of fucking herself on him as he struggled between stopping her or reciprocating. The wetness that dripped down his sac from her arousal and the molten pleasure of her sex convinced him to pursue the latter. He pressed his lower body onto hers heavily, slowing her frantic pace and rocking into her at a more sustainable rhythm, one that wouldn’t have him coming in a mere matter of seconds.

“Easy, dear, easy,” he soothed, nuzzling her turned cheek. She moaned as he thrust into her in controlled rolling motions and he squeezed a hand beneath her. “You are good, yes? Not hurt?”

She answered him with a surprised cry when he began to rub her clitoris, the high pitch extending into her panting and unintelligible moans. Her back arched to lift her hips higher to him, driving him in deeper and trying to increase their pace. He almost chuckled at her impatience, indulging her by giving her a few hard thrusts that made her yelp and squirm, but he could hear the sharp edge of pain in her cries even as she seemed to want it. Her tolerance for pain, or rather, her active pursuit of it befuddled him. Of course, he’d known that there were people who enjoyed pain in a sexual context, but his sweet little Simone seemed too innocent and victimized for that to be true of her. The thought of her in pain was upsetting, but the thought of her enjoying pain was just… confusing. Curiously, he snapped his pelvis sharply and produced a cringe and a cry from the girl, though not of displeasure. Her muscles tensed around him at the pain he’d inflicted, generating an instant regret from this feedback as well as a disturbing thrill in him. It was just fascination. A very morbid fascination that he shouldn’t satisfy, but he needed to know more.

“Dear…” he started, but he couldn’t think of how to phrase something so strange, let alone in English.

He peeled the raggedy knit sweater off her instead, but came to regret that when he saw the long stripes of bruises from the belting she’d endured as well as the bite wound that had reopened. Still fucking her at his languid pace, he traced the worst of those bruises. The reds and purples seemed almost pretty on her darker complexion, not startlingly contrast like the ones on his pale skin. At that horrid thought, he slid out of her, turned her onto her back and quickly thrust back into her again. She gasped sharply at the sudden reentry and he pulled her into a frantic kiss, finally feeling that plush mouth against his as he sought to erase that strange thought from his mind. He loved her; he could never want to see her battered or bruised, he could never purposefully hurt her. There was nothing pretty about her pain. There was nothing about her distress, her submissiveness, or her vulnerability that excited him.

An anxious energy drove him to thrust harder and faster into her, his insistent kiss muffling her cries. He groaned, slowing each time he felt on the verge of climax, his thumb rubbing at her clitoris and making her shiver and whimper as he pulled his hand away with each denial along with him. The bedding beneath them was drenched in their sweat and a more viscous circle of her fluid. She was so
responsive to his touch, so eager to take his cock, and so frantic for him to let her orgasm, part of him wanted to do this all night. She was nearly sobbing with need, her narrow ribcage shuddering with each breath, and he pulled back to look at her in her desperation. He nearly spilled into her at how savagely erotic she looked with the raw lust in her flushed face and her bared skin glistening in sweat.

“Tell me…” he whispered breathlessly. “Tell me who you love.”

At first, she could only whimper unintelligibly, so he slowed his motions to motivate her to use words. She groaned and tried to fuck herself on him faster, but he only leaned heavily into her until she couldn’t move. Her nails dug into his shoulders and he smirked at her fervor. She was so endearingly impatient.

At last, she took a deep shuddering breath and answered, “Y-you, Papa. I love you.”

Anders felt a frisson of pleasure run up his spine, the buzzing pulse of it swirling in his mind as he pressed his open mouth to her neck and sucked while he rubbed her clit between their slick bodies and fucked her harder. Her voice sung out a throaty moan as her cunt spasmed around his cock when he finally let her climax, the deep pelvic muscles flexing to draw him in deeper. He knew what her body wanted.

“Ready, dear?” he whispered raggedly, his cock tensing in the need to release.

“Yes, Papa,” Simone breathed.

He hummed in approval, then groaned low in the pleasure of pumping her full of his semen. Her sharp little gasps at each throb and pulse of his cock drew out his satisfaction, the thick spill of his seed filling her deep in her cunt where it belonged. When he lifted his mouth from the crook of her neck, he licked his lips and tasted blood.

A loud knocking at the door awoke them, but it was the slide of a keycard entering the slot that had Simone leap out of bed with the grace of a newborn fawn and knock hard into a wall before making it into the bathroom.

“Simone Valstad, I’m here to escort you to your interview with Special Agent Maier,” an unfamiliar male voice spoke from the doorway.

“Nope!” she said from behind the bathroom door. “Come back later!”

“Some minutes, please, officer,” she heard Anders acquiesce, his accent somehow even thicker as sleep fogged his voice.

“Later!” she repeated insistently.

“I’ll come back in thirty minutes,” the officer announced, the heavy door clicking shut afterward.

“Fuck,” she grumbled. Her fingers carded through her hair and her back hit the wall before sliding down to the floor. She couldn’t do this again. She felt nauseous and weak, the long strange night not affording her much sleep until the early hours of the morning with how her nightmares had plagued her. “Fuck, fuck, fuck…”
“Kjære, you need help?” Anders asked through the door.

Her immediate reaction was to decline, but her shaking hands and rubbery limbs told her that she did, in fact, need help. “Yes, please.”

A sleepy but surprisingly alert Anders stepped into the spacious bathroom, his sympathetic smile at seeing her huddled on the floor making her chest ache in some unknown longing. He ruffled her hair affectionately and turned on the shower taps. She watched him move about, his limp noticeable but no longer so impeding and his posture back to that easy confidence it was in those first days. It was startling. He was, so far as she could tell, completely refreshed. When he held out his hand to her to help her up, she could only stare at him in wonder at what magic or madness could have possibly caused such a radical change in him overnight.

“Come, min kjære,” he grinned, grabbing her wrist and hauling her up with his good arm.

He began undressing, a process she did not require as her clothes had been lost at some point in the nightmare-filled night. Or they had had sex. She wasn’t sure exactly how much of their intimacy was real and how much of it had been twisted by her night terrors. Glancing in the mirror and seeing the dark splotches of hickey marks along the sides of her neck, she supposed much of it had indeed occurred. A cold sweat shivered across her skin at the faint details.

“Did I… Did I do or say anything, um, weird last night?” she asked.

He turned that bright-eyed smile to her with a curious tilt of his head, grinning even as he said, “You speak bad to Officer Grady.”

“No, no, after that,” she specified.

He glanced away briefly, a shadow of something troubling ghosting over his expression before a fond smile brightened his cheer once more and he answered with a shrug. He pulled her into the large shower stall, the spotless clean glass walls and stone tiling bringing her to acknowledge that they had locked her and Anders in a rather upscale hotel, most likely an off-season ski resort. From a modern high-rise New York apartment, to a stately country manor, to a luxury resort hotel, her cages had always at least been gilded. Knowing this wasn’t coming out of either the FBI’s or the local PD’s pocketbooks and that her father’s accounts were almost definitely in escrow, she wondered who exactly was funding their stay. She wondered if it was that enigmatic “we” Maier had referred to, but nothing about his approach had hinted at courting her cooperation through friendly gestures. His handling of her had already assumed her cooperation. Her lip curled away from her teeth in a slow snarl as impotent frustration boiled in her with the knowledge that he was right in that assumption. She barely knew what was happening, but she had no choice but to play along. There was no one she could turn to for help in whatever this was and there was no escape.

She was forced out of her dour thoughts by Anders poking her bared teeth with the minty bristles of a toothbrush and he chuckled when she flinched away from it. His tone was light and teasing as he said, “You are not the morning person, yes?”

She pushed aside her thoughts and feelings of her unfortunate near future and replied in mock irritability as she accepted the toothbrush, “I’m not an anytime person.”

As she brushed her teeth, he lathered her with the citrusy hotel soap. He hummed as his rough hands gently worked the suds over the abused skin of her back and avoided the open wound of her bite. There was something so infectious about his good humor, a quality she’d nearly forgotten had initially attracted her to him. He really seemed back to his old self, perhaps better. Whatever had taken hold of him, she wished she could stay and linger in this welcome departure from the misery
that had consumed their lives. It was surprisingly easy to force herself to forget the outside world when she was with him. He laughed at her when she spat a mouthful of toothpaste froth at the pristine glass wall and smeared it into the shape of a heart. His arms wrapped around her middle, pulling her towards him under the warm stream of water to rinse off the suds, and she found it so natural to stand on her tiptoes and kiss him. She'd meant it to be only a quick gesture, but he tugged her back when she began to pull away and tilted his head to deepen their kiss. This was the easy and free affection she’d so often longed for in a lover, all comfort and pleasantness to bolster her heart with against the harshness of the world. When she slowly pulled away this time, the affection that glittered in his eyes when he looked at her made it tempting to fantasize about having this to keep.

“Jeg elker deg, min kjære,” he smiled.

“I love you too, Anders,” she smiled back.

“Please,” he said, tugging her closer. She startled in surprise at his erection pressing against her belly, her face heating in a blush that seemed silly now after all her interaction with it. But when he leaned down and whispered in her ear, the blood heating her cheeks fell in a chill as she paled. “Call me ‘Papa’.”
Simone stared out the window to the blur of trees they passed in the boxy unmarked Ford SUV, her mind distracted almost entirely from the discomfort of being driven by a stranger with a gun strapped to his hip and from the dread of the coming interview. In her rush to get a moment alone to process all that Anders’ ominous request had implied, she’d nearly run into Henrik as she bolted from the suite to dress in her room. While she was glad to know he was alive and uninjured, she did a poor job conveying that sentiment at seeing his bewildered features harden into an angry frown. Of course, it had to be Henrik to catch her slinking out of there like a guilty mistress. Leaving his room so early in the morning in only a towel, her hair still dripping from the shower, it would have been obvious to anyone what had happened in there. She didn’t have the mental fortitude to even consider handling that with any level of grace or humility just then with Anders’ words still wreaking havoc on her mind, opting to avert her gaze and refrain from literally running away. Even in the relative calm of the car, her mind still reeled too chaotically for her to consider that situation with anything more than a cringe before dismissing it to be dealt with later. The backlog of troubles she’d been collecting seemed endless, but one matter rose above the others in its urgency.

“You want me to run the heat higher, miss?” the officer asked.

“No,” she answered mechanically, not considering the cold that nipped through the baggy hooded sweatshirt and drawstring track pants she’d yanked blindly out of the box of donated clothing.

“You been shiverin’ since we stepped outside,” he said, his tone not friendly so much as it was simply overly familiar. She could recognize a man who was accustomed to getting his way using such obnoxious methods by the sound of his cadence. “I can tell you aren’t from around here because you went out on a Spring morning with your hair still wet. Gonna catch your death of cold that way. So, where you from?”

Simone turned her glare to this cop, an acidic quip on the tip of her tongue that evaporated as the memory of Anders shoving her into the mattress and commanding her not to talk to men flashed in her mind.

“Not here,” she answered tersely, turning her wilted gaze back to the blur of green.

“Usually they tell me a little about the folks I cart around on special cases,” he continued, much to her annoyance. She just needed a moment to think, but that was obviously not going to happen so long as this man kept trying to bully her into a conversation she was being blatant about not wanting. “Not you, though. Top secret. Classified. They just gave me the who and where and cussed me out when I wanted the what and why. You’re not a sus or a con, though. Your juvie record is sealed, but you do have one. So, what is it about you that’s got everyone’s panties in a wad?”

Simone looked at this cop, letting her observations spill freely through her irritation. “You’re not from around here either. What accent is that? Chicago? You’re too old to be an academy-fresh recruit sent down to the slim pickings of a bottom litter Podunk back wood force. What was it that got you kicked out of the good old boys of Chi-town? Was it this lack of regard for rules and conduct, or did a hooker dime you out? Too bad they didn’t like you enough to let you skate on that. Your coworkers, I mean, not the hooker. You couldn’t pay someone enough to find your cracker ass likeable.”

The look on his face was enough confirmation for her to turn back to the window and ignore his loud, barking offense with the same dismissiveness she would employ to ignore a yapping dog. The anger of common men was so trifling to encounter and simple to invoke; even the presence of his
gun didn’t strike her nearly half as thrilling as the mere scent of Leif. A scent so similar to his brothers’. She rubbed her runny nose and looked down at her loose sweatshirt. The curves of her body were completely concealed by the soft miasma of fabric and the excess legroom of the large SUV was wasted on her small stature, reminding her of a childhood that really wasn’t too long ago. She pressed her hands to her abdomen, molding the baggy top to her body to find that her adult form hadn’t regressed underneath. She pulled the material to billow away from her in an irritated tug. It wasn’t as though an absence of womanly features had stopped her father from partaking, anyway. Maier’s knowledge sat heavily on her mind then. Fourteen. She’d still had braces. She’d still worn those modest cotton panties her mother would buy for her by the five-pack at department stores, the ones with butterflies and flowers on them. Her father had looked at that scrawny little punk kid and decided to “test sexual interaction” on her. Simone shivered, cold nausea churning her gut, unsure if she should feel sad or angry or relieved he’d done it while she was drugged. She wished she could hate him. She wished she’d wanted him to be dead. It wouldn’t be better, but it would be simpler if she didn’t still feel a ravenous ache for him. An ache Anders had helped soothe as he, unwittingly or not, had enforced his dominance over her. She could only hope it was unwittingly.

“Pull over,” she blurted out abruptly, interrupting whatever vehemence spewed from the still fuming cop before she clapped a hand over her watering mouth. “Oh, don’t you fucking dare hurl in this car, bitch!” he yelled.

She considered doing it to annoy him further, but they still had forty minutes to drive to the police station and she didn’t want to spend that time having to hear him complain. The lurch of the vehicle as he slowed and swerved suddenly to the shoulder brought the unpleasant warmth of fluid further up her esophagus, making the muscles in her throat contract involuntarily. This illness she had acquired was getting worse in waves, making eating impossible and keeping her weak to the point that the energy she expelled in retching brought darkness in the corners of her vision. She barely made it three stumbling steps out into the side of the road before coughing up the water she’d had as breakfast. The thought of having to go back to the hospital and let strangers touch and see her body brought an anxiety that didn’t help her nausea. When her heaving had satisfied itself to exhaustion, she noticed the sheriff’s patrol car parked behind the SUV and the brown-shirted deputy that stood watching her.

“You alright there, Miss Valstad?” he asked.

Simone spat into the puddle of bile-soured water before straightening and grousing out a hoarse, “Peachy. Do you want something from me, or are you just enjoying the show?”

To his credit, the deputy had the humor she was finding to be rare in these lawmen to grin at her petulant response. “Change of plans. We’re taking you home.”

Henrik could count on one hand the number of times he’d been this livid, each carrying with it an action of violence that had always left him sick with regret later. Watching his niece scurry toward the room she was supposed to have been, her rattled expression before realizing his presence telling him far more about what had happened in there than even her state of undress, he had to remember that he detested violence. Rage billowed like smoke in his lungs and he breathed it out slowly through his flared nostrils. A terrible energy thrummed through his muscles, making them flex and tense in the urge to break down the door and strangle Anders. He was not a violent man. He wouldn’t let himself be, no matter how tempting this rare impulse was. He breathed slowly and shut out those savage thoughts until his shaking fists relaxed and he could imagine saying what needed to
be said without the accompaniment of pummeling. He banged on the door louder than he’d meant.

Anders stood in a terry cloth bathrobe, as wet as Simone had been and smelling of the same citrusy soap, bringing Henrik’s blood back to a boil as his youngest brother greeted him with a cheery, “Good morning!”

Henrik shoved past him into the room, unable to look at him as he nearly growled, “We need to talk.”

“Sure, I think I have some time in my busy schedule,” Anders joked, letting the door shut as he followed.

Henrik resisted rounding on him with a haymaker for being so flippant, but he let the rage slide off him with a deep breath before he turned to look at him. Anders wasn’t put off by the anger Henrik didn’t try to hide, sitting casually on the edge of the bed and taping a clean pad of waterproof gauze over the sutures on his chest. Henrik was momentarily shocked out of his thoughts at the sight of the wound, the brief account of events from the policemen after his interview having provided only the roughest idea of what Leif had tried to do to him, but the carefully maintained detachment of his brother brought him back to his rage.

“Just what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Anders didn’t look up from his task, gently smoothing the corner of the gauze down before applying the tape as he said, “Aftercare.”

Henrik grit his teeth in frustration. “With Simone, stupid.”

This time, he looked straight at him, his nonchalance giving way to solemnity as he repeated, “Aftercare.”

“Is that what you’re calling it?” Henrik jeered. “I have to admit, it sounds a lot better than ‘sticking my dick in my blood-related niece—”

“Henrik…”

“-who is barely out of her teens—”

“Henrik.”

“- and too fucked up in the head—”

“Henrik!”

“- to FUCKING KNOW ANY BETTER’!” Henrik finished in a shout above his brother’s interruption. Both men glared at each other, but Anders’ calm was only irking him more. It was all he could do to keep his fists curled at his side and his feet rooted to the floor. “Are you even going to try to deny any of that, or does the truth just not concern you?”

“Did you want to talk, or did you just want to yell?” Anders asked, that annoying calm driving Henrik to look away in disgust.

“What I want is to knock your head off,” he answered in a snarl. “But I’m settling for talking.”

“Then let me say something: I owe you an apology. You were right. About everything. I did some awful, unforgivable things… but I think I know how I can start making up for them.”
Henrik looked at him, the urge to violence finally creeping back at the sign of guilt in the younger man. The anger that had taken hold of him was still there, but quieted enough for him to find the fear of losing another brother. The madness Leif had been rife with seemed to spread to everyone around him like a disease. Simone had long since succumbed to it, Vidar seemed as though his mind might have been permanently tainted, and Anders had lost all perspective on the wickedness he had been doing. He leaned against the wall, wringing his hands anxiously in hope that this humble tone his youngest brother had adopted led to sanity.

Anders kept his somber stare on the wound in his thigh as he spoke. “I know she’s everything you’ve said she is. She’s a crazy, mixed-up kid but she’s more than that. She jumped on a man with a gun in his hand and killed him to protect us. To protect you. She saved your life; would you still call that insanity?”

“I would call that reckless,” Henrik answered guardedly. “And, yes, insane.”

Anders fixed a hardened stare at him. “Bravery. Selflessness. Loyalty. That’s what I call it. She stayed with us, not because she wanted to run away, but because she wanted to keep us safe. Vidar was right; she would have gone back to Leif the second we lifted off US soil because she thought he was all she had. Her loyalty to family is just so… I can’t leave her. She belongs to me and I’m going to take care of her.”

Henrik groaned, frustration pounding between his eyes and he pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off a headache. “Would you stop fucking saying that? It is seriously, truly creepy!”

“That’s not what I mean,” Anders said. “I was… confused. Leif got in my head and really messed me up, but I’m thinking clearly now. I feel like a monster, but… We’re family and it’s time we started acting that way. I’m going to take her in and look after her as my daughter.”

Henrik’s anger shifted in a discomfort he couldn’t name, a slick chill sliding in his gut at his brother’s bizarre announcement. “You fucked her! You fucked her just the other day and you probably fucked her last night! Jesus Christ, you were just taking a shower with her!”

“She’s still very weak, so I had to help her in the shower. Besides,” Anders countered, a faraway look in his eye as though recalling a distant memory, “normal people don’t experience arousal toward their close relatives. We’re just very close.”

Henrik wanted to believe him. He wanted to let him pull the wool over his eyes and become blind to the signs that pointed in the opposite direction of this truth he was trying to sell him.

“Did you fuck her?” he demanded. “Just… look me in the eye and tell me the truth. Did you fuck her last night?”

Anders obliged, lifting his sky-blue eyes to him in solemn regard as he said, “I found her hiding under the bed in her room in the dark. I took her back here, we got in bed together… and I held her until we fell asleep. I didn’t do any of that with the intention of fucking her. It just felt so natural to take care of her. I’m sorry I broke the promise I made to you, Henrik, but I can’t ignore her when she’s in need.”

The chances of this being true were nearly impossible, but Henrik had seen how quickly a person could change and how little he could know someone he thought he’d known even all his life. Maybe it was possible that a man could truly repent. Possible, but unlikely. He needed more to quell the churning sickness of doubt in him.

“So that’s it? You just suddenly saw the error of your ways and decided that you, a childless 29-
year-old bachelor, are the most qualified person to take in a mentally ill girl? You’re a good guy, probably the nicest guy I know, but you can’t do that,” Henrik said, trying not to let his voice rise or his teeth grind. He pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead, shutting his eyes and clenching his jaw against the urge to scream before he was able to continue, “Simone isn’t one of your deadbeat floozie girlfriends who needs you to ‘save’ her from herself; she’s legitimately fucked up. And you helped fuck her up. You don’t get to take her home and play house with her after that. It’s not your role, anyway. She should be with her mother, if anyone.”

“The woman who sold her to the devil himself?” Anders scoffed, his lip curling back in a mirthless grin as he shook his head. “No. No, I don’t think so. Simone needs someone who can handle her, not someone who sees her as a burden.”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“I am. What I’m hearing is that you would rather leave her to the wolves than let me have her. But it’s not up to you. I’m not asking your permission, Henrik, I’m telling you what’s already happened.”

Henrik’s head shot up from the cradle of his hands, a sharp alarm running through his brain. “What the hell happened to you? That sounds like something Leif-”

“Don’t!” Anders snapped in a sudden shout that shocked Henrik into pause. “Just... don’t. Okay? He’s dead. Let’s leave him in the past and focus on the future. We’re going to go home and things are going to go back to normal. The only thing that’s going to change is that I’ll have Simone. Alright?”

Henrik stared at him, seeing the darkness rimming his eyes and the sickly pallor of his skin, and felt a heaviness stuff his aching head with a dire hopelessness. “Alright. Alright, littlest brother. I hear you.”

His feet took him out of the room, down the hallway, and he stood in front of the door to the suite he shared with Vidar as he tried and failed to compose himself. He pressed his heavy forehead against the wood, shutting his eyes against the tears he knew he couldn’t hold back, and focused on just holding himself together for a moment. There was nothing he could do to stop the madness from rotting away the sense in his brother. They may have escaped Leif, but it seemed as though Anders would always hear his terrible whispers. Henrik could only hope that their littlest brother would tell them to someone who could help before he did something worse.

The house was buzzing with activity, the dozens of crime scene investigators and agents wearing navy jackets with bright yellow lettering announcing their status as FBI flitting about and concentrating on their specialized little areas. Simone sat awkwardly on the sofa in the living room, watching a man take gruelingly tedious interest in opening and leafing through every book in the baroquely carved case along the wall while the forensic psychologist looked over the test sheets she’d had her fill out. Simone’s hands were numb and tingly, making the process of filling in the columns of true or false bubbles almost as arduous as the alternatingly absurd and mundane questions. It had taken her nearly two hours to complete the 567 questions and that was after being grilled about her medical history, which when spoken aloud, had sounded suspicious even to her own ears. She was already too exhausted to suspect the meaning behind each question and gave into blunt honesty with an unfeeling detachment. Sleep tugged at her eyelids each time she blinked despite the anxiety that foamed in her brain. She must have nodded off at some point because the room was empty when she opened her eyes.
Her ears perked at the soft sound of a voice echoing from down the hallway. Not the murmuring and rambling of professional tones discussing evidence, but the inviting gentleness of singing. Curiosity drove her to stand and walk toward that voice, her hand dragging along the bone white wall of the hallway to steady herself. Her breath was sucked out of her as her heart seemed to stop at the sight of Leif standing in the kitchen, his broad back turned to her as he worked at the counter and hummed out an unfamiliar tune.

“Papa?” she whispered, her voice squeaking past her breathlessness but still too quiet to be heard.

He continued to hum, the knock of a knife on the wooden cutting board keeping time with his tune as his arm moved with the motion of chopping. Simone’s relief washed over her in a cleansing wave, pushing her forward into the kitchen on shaking legs without her thinking to move. Her tears fell without warning and they floated up from her easily, spilling hot and fast. She had not senselessly murdered her own father. The breath that pushed out of her expelled all the tension and toxic pain she’d carried since seeing him lying on the floor so horribly silent and still. Her chest expanded and ached sweetly as she drew in a deep and shuddering breath, filling herself with this feeling of peace. There was still so much to worry about, but this moment was suspended in the singular joy of freedom from that sin. Leif’s humming and chopping stopped when she wrapped her arms around his middle, his warm and solid body so comfortingly familiar that it made her throat ache in a constricting sob.

“I’m sorry, Papa, I’m so sorry…” she whimpered, pressing her wet cheek to his back.

His hand, carrying the zesty and sweet scent of freshly cut citrus, gripped her shoulder to keep her still as he turned. She looked up and, blinking away the tears that blurred her vision, bit her lip against another shaking sob when she saw his slight smile. He cupped her cheek and tilted her head back further, the edge of the knife handle warm along her jaw and his fingers slightly wet and sticky, and she let her eyes fall shut when he bent down. The light pressure of his lips against hers made her breathe out a quivering sigh as a tingling electricity buzzed in her from the contact. That feverish need for him was all at once gorged and burgeoning insistently, squirming inside her mind in a rapid cycle that felt almost alive, like a vicious ouroboros created by its own self-destruction. Her mind flashed with images of the serpent’s gleaming scales blurring in eternal motion, dizzying her as much as her father’s unique taste seeping past her lips. He dragged the blade down her neck, the cold flat of steel trailing wetness on her bare skin that stirred the ever-present fear of him in her heart.

“You can’t resist your nature,” he said, his voice low in the quiet of the kitchen and his lips brushing over hers with each word before kissing her more deeply. The hand at her shoulder slid down her arm, gripping her wrist to bring it up to the wooden handle of the knife pressed over her sternum. Her heart thumped against her fingers as she curled them around the handle obediently. His hand squeezed over hers to grasp the knife tighter as he pulled away, her eyes opening to watch the glint of his sharp teeth as he softly repeated the haunting words he’d said to her that horrible morning, “You were given a gift and it compels you to use it. Embrace it or let it consume you.”

“What…” she started to ask, but the words evaporated from her mind in the shock of what was behind him as he shifted away from her embrace.

On the cutting board, Mr. Marceau’s severed head laid on its side, the skin of his jaw peeled back to reveal the musculature and map of veins along his mandible in a clean anatomical display. Her hand twisted around the knife handle, the wood crawling and flexing against her palm. Leif’s hand gently gripped the back of her neck, making her recoil and shoot her terrified stare up at him, but it was Bjørn who stood behind her. His watch ticked loudly in her ears, vibrating her teeth.

Those mad silver eyes, the same shade as hers and Leif’s, burned into her as he whispered in her
father’s voice, “Once you’ve taken down your first quarry…”

A jerky, mechanical movement flicked in the corner of her vision and a sickening dread turned her slowly back to the head on the counter. Bjørn bent to place his face level next to hers, his long and jagged teeth peeking out in a grin at her peripheral as she stared in frozen terror as that flayed jaw quivered. Her eyes shut in a flinch when the head coughed out a spray of blood that splattered wetly against her, making her stumble backward into Bjørn’s boney body.

She gasped, sitting up in the living room sofa, a cold sweat covering her shaking body as she looked about wildly. The investigator rifling through the books was coughing noisily into his elbow, earning a disapproving look from Agent Gladwell as he stood speaking to the forensic psychologist. Simone’s eyes followed the investigator as he scurried out of the room, confusion and panic pounding along with her rapid heartbeat in her head. It was just a dream. Her father was still gone. She let her body fall back into the sofa, her head leaning backward to stare at the ornate brass light fixture on the ceiling as she tried to calm her breathing and the aching hollow in her heart. Sweat dripped down her jaw, a wet reminder of blood, and she wiped it away with her numb and tingling hand. The fever had worsened. Her breaths were hot as they rattled out of her panting chest.

“Well, I have some bad news and some good news,” Gladwell announced, his voice reverberating painfully in her skull. She rolled her head to look at him, squinting to focus her blurring vision. He grinned down at her unkindly. “Despite your rather… colorful array of deficiencies and deviations, you’re officially sane.”

Simone lifted her head, the motion sliding a strange taste in her mouth as she mulled his words over in her scattered mind. Her voice was raspy and weak as she asked, “You’re telling me… that I’m not crazy?”

“Legally, you made the cut to sanity,” he specified. “You have a functioning capacity for reasoning and judgement. That doesn’t mean you’re not without mental illness. Personally, I think you’re about as crazy as a bag of cats, but the shrink said you’re fit to function in society.”

“Huh…” she murmured. It felt strange to be called sane. She couldn’t trust the diagnosis even in its limited scope, but it stirred an odd anger in her that she had to push aside for now. “So, what’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is we don’t have a case against you,” Gladwell answered, shoving his gloved hands in his pockets as he stepped toward the fireplace. “All the bodies we’re finding out there on the property are over two decades old. The fresh stiffs, Leif Valstad did alone. Your mother can testify that you never accompanied your father on his sprees and the statements your uncles gave us all checked out. Congratulations, Simone Valstad, you’re the third surviving victim of the I-80 Killer, the Concrete Killer, the Washington Carver, and the Great Lakes Gutter.”

She tapped her forehead, trying to feel for her temperature, but her fingers were completely numb. His words swirled in her burning brain, sticking to stray thoughts and wonders as she worked to make sense of them all. From the jumble of her mind, several questions fought for priority, but the trained habit of picking her questions sparingly quickly narrowed it down to the most auspicious.

“Why was I brought here instead of being interviewed by Agent Maier?” she asked.

Gladwell’s head turned from the view out the window, an almost jumpy edge to the motion and a frown tugging at his mouth as he worked to formulate a careful answer. That sign of caution told her more than his tepid, “Change of plans.”

“He doesn’t know I’m here, does he?” she mused aloud, a strangely vicious glee bubbling up from
beneath her dread and feverish haze. When Gladwell furrowed his brow at her in an irritated suspicion, she spat out an abrupt laugh. He didn’t trust his partner with her. She wondered if he knew and, looking at his deepening frown as he turned back to the window in dismissive aggravation, supposed he might know more than he believed.

“You’re here to provide context,” he said pithily, not looking at her. “There are answers in you that might help us find him.”

The glee dissipated from her like smoke in the wind, leaving a chill that made her shiver more violently and curl her arms protectively around her body. “I already told you everything I could remember.”

He turned to her then, a merciless gravity in his tone as he said, “Maybe you did, but I need you to remember everything. You’re going to describe to me every single thing that happened to you in this house and show me where it happened. That should jog your sloppy memory.”
Chapter 38

The little bedroom in the back had an entirely different quality to it from the rest of the house. In this country manor that had been reworked and refinished according to the tastes of the architects who lived in it, everything had been designed with open space and sumptuous aesthetic in mind. However, this room could have been mistaken for a large closet, if not by size then by the lack of attention it had gathered. The musty carpet bequeathed an everlasting stuffiness within the four yellowed walls and only a simple wooden dresser occupied the small space aside from the narrow bed. Simone picked up the strange little plastic robot figure from the dresser, turning it in her hands as she tried to envision what life for her father had been like, taken from his mother and brothers in Norway and stuffed in this neglected little space until he had grown enough to fit more appropriately in the imposingly elegant house. The shy smile and uncomfortable gawkiness of the boy she recalled in the photo album had seemed like an entirely different species than the honed predator he would become beneath his mask of normalcy. She didn’t need to see the photo album to recall the hints of his transformation over time in those pictures. Whatever had happened to him, it had happened in this house.

“What happened here?”

Simone ignored Gladwell’s looming presence in the doorway, shutting out the world to focus on the image of the boy from the photos and placing the toy in his hands. His skin was tanner then. He’d spent his time outside when he could. Einar was always fair-skinned even for a white man, but Bjørn’s gaunt face was as weathered as a sailor’s. There they were, one boy displaced from his home and one man displaced in his existence, finding common ground in the woods. She felt the fondness Leif had radiated as he’d spoken of his reclusive uncle and touched the reverence of the emotions inside that glowing sphere marked as Bjørn within him. This forgotten space did not hold enough of her father for her to find him here.

“Nothing important,” she answered Gladwell, rising from her kneeling position on the old carpet. She shut the door behind her as she stepped back into the cavernous hallway, her numbed feet dragging toward the nearby archway of the dining room. Little yellow folded signs with black numbers on them marked several places along the floor where she remembered blood had spilled from her, Anders, and even Leif on the night of that dreadful dinner. A deep, sinister anger had steeped into the high walls of this majestic room, but not from that night. The heaviness in the air had been pressing down for decades. She’d seen that gravity weigh on her father whenever they’d sit and eat in there. Even in his most convincing performances, his false cheer had a glaze of tension, like an old injury had started aching again. This was the room where his father had most obviously reigned and he was not always a kind man to those in his domain.

“Why are we in here?” Gladwell asked.

“Just a moment, please,” she whispered, walking toward the chair at the head of the table and sinking into the ghost that occupied it.

She knew the unspoken signs of abuse like a distinct perfume that marked its wearers and had scented that pain in Leif whenever he’d been forced to think on his father. She’d never allowed herself to trespass into that so private piece of him, having felt a disquieting awkwardness at stumbling upon that guarded secret, but now she reached into those moments and rooted around in them. Her recently acquired firsthand perspective on being physically abused by a parent muddled her insight and she wondered in a horrified moment if Leif had perhaps been hurt the same way he hurt her, but he did not harbor the signs for that breed of pain. His violence had been inspired by the
violence done to him, but the sex was his own infected wickedness. The distraction of her fiercely conflicting feelings on their incestuous lust for each other tugged at her concentration, but this room was only a stage on which her father had tried to rewrite his own painful memories in a resentful fantasy of control.

“Papa drugged my uncles the night before the funeral in here,” she offered to Gladwell by means of appeasing him. “It was the wine. Take the glasses into the lab and you might find the residue on them to prove it. The blood is from the fight. Most of it is mine. This,” she pointed to the thin line of stitches at her throat, “was an accident. Paring knife by Papa. I’d tried to get between him and Anders.”

“Anything else happen in here?” he asked.

“No.”

“TEDESCO!” Gladwell hollered into the hallway, his roar quickly summoning a portly older man in a hooded white coverall with safety goggles over his thick eyeglasses. “Gather up all the glasses, cups, any drinking receptacle and tox ‘em.”

The white-sheathed man nodded blankly before disappearing back down the hall. Simone pushed herself up on the arms of the chair, her head swimming even from the deliberate slowness of the motion, but her search had only just begun. She shuffled out into the hallway and watched as another figure in a protective white onesie emerged from the closet that hid the broken-down door to the darkroom. A deep shudder erupted from her core at the memory of that figure sitting up under the sheet, rattling its breath from the hazy part of her mind usually reserved for forgotten nightmares. Not yet. She couldn’t handle that yet.

“Alright, let’s keep this haunted house tour moving,” Gladwell griped from behind her.

“You seem a little peakish, Mr. Valstad,” the agent said after shaking his hand. “Are you sure there’s nothing we can get you to make your recovery a little more comfortable?”

Anders returned his polite smile and shook his head. “I am good, Mr. Maier. Please, welcome.”

He stepped to the side, allowing the plain little man to enter the suite. The remnants of breakfast still laid spread out on the small table in front of the window and Anders moved quickly to clear the tray for the agent to place his notes. He was surprised by the visit, though not unpleasantly. There was only so much bad American daytime television he could occupy his time with while he awaited his Simone’s return.

“I was reading through the transcripts of your interview last night,” Maier said, his American accent heavy but his Norsk was unexpected. Anders glanced at him, unable to keep the surprise from his expression, but the man politely kept his attention to the arrangement of notes and pens as he laid them out on the table in methodical order from his briefcase. “And I must commend you and your brothers for your openness. We understand how difficult it is to have to relive some of what had happened to you. There’s bound to be some inconsistencies. I’d like to go over a few things just to clarify them for the record, if you don’t mind.”

Anders swallowed the nervous lump in his throat, but took a seat across from him and gave a short nod in reply. Maier’s smile was flat and fleeting, his lightless eyes without feeling in a way that
would normally make Anders weary, but in this circumstance he was relieved for the detachment. The late morning sunlight filtered in through the thick glass of the window, dragging shadows across the smooth features of this agent and giving dimension to his otherwise plain face. There was nothing noteworthy about this man, but those dead eyes were hard to look at. Anders kept his gaze focused on the view outside.

“When you came upon Leif Valstad digging that grave on the property, did you know at the time that he had Bud Renfro’s corpse in the flatbed of the truck?” Maier asked, his professional monotone conflicting with the horror of the content.

“Oh?”

“Bud Renfro was an associate of your father’s. His corpse was among those in the vehicle Leif Valstad had left burning at the morgue, but his was the only one with soil particles on him matching the composition found on the Valstad estate. That, and the estimated time of death, places him in that hole Leif Valstad had dug. I just thought you should know that the grave wasn’t intended for you.”

A weighty uneasiness wriggled in Anders’ mind at this revelation, making him begin chewing on his knuckle as he once more considered the depth of his brother’s evil. He found no comfort in this news at all. A part of him had suspected it after he had ended up not being buried. Another part of him was too aware that there was still a hole waiting to be dug for him elsewhere.

“Do you still believe his motivation to murder you was due to his daughter’s affections toward you?” Maier asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what motivates a man to do such things. Maybe he needed no motivation at all to do the things he did, but I do know that it bothered him. Significantly.”

Maier’s tepid smile took on a reptilian coldness as he said, “Because he is in love with her. You managed to affect a man who believes himself above human weakness by threatening his position with her. It’s possibly the worst thing you could do to him.”

Anders didn’t know how to respond to that. The familiarity this man spoke of Leif with was unsettling, if not for the knowledgeability of his insight, then for the eagerness he seemed to have to speak it.

“How long have you been investigating him?” Anders asked.

“The FBI has been pursuing Leif Valstad as a suspect since an anonymous tip was submitted shortly after the funeral,” Maier answered. Without any detectable change in his mood or tone, he continued, “But I’ve been studying Leif Valstad for quite a bit longer than that. A purebred hunter. They don’t make them like that anymore. It would be a terrible shame to stop the tradition now.”

That uneasiness in Anders spiked into apprehension of this agent. The policeman was down the hall, sitting in the chair facing the elevator doors, and he wondered if his shouts for help would be heard. But Maier displayed no expectation of reaction despite the shocking things he’d said. Anders choked down his fear and nodded.

“He is more than proficient; Leif Valstad is simply the best in the field. He would have never been caught if they didn’t give him up. It was such a myopic, short-sighted decision, but we’re working to
resolve that,” Maier said, his reptilian smile spreading into a grin. “Now that we have him, though, well… Things are going to change. A coup has occurred and there is chaos in the ranks; all of us aware that now is the time to secure the power that’s been scattered. Lots of assets to acquire and maintain. That’s where you come in, Anders Valstad.”

Anders did not want Maier to tell him any of this. As little sense as any of it made to him, this was knowledge that poisoned him as readily as any viper’s bite, marking him as a necessary casualty to protect a secret so deadly. His pulse flowed ice through his veins as he tried to keep his face from showing any of the fear and alarm that raged in him. He had to construct a narrative that could protect him from this knowledge.

“Oh, so the FBI has him? That’s a relief,” he said, careful to keep his voice from sounding too desperately breathless or nervously loud.

Maier ignored his response, slid a plain manila folder to him across the short barrier of the table and explained, “You have two choices. You can leave Simone entirely in our care and forget we ever had this conversation. Move on, leave behind Leif and Simone and everything that’s happened here, have a normal life. Or, you can retain her as your ward and relinquish her to us periodically to serve her purpose. Your role will be minimal outside of that. You can… enjoy her to your liking, so long as you obey us. Open the folder, Anders Valstad.”

He obeyed, his hands moving slowly to turn the thin paper cover as he prayed for his fingers not to shake. This man did not come to him as an FBI agent. Whatever Maier was beneath that title and those dead eyes was scarcely even what he would call human. He leafed through the contents of the folder, finding Simone’s passport, birth certificate, state identification, school transcripts, immigration applications, medical statements, and his own passport. Everything he needed to take Simone home with him was provided in this folder.

“It’s already been taken care of,” Maier said. “You’ll have everything you want, so long as we have your discretion and your cooperation.”

“When you said… ‘her purpose’, what did you mean by that? What do you need with Simone?” Anders asked. His voice quivered. It didn’t matter if he hid his fear or not, the consequences of this conversation were now beyond avoidance. A black, heavy hatred for this man poured over that fear like tar for giving him this illusion of choice when there was none. He was once more a pawn in a madman’s game, but this time he was aware of it.

Maier’s unwavering stare didn’t flinch as he answered, “We’re going to use her to maintain control over Leif Valstad whenever and however necessary. Men like him aren’t easily swayed by conventional means. But don’t worry; we are not barbaric. No significant harm will come to her during those processes.”

“And my role?” Anders asked. He was wary of pushing this subject, but they’d already gone through all this trouble to let him have her. He had to know. “I’m not involved in any of… this. Why did you choose me?”

“Have you yet to see her interact with anyone not of the Valstad bloodline?” Maier countered. Anders could only furrow his brow in further bewilderment. “She might be submissive to you, but only because she perceives you as a surrogate to her master. He’s conditioned her to be that way. As for anyone else, well… He’s conditioned her in many ways.” He leaned in closer, his tie dragging over the table as the first spark of emotion revealed itself in the gleeful gleam over his dead eyes. “She nearly tore into my neck when I presented her with the opportunity. I recommend you keep her on a tight leash around others. Maybe invest in a good muzzle.”
Anders visualized his Simone sinking her teeth into the flesh of this man’s throat and found himself pleased by the brief fantasy before he could remember to be repulsed. He blinked the daydream away, recalling the fear he was supposed to be feeling, but could find only an agitated anticipation and hatred. Leif might have somehow survived, but Maier was not Leif. He did not have reason to fear him, for all the power he held over his and Simone’s lives. He did, however, have a growing reason to hate him and it filled him with a sweet, hot energy.

“So, you get Leif, I get Simone, and everybody wins, is that it?” Anders asked. “You take away his daughter and his freedom and you expect that he’ll help you win whatever game it is you’re playing. If he’s as good as you say he is, he’ll just kill you.”

“That’s possible,” Maier admitted. “But unlikely in my case. Handling Leif Valstad himself is above my pay scale. Obtaining his little monster and orchestrating this case are my main objectives and I have succeeded. Your involvement can end here, as well. Up to you.”

Anders leaned back in his chair, the weight of the mad world pressing down on him as he tried to digest just how unaware he had been of these hidden machinations everywhere around him. The agendas he’d been written into just by being Leif’s target nagged at his own sense of incompetence, but he did not have to succumb to it in despair. He’d already entered into a deal with a devil, one more didn’t matter at this point. He picked up Simone’s passport book, flipping open the blue pages to look at her photo. She looked so young, so brimming with life and potential. His chest ached with the longing to touch her just to feel that she was safe. There was nothing to reconsider.

“When do I get to take her home?”

To find her father, she had to understand him. Standing before the wallpapered wood of the darkroom door, the gasping darkness whispering to her from between the jagged gaps from the ax, Simone reminded herself that if she was to have any hope in finding him, she needed to understand him first. She needed to do this. There was nothing real down there to fear. Not anymore.

“You need someone to hold your hand?” Gladwell asked, thick with sarcasm.

_Fucking pig_, she did not say. Her mouth was too busy salivating with the impulse to vomit. She swallowed the excess moisture repeatedly, focusing on the chore of not puking as she pushed that door open, the remnants of fingerprint powder from the edges sticking to the nitrile gloves they’d insisted she’d wear. Her center of gravity seemed to twirl as she cautiously descended the concrete steps, but the inky blackness she’d expected was at least drowned out by the bright white lights of the lamps they’d placed down there. The sour smell lingering thinly through the stale air brought Bjørn to mind, a man who had died before she was born but she felt as though she had known his company well. Hermetic, bedraggled Bjørn, with his avoidant stare and malfunctioning mind, haunted her dreams both awake and asleep. This was his domain. The room seemed smaller than she recalled, the colors different than she’d imagined. Little yellow signs marked where items had been taken. One on the shelf in the center of a circular absence of dust caught her attention briefly. The chair was still bolted down to the floor in the little alcove away from the work area, its simplicity denying its sinister purpose. Something wasn’t right.

“Turn off the lights,” she said.

Gladwell hissed an exasperated sigh through his teeth, but one by one, those bright lights shut off around her until that inky blackness closed in as though it had been waiting to pounce. There it was.
Her feverish mind had already put her in an unpleasantly dreamlike state, but this darkness cut her off from the solidity of her surroundings and she floated in the chemical scents and dense pressure of the underground. All it ever took was a little push for her mind to slip. She remembered the asthmatic wheezing of the figure in the chair, the madness in Bjørn’s eyes, the coarse hairs of his beard, the flash of the camera. The whirring of the film winding. The flash, flash, flash. She blinked against that strong flash, the room illuminating in the microsecond of white brightness. The tripod lights and the little yellow signs were gone. Someone was in the chair. No, something. A flickering static in the shape of a human sat strapped to the chair and Bjørn stood in concentrated poise as he took its picture again and again. These weren’t people to him anymore. The whistling breaths that rattled from it were slow, faint, far apart. The slower it breathed, the faster that flash occurred.

Simone rifled through the reasoning behind this vision even as she stood horrified from it. How much of this was once real and how much of it was the creation of a nightmare laid only in the reasoning. Kyun’s teasing Bjørn would have loved to photograph you. An old-fashioned film camera. A mechanical watch. The sanctity of nature. She knew very little of Bjørn, but she could suppose much. A superstitious man, distrusting of people and of modern society, attached to strange concepts his creative mind obsessed over. She could relate. Her fingers often itched inconveniently for a paintbrush when she found a moment she wanted to capture on canvas. He had wanted to capture something specific and he would try again and again, never satisfied until he got that perfect shot.

In the corner, that boy from the photo album stood watching and waiting. They were both waiting for Bjørn to catch something so elusive. The quarry Bjørn hunted was not in the panic of the woods or the subjugation of slaughter, but in something more esoteric. His father had taught him violence and control, his uncle had taught him art and meaning. Art and the conductivity of human connection, human suffering, human life. Bjørn knew people as she did. The overwhelming sensitivity to human contact. A final rattling breath, a flurry of flashes, then darkness. Minutes later, the scent of newly born death intermingled in the chemical staleness of the air. She knew that scent, knew that she didn’t let her father get to that stage. Autolysis. Self-digestion. The enzymes and bacteria necessary in the living quickly ate away at the dead. She’d kept oxygen flowing through his cells, refusing to let them decay. He was alive. She had to find him.

Leif’s whisper, his voice higher and so unsure at that young age, blew over her ear from the darkness, “There’s a lot of similarities between you and him, you know.”

She yelped in shock when a tripod light turned on, blinding her in the flood of brightness. Gladwell’s irritated tone was loud in the confined space as he asked, “What happened in here?”

“P-Pictures,” she sputtered, grasping her chest to calm her racing heart. It was just a daydream. She was out of the dark, away from the flash, away from the madness. It wasn’t real.

“No shit, Sherlock, it’s a darkroom,” he grumbled. “Why did you come down here?”

She panted to catch her breath. “I found it on accident when I was hiding from Papa. From Leif. After he drugged Anders for the first time and... punished him. The door, the ax marks, from when Anders tried to find me. I think he wanted us to escape.” “Upstairs. The smaller guestroom. Tied to the... I was tied to the bed. Papa, he... he fucked me... and when he was done, Anders... It wasn’t his fault, he was too drugged to know he was hurting me... The blood on the mattress is mine. The semen is Leif’s... and Anders’.”

A minute crawled by in slow silence, her panting breaths the only sound until Gladwell finally said, “You didn’t tell us about that.”

“Must have blocked it out,” she lied. “Did he say anything about it in his report?”
“I haven’t read their reports yet,” he answered absently. “Do you, um… Do you want us to put you in a separate hotel from him?”

The softer edge in his usually brash voice drew her attention and she glanced at him to see the hard frown of sorrowful frustration and regret deepening the lines of his face. She grit her teeth in a hot wave of anger and hissed, “Fuck your pity, Special Agent Gladwell! Get your god-damned head in the game; you’ve seen worse than a half-breed slut getting passed between her daddy and his brother. There’s a murderer on the loose, remember?”

“Christ almighty…” he murmured, turning away from her and pressing his hand into his receding hairline. “He really messed you up, kid.”

“No shit, Sherlock. You wanted context, you’re getting it,” she seethed.

“I’m not your enemy,” he insisted, his tone still far too soft.

She could feel his emotions bouncing off that shield of hatred she’d built around herself. People were so messy with their feelings and expectations sloshing over the edges of them, spilling them on her when they didn’t even know what she was. If she looked at him now, she would see through to him, clear as glass. She would know him. She could see and smell the exhaustion of his liver from hard drinking, know that the hard drinking was from a hard life in the effort he took to obscure his emotions with irritability, feel the frustration of being in a body slowly failing him among the many failures in his life. Frustration hung about him like a vapor and sullied everything he touched. She could even relate to him, but she did not want to. He didn’t smell right, didn’t smell like Leif at all. She wanted to only know him as flickering static instead of this barrage of information and humanity. His pattern was simple enough for her to counter with the approach he could most identify with: open disdain.

She didn’t have the energy to do more than speak in a firm whisper, “You aren’t anything to me. Nothing but shapes and noise and stink suspended in air. We happen to have a common goal, but don’t you ever, ever humanize me. I’m not a person. I’m evidence. Gather the evidence, find your killer. Do your job and keep your feelings out of it.”

The abrasiveness of his resentment scraped against her from the sigh he breathed out, but thankfully, his heavy outpouring stemmed from there to a level she could disregard even in her raw condition. This was new territory for her and she begrudged him the complication of his presence. It was hard enough to leave herself so open to her madness with its interpretations and intuitions without this man trespassing into her mind.

“Is there anything else I should know about that happened in here?” he asked, a guarded dispassion cloaking his ire.

Her mind was filled with too many horrors to process and nightmares awaited the corners of her consciousness. The roots of her father’s madness dug deeper than she could have imagined and she felt a powerful need to find a safe place to hide and organize her crowding thoughts. She straightened, unwrapping her shaking arms from her body, and said, “Not recently. Send me back to the hotel. I can’t do anymore today.”

“Take an aspirin and suck it up, Valstad,” he frowned.

“You suck it, Gladwell, I don’t work for you,” she shot back, her glare turning to him briefly before returning to the safety of the void. “One more room. That’s it.”

“Fine. You shared a bedroom with him, correct?” he asked.
Her stomach twisted. For all the personal details she could collect just by observing, she lacked much
skill in manipulating people even when armed with that analysis. She wished she had a little more
Einar and a little less Bjørn in her in that regard, a thought that made her mouth twist into a wry
smirk and then falter. There really were a lot of similarities between her and Bjørn. The kinship she
felt with him brought a freezing shiver up her spine.

“You want to see where my dad fucked me?” she jeered, trying to dissuade him, but it was a crude
and ineffective attempt even to her ears.

“Get walking,” he commanded tersely.
Simone focused on the little yellow sign that marked where the dribble of blood and sex fluids had dried on the floor, bringing back the twinge of pain from the abrasion still healing inside her vagina and the ache of her arms restrained behind her. It was hard to interpret anything else she might have observed inside the room with that memory burning so bright at the forefront of her thoughts, her imagination drawn again and again to the conflicting ecstasy and agony of being so brutally forced.

Gladwell didn’t look up from the little notebook he wrote in as he asked, “This was the fourth time he’d raped you with his brothers in the house?”

His question startled her back to the present, her confusion derailing her comprehension at what he was asking her. “Sorry, the fourth time he…?”

“Raped you,” he repeated. She could hear the hard edge of discomfort he forced the word out with and see his reluctance in the way he refused to remove himself from his writing task to even face her. “With your uncles present in the house.”

She looked at the desk, the area she had worked at daily to hide the bruises Leif had bestowed on her, and tried to swallow her hesitance at allowing Gladwell to continue calling it rape. She wouldn’t be flushed hot with the desire to be pressed into the floor under him again if it was rape. That heavy fear that coupled with her arousal felt different than it had at the beginning, somehow more unclear now. There was a longing in her to feel that helplessness and terror tied to his sex, but that was too painful for her to place any faith in being a real desire. Another symptom of her madness. Or lack thereof. Legally sane, but crazy as a bag of cats. She rubbed the back of her sweaty neck, the fever and the arousal burning her up and making her shiver in chills as she tried to figure out the unnatural effect his sadism had on her body. She shoved that line of thought aside along with the crisis that lied at the other end of that looming revelation. There would be plenty of time later to shiver and scream alone in a small dark space about what he had done to her mind. She wasn’t there to learn about herself anyway.

“Yes,” she answered, still unsure if she was lying or not. Maybe she wasn’t. It didn’t matter.

While he wrote, she approached the bookcase along the wall next to the closet. Nothing but academic textbooks and nonfiction centering around architecture and design. His presence could be felt in the caution he took to hide who he was behind what he had wanted to be seen as, magnified by how early that habit had formed in his life. The framed photos of what she could only suppose were meant to be his friends in youth never had the same people twice and never once included him, giving what was meant to appear as a large social pool the obvious lie that these classmates even knew him at all. He was still green enough to make that mistake back then. She wondered when he had started to have fake friends instead of faking friendships, but it was clear that he hadn’t yet learned that skill while living here. She shivered again, the chill winning over the heat in a frigid draft that ached into her bones, and she rubbed her arms to attempt warmth.

“Take a jacket.”

“What?”

“Take a jacket from the closet,” Gladwell repeated grumpily. “Your shivering is distracting.”

She didn’t want to risk questioning the unexpected offer or rebuke the pity that burned at the end of that thinly veiled kindness. She pulled out the fitted plum pea coat and hurriedly slipped it over her
hoodie. Her mother had gifted it to her for her birthday just two months ago, making it relatively bare of memories and attachments. Her mom had complimented her on how the color made her eyes “pop”, the wording making Simone laugh with the violence of the imagery it invoked. Oedipus had stabbed his eyes when he had finally seen the evil his hubris had blinded him to. She had committed such similar wickedness with her eyes wide open.

“Can I take some clothes with me?” she asked.

“I can’t let you carry anything out of here,” he responded.

“Can I wear some clothes out of here?” she pressed.

He turned to a previous page in his notebook, taking a moment to read before stiffly saying, “I can’t say yes to that.”

She grabbed a pair of moss green corduroy pants, her only pants left that weren’t in the hamper that had been taken as evidence, and slipped out to the bathroom to put them on while he pretended not to notice. Putting them on over the ill-fitting track pants, it wouldn’t have been indecent to do that in front of him, but it seemed too intimate for her to do comfortably. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the long crack she’d made in the mirror days ago while arguing with the enemy in her head. Now that she wasn’t insane, she could more easily accept that the voice was never real, but since she was still crazy, she could keep feeling angry at it. It left a slimy feeling in her to see that she had left a mark on this house, like anyone who looked at that crack in the glass could see her inside it the same way she could see Bjørn in the darkroom or Einar at the head of the dining table. Except no one else saw those things like she did. Their dreams were kept politely caged in their subconscious while hers sloshed all over the waking world. The fever wasn’t helping. She had to step out of the bathroom quickly when her reflection began to shift into something inhuman.

As she turned to walk back to the bedroom and convince Gladwell to send her to the hotel, she noticed that the door next to the bathroom that had always been locked was left slightly ajar.

Anders twirled the orange prescription vial between his fingers as he sat on the bed, the television on and his eyes pointed towards it but his attention was entirely inward. The little blue dissolvable tablets rattled inside the vial; a precautionary measure, Maier had called them. He felt guilty for accepting them, guiltier for considering all the ways he might need to use them. His Simone was sweet, but she was not always herself. He pushed down the rage that came with that reminder of how deeply his brother had broken her, focusing instead on how he would help her heal. He would provide her the care, love and stability Leif had denied her. He would be a good father to her and then, after some time and some talking, she could make him a father again. He smiled at the thought of her baring his child. Logically, he knew he shouldn’t, but logic rarely applied to love anyway. That’s what made his feelings for her so pure; it was all so hopelessly out of his own control, right from the start.

He slipped the vial into his shirt pocket and laid back on the bed, inhaling deeply through his nose to take in the scents that still clung to the bedsheets. He could smell her fever and fear interwoven in her sweat, these signs of her distress making his muscles tense in anxiousness to seek her out. Objectively, it was disarming how instinctual and impulsive his behavior was regarding her, but in the moment, none of it seemed odd at all. It was all so pure and natural, it was easy to ignore the unpleasant details of their relation and the questionable scope of her ability to consent. He turned his face, burying his nose into the sheets to seek out her scent; the unique quality of it stirring something
thrilling and ancient in him. His Simone simply smelled correct in ways he couldn’t articulate.

A knock at the door broke him out of his pining and he moved to the door perhaps too quickly by how his thigh wound complained, but he was hopeful it was his Simone returned from her interview. Instead, he flung the door open to find Vidar’s tall and lanky form casting a long shadow over him. He felt all at once embarrassed, as though his brother had somehow known he was doing something weird in there, something like huffing the bedsheets like some lunatic pervert. He knew he couldn’t have known, but he couldn’t keep the mortification off his face enough to avoid Vidar’s sharp eye.

“What are you, a vampire?” Anders quipped in annoyance.

Vidar responded by shoving past him, bullying his way into the darkened suite in that familiar rudeness brothers subsisted on. He fixed his near-permanent scowl at the television, the only light source in the shadowed room, the shifting pictures casting a pale light on the already pale man. Anders limped back to the bed, unnerved as his brother’s intense quiet and weary of his frequent antagonism. Past experience had taught Anders to wait for him to speak first and recent experience had taught him to prepare to rebuke the inevitable accusations of sexual predation on their niece.

“We’re going home tomorrow,” Vidar finally said, his face still turned away toward the screen. When he didn’t continue, Anders tentatively asked, “How do you know they won’t keep you?”

“Agent Maier stopped by and told us as much,” he answered. “He also congratulated us on the new addition to our family.”

The clipped tone tipped Anders off to the purpose of this visit more than the polite content. He tried not to sound defensive. “I did tell you that I intended to take her home with me.”

“Well, you lie a lot, so I was somewhat surprised.”

“When have I lied?”

Vidar turned to him with a razor-thin smirk. “So, since you’re thinking so clearly and have decided to make her your daughter, that means she’s single, right?”

Anders stared in shock at his older brother, feeling a dark haze of something dangerous choke his thoughts as he tried to comprehend his words. Vidar made a noise that wasn’t quite a hum but less than a chuckle, that sharp smirk pulling wider.

“What’s wrong with that? It won’t be anything she’s not used to,” Vidar grinned. “Unless you’re going to be the kind of father she’s used to. You’re off to a good start with that parenting style.”

“That isn’t funny, Vid,” Anders warned.

“I hope it isn’t funny because I’m not joking. If you’re not fucking her, then there’s no reason I can’t. She’s the kind of girl who needs a hard fuck pretty often, right? I’d bet she’d let me do whatever I want to her.”

Revolusion and a corrosive bitterness churned in Anders, but he knew his brother wasn’t serious. He couldn’t be serious about something so sick. “Go back to your room if you’re just here to irritate me.”

Anders suppressed an aggravated growl as Vidar sat next to him on the bed, his brother’s demeanor
all false friendliness and cheer. “Why would it irritate you? I’m being polite by asking you before I ask her. Hey, since you’re her father now, would she call you ‘daddy’ when you’re giving it to her good or would she… oh, what’s that American phrase… ‘cry uncle’?”

Anders shot up and walked away, the pain from rising so suddenly drowned out by the din of his anger. He had to move away before he did something he might regret. Socking his brother in the jaw didn’t seem like something he’d regret at the moment, but he clung to that bit of sense in him that warned him not to do it.

“Hell, I’m not greedy. If you ever have second thoughts about giving up incest, I’m open to sharing her. I don’t know if she could handle both of us at once, but half the fun is in trying,” Vidar continued, stretching out on the bed languidly. “I’ve got dibs on that sweet ass of hers if we’re doing a threesome, though. Did you get a chance to fuck her up the ass before you started repenting?”

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Anders snapped.


“Stop it! Just stop!”

“Fine, then maybe we won’t talk about it. I’m going to need to borrow her for a couple hours today, but don’t worry, I’ll go easy on her this time and bring her back in good shape when I’m done.”

Simone didn’t start crying until she was in the car, safely away from that house of nightmarish visions, but when she began, her sobs forced their way out of her in vocal gasps. She couldn’t care about Deputy Jacoby’s discomfort at her restrained moaning or her own bruised body aching at the violence of her shuddering. Doubled over in her seat, her arms tucked between her body and her lap and her wet face buried in her hands, she rocked slightly back and forth in a self-soothing motion as those sobs tore out of her. The jagged hole where her doubt had been bled and throbbed inside her, torn out of her by the undeniable proof that still flickered behind her eyes. Certainty had never felt so wicked. Dreams were only meant to represent the truth we may or may not be consciously aware of. They were not supposed to be literal. She could bare the nightmarish visions knowing they were only interpretations built on her observations and fantasies built on her fears, but for them to have been real, for them to have been the unadorned truth without the tact of symbolism or the softening of obscurity, had shattered her faith that at least reality had a solid foundation of logic and reason.

“Hey, I know it feels bad now, but you’re gonna be okay one day, kiddo…” Jacoby offered softly, giving a reassuring rub between her shoulder blades. This stranger’s touch seared the edges of her mind, hot as a branding iron through her wool coat, but the hatred in her bent under the need for comfort. “We’re going to make sure he never hurts you again.”

A terrible laugh shuddered out of her, indiscernible from her sobs. She’d let her father tear the living skin from her screaming body just to hear him denounce that it was all true. The knees of her pants were still smeared with the dust of the office room floor, the odors of ink and decaying paper carried on the tiny grains. Exhausted and nearly delirious from fever, she shouldn’t have noticed the fingerprints that had scraped away the dust on the floor, shouldn’t have seen the slight shadow of a gap between the floorboards, shouldn’t have tested them to find that they were loose. There was no little yellow sign that had marked it as evidence. She should have gotten Gladwell, but she reached into that space beneath that floor. When she opened the photo album, the world stopped making
Gladwell had mentioned that the pictures would make it easier to identify the victims they’d found. That she’d done a good thing by finding the albums. That their families could finally have closure because of what she’d found. She didn’t hear him at the time, his words only making sense to her now that she was away. Dozens and dozens of people. They reached into her from those photos like one hundred dusty fingers brushing her mind and smearing it with their panic and sorrow and rage. A young Einar and Bjørn in the revelry of the hunt, an impossibly young Leif joining them later. Posed amidst a tableau vivant of bodies, the men glowing with pride and the boy haunted by the death within and around him. Her father never had a god damned chance.

“Do you want to pick up something to eat? Anything you want,” Jacoby said, his hand still rubbing her back while his other hand was on the wheel. “You gotta be starving by now. There’s a McD’s up the road.”

People like Maier were out there, getting more organized and winning, while she was getting sicker and weaker. People like Marceau had tried to strip the art and meaning of what Leif did and he had killed him for it. Maier had Leif trapped because if he hadn’t, then he and his friends were as dead as Marceau. All those sons of bitches were good as dead with her father free and the world would be better for their absence. She had to find him.

“Would you let Special Agent Maier know that I’d like to speak with him please?” she asked.

She had to find him no matter the cost.

Anders couldn’t hear any more of it. The wretched anger it churned in his gut was enough to chase away any thought in his actions as he hauled his brother up off the bed with one fist twisted in his shirt collar and growled, “I’ll rip your tongue out if you say one more god-damned word about her!”

A flash of agony burst behind his eyes and he was already on the ground when he realized Vidar had punched his thigh wound. Before he could even gasp to recover, Vidar had his arms locked behind him and kept him on the floor as he seethed, “What’s wrong, Anders? Don’t like to think about your brother fucking your niece, or are you getting jealous? Better pick your answer carefully, fuckhead, because I know when you’re lying.”

“Get the hell off me!”

Vidar pulled painfully at his arms, making him groan and bow lower. “Is that what she said when you were ‘too doped up to know’ you were raping her?”

Guilt pierced through his turmoil of agony and rage at hearing his brother stating his horrible mistake so plainly. “I didn’t mean to hurt her!”

“You kept hurting her, you sick bastard!” Vidar snapped, making Anders stifle a pained gasp as he shoved him away. The younger man turned onto his back and clutched his chest wound, the stretching of his arms behind him having pulled agonizingly at the stitches. “When are you going to get it?! It’s so fucking obvious! You saw what he had going on with her way before anyone else and you wanted it! He practically taught you how he twisted her into his little fuck slave! You’re acting like you’re doing her this big favor, but you’re just replacing him!”
It wasn’t true. He was only ever trying to help her. He could have kept his attraction to her secret, she would have never known how he’d really felt, but she was the one who had put her hand on his dick and begged him for sex. They couldn’t go back after that. He’d tried, really tried, and Leif had forced him on her when he’d thought they might be able to be a normal uncle and niece again. There could never be anything normal between them, but that didn’t make him like Leif.

“I’m not her surrogate master!” he insisted, still huffing between gritted teeth through the pain. “I love her, you fucking prick!”

“So does he, and look where it got her,” Vidar said, his manner devoid of either hostility or false cheer. “He couldn’t stand the thought of her growing up and leaving him, so what did he do? He crippled her so she couldn’t and made himself the only one who could take care of her. Sexy little thing like her, completely dependent on one man to fill every role in her life and just so grateful to him for it; I wasn’t surprised when I saw you watching them. You don’t have to lie to me, Anders. I’m not Henrik. I have accepted what you are.”

Anders cautiously rose to stand, pausing in bewilderment when his brother offered his hand. He hesitated, waiting for that hand to strike him, and accepted the help when it didn’t. His blood pumped wild and heavy through his aching body, the whooshing loud in his ears as he struggled to deny what Vidar had said. He’d thought it was touching how Leif had cared for her at first. Their dynamic was intriguing, but only because of its unconventionality.

“I didn’t know he was molesting her,” he said. He didn’t know what other excuse he could give.

“But you imagined that you would fuck her if you were in his place, didn’t you?” Vidar asked. His non-accusatory tone somehow frustrated Anders further. “That’s disgusting.”

“Was it disgusting last night?” Vidar smirked. Anders glared at him, his glare withering when Vidar tapped his own nose. The dread of having been caught in his lie made his stomach feel as though it had dropped out of him. “It doesn’t smell disgusting; far from it, in fact. Smells like you had a lot of fun in her on those sheets. You can’t fool me, littlest brother, so why not be honest? I just want us to be a family again. Got it? I’ll take care of Henrik.”

Anders couldn’t bring himself to respond, his confusion seizing his thoughts. Vidar huffed out a brief chuckle and patted his shoulder encouragingly before turning and walking out of the room, leaving Anders alone in his bewilderment. He couldn’t tell what Vidar had thought of any of it at all. His clever older brother was still sharp as a knife but now jagged and bent, his thoughts seeming to spill out of him from too many directions at once. It would almost be preferable if he’d just condemned it like Henrik had. Anders sunk back down on the edge of the bed, his unfocused eyes pointed at the television once more as he tried to calm down. He wasn’t sure what he thought of it himself anymore. Everything was supposed to be simple, but now nothing made sense.

Simone slowly sipped the Gatorade Jacoby had forced in her shaking hands, trying to tiptoe around the detection of substance in her belly before it roused to expel it back up her throat. Sitting on the floor of her hotel room, her clothing discarded in a heap around her as the fever shifted back to a boil, she waited for Maier to call. She had nothing to offer him, no cards in her hand beyond the role he had wanted her to play in his game. Sweat dripped down the bruised skin of her back and she hurriedly gathered her mess of hair into a bun, securing it with a pen. She felt reckless in her clarity, eager to see clearly what there was to be done and impatient to do it. She had fumbled around in the
dark too long and had no time to waste being blinded by the light of awareness, no matter how her
brain writhed like a snake in her skull. The sweat made her cuts itch and she scratched the long one
on her arm open by accident, only aware of the blood coating her arm when she smeared red on her
bare thigh.

She pressed a bloody finger to the off-white wall, the brilliant scarlet almost glittering to her fever-rattled mind, and repeated the motion, layering fingerprint on fingerprint to create gradients of red. It had been too long since she had painted and her hands shook too violently to hold a pencil to sketch. She pressed hard to form the shadows cast by his cheekbones and deep-set browbone, smudged in feathery touches to get the lightness of his eyes right. She’d painted his portrait enough to know how to do it in any medium and material. It didn’t take her long at all before her father’s face stared back at her from the wall, drawn in the blood they shared. She stared at it, sitting nude in the lotus position for a length of time that slipped by her unnoticed. Her hands were steady. Her breathing evened. She reached up behind her, took the pen out of her hair, and brought it down into the center of his forehead.

“Miss Valstad?”

The pen was stuck in the wall, angled up. She pressed the tip of her finger gingerly to the end of it and watched as a thin stream of blood ran down the pen and dribbled down the wall, oozing around that hole she’d stabbed in his face.

“You wanted to speak with me?”

She dragged her bloody fingers down from the center of her forehead, smearing red from her brow to her chin in four wet stripes. Four brothers. Four of them but only one of them chosen. Her great grandfather had chosen both of his sons. Her father didn’t choose her, though. He had created her to be that choice. I’ve made you and I will continue making you. She smelled Maier, felt his heat to her right, and looked up at his plain and unassuming face.

“I want to see him,” she said.

“You will,” he smiled. His eyes gleamed with that fascinated curiosity, interested more in the blood on her skin than her nudity.

“I want to see him now.”

That curiosity shifted, no longer so detached, and she could feel his gaze burning on her bite wound.

“That would be difficult. They’ve relocated him to the Western Europe branch.”

Resentment flooded up under the calm waters of her mind, but she detected some regret in his voice.

“Did you see him before they took him away?”

“Briefly,” he said. A glimmer of excitement sparked in the minute quiver of his smile. “He bit a man’s thumb off.”

She watched the pulse point at his neck quicken, his pupils widen, and his white skin flush. His arousal was barely carnal, existing almost entirely on a mental level, though it did create a physical reaction. There were base urges in every man, but his responded to a rarer stimulus. The supply of that rare stimulus was perhaps what had led him to his career, but seldom did it place him in the active spaces of it. His pleasure was reaped in the aftermath and spectatorship. She could bring him closer.

“Did my father spit it back at him?” she asked, shifting to kneel, her eyes never leaving his.
A queer laugh bubbled out of him, high in pitch and excited. “It bounced right off his face as he screamed.”

She smiled up at him and his grin twitched. He was growing uncomfortable, bad memories of others being unable to understand him resurfacing under her attention. She had to reassure him. “Magnificent. His ruthlessness is unparalleled, isn’t it?”

He didn’t tense or flinch away when she took his hand gently in hers. “Yes,” he answered, his stiff tone revealing his nervousness at her touch. Nervous, but interested.

She let her gaze fall to his hand, turning his palm over and running her finger up his thumb as she asked, “Where is my father? Are they treating him well?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that,” he said. There was a slight quiver in his breath.

She could feel that quiver extend into his muscles as she moved her face closer, her lip brushing over his thumb as she asked, “Are you at liberty to show me how much of that man’s thumb he bit off?”

She could see his throat bob in a thick nervous swallow when she started to slip the appendage into her mouth, her teeth scraping heavily along his skin as she slowly fed him in. His normally meek and composed features were a mess of alarm and astonishment, his breath nearly panting out of him as she slid his thumb in further. When his breath hitched in grunt and he nodded quickly, she bit down gently. Too gently. He looked like he wanted to scream in frustration and she resisted the urge to grin.

She hummed questioningly at him and he stammered, “Th-there. Right there.”

“Mm-hmm?” she pressed and he hissed out a tense sigh.

“Leif Valstad is in France, on the Marceau estate,” he admitted in a huff.

She bit down hard, crushing the muscles over his metacarpal until she could detect the hardness of bone underneath. The choked groan he made was distractingly disturbing, even more than having this awful man’s thumb entirely in her mouth, but she was succeeding. Marceau’s people had him. He was not safe in the vengeful den of his slain enemy. She let Maier feel the crushing force of her teeth for a moment longer before releasing him, refraining from pulling away as quickly as she’d rather and careful to keep her disgust from her face. There were red indentations of her teeth deep in his skin, sure to leave bruises he would feel for quite a while afterward, but she had not broken it. The thought of his blood in her mouth was repulsive.

“It feels good to do the things he does, like I’m becoming him,” she whispered up at him, confiding a secret only they could understand. He bought it completely, his mouth parted in awe as he gazed down at her in unabashed amazement. It wasn’t necessarily a lie. She wanted very much to kill him, like she knew her father would want. It was a vicious, transitory thought that she batted away fiercely as she rose to her feet.

“I know other things,” he blurted out eagerly.

“Tell me.”

His eyes darted to her bite wound, his tongue peeking out to wet his pursed lips in anticipation. Her gut twisted at the desire she read in him, clear as though written on his face.

“I could tell you how to free him,” he said breathily.
Simone was right. His blood was repulsive in her mouth, but it was easier than she had thought. Not in the level of force she had to put into the bite just to break his skin between his neck and shoulder, but in getting close enough to him to do it. If she imagined she was on the subway during peak hours, pressed between the swaying and sweating bodies of the general New York public, it was barely anything at all. If she could ignore the kindred response to the conjoined twins of agony and ecstasy in his trembling gasps, it might have even been simple. The faulty mechanism that mistranslated brutality into pleasure in him was dreadfully familiar and she had shuddered in the raw exposure she felt as that dark piece of her related to him. That commonality between them shook her and made her reach inside him to where she did not want to feel and look to where she did not want to see. Without meaning to, she understood Maier and, in understanding and relating, became infected with him.

She spat into the sink, a burst of red blooming abruptly in the white porcelain and then swirling away in the running water. She glanced at her reflection on accident, recoiling at the nightmarish image of the blood-splattered and fever-damp girl. It seemed more like something she would have hallucinated, but lately, her hallucinations were becoming reality. She forced herself to look, to see what she was and what she would have to be to bring an end to all of it. A creature stared back at her through the glass.

“Do you hate him?”

Maier pressed a hand towel to his prized wound, the splotches of bright red on the clean white of both the terrycloth and his shirt like oriental poppies embellishing the materials. She looked away from both the thing in the mirror and the man in the doorway, uncomfortable with cleaning herself in front of this unfamiliar audience.

“I hate the world that created him,” she answered, her own voice distant from how far she felt from herself. She was stripped down too raw to lie anymore. Photographs flipped rapidly behind her eyes. “I want to… destroy it for what it allows… for what it does. I want to cut away the rot and burn it.”

“That’s too ambitious,” he said, a bitter delight ringing clearly through that terrible piece of him he infected her with.

She forced herself to look back into the mirror. Her father’s gray eyes glittered in the light. “Not for him.”

“You might be killed,” he smiled. “You might not like it, but you would be safe within the network. They’ll offer you plenty more than safety for your service.”

“I’d rather be dead than their carrot to dangle in front of him,” she sneered.

He walked into the bathroom, the steps of his fine polished shoes echoing off the stone and porcelain until he stood behind her. She watched him in the mirror, meeting his stare, and had the strong impression that if he didn’t abhor human contact, he would place his hand on her in reassurance. His admiration was more condemning than any accusation she could expose herself to. It occurred to her then, in a winding twist of horror and amusement, that she had made a friend.

“If you free him…” he started to request, but faltered on the edge of hope. She followed that thread easily.
“He will slaughter you without mercy,” she assured him. “I’ll ask him to do it barehanded.”

Maier’s polite little smile twitched into something frenzied and she could feel an ecstatic response swell within him. Love had as many faces as horror and, after touching Maier’s love toward Leif, she was able to accept that the two emotions often wore the same masks. Fear and love sung in a tumultuous harmony in her heart, fueling her devotion to vengeance both for and against her father. She swiped up some of the blood from her chin and pressed it to the center of her forehead, letting it gather enough to dribble down the bridge of her nose. With her eyes unfocused, she could see a hole stabbed through her head. Maier’s high, trilling laughter bounced off the tiles.

Anders woke with a start, the images of his nightmare dissipating like steam in the open air, and looked at the time. 8:45. He’d napped for four solid hours, drowsy on painkillers and avoidant of his troubled thoughts. He wrenched the sweat-soaked shirt off him with clumsy hands as he tried to get out of bed, rising on uncoordinated legs at the second attempt. Residual panic from his dream fed into an aimless urgency within him, dragging him still bleary-eyed into the hallway, the cane swinging to supplement the leg that refused to cooperate fast enough. He stopped in front of the police officer, his hand raised and mouth open as he struggled to recall enough English to pose his request. The officer looked up from his phone expectantly. Anders let his hand fall and hurriedly continued walking.

“Fucking Norwegians…” he heard the officer mumble behind him.

Henrik opened the door quickly after he knocked, the scent of vodka wafting strongly from the room, and greeted him with a slurred, “Well, look who it is! Papa Anders come to visit!”

“Henrik, I need-”

“Are you going to shut the fucking door?!” Vidar yelled from within the room.

“Vid, can I borrow your English for a minute?” Anders yelled back.

“Piss off, I’m not getting up!”

Anders bit his knuckle in a flurry of frustration and thought. It didn’t take him more than two seconds to make his reckless decision. “Fine! I’ll be right back!”

He could feel Henrik watching him as he knocked loudly on the door to Simone’s room. He tapped his nails on the heavy wood while he waited impatiently for a response and, after a few seconds of not hearing any noise stir from inside, knocked again.

“I think she’s taking a shower,” Henrik suggested.

“She’s been in the shower for two hours!” Vidar yelled.

Anders froze, his shock barely holding his anger at bay as he stiffly turned to Henrik and asked, “And neither of you thought that was strange? Why didn’t you check on her?!”

Henrik offered a loose shrug, his body swaying with the motion. “I dunno. Everything about her is strange.”

Anders shot him a heated glare before limping back to the officer.
“Open Simone’s room, please,” he said, carefully mimicking the American accent.

The officer reached into his shirt pocket and handed a key card to him without breaking his attention from his phone. Anders pursed his lips, on the verge of questioning this cop’s apparent unconcern for their safety to just hand out their room keys without a second look, but he was reluctant to find fault in this benefit to him while he was in a hurry. He’d have a few probably misused English words with the officer afterward, he decided.

Henrik still swayed in his doorway, a befuddled frown on his face as Anders staggered back toward her room. “What- What are you gonna do in there?”

“Help her,” Anders answered, slipping the keycard in the slot and trying the handle. It jammed, still locked, and he sighed in aggravation.

“Why don’t you just let her do what she wants?”

“Because she doesn’t always know what’s right or wrong.”

He tried slipping the key in and out slower and waiting a split second longer for the lock to disengage. The knob turned smoothly and he pushed it open into the darkened room, the sound of the shower running within. Henrik caught the door before it shut after Anders stepped through it and he tried not to growl at his older brother.

“And does that mean you do?” Henrik challenged.

Anders felt around in the dark for the knob to the bathroom door, pushing the wooden surface to find it ajar as he spoke past a heavy guilt, “I’m trying my best.”

His searching fingers flicked the light switch and both men gasped audibly at the painting on the mirror of a large serpent circling to take its tail in its mouth. The individual scales were smudges of a white paste, each with a center of red that spread outward into a pink swipe and textured to give the heightened illusion of dimension. Anders stepped toward it, his feet moving on their own as he stared awestruck at the level of detail in the serpent. The eye was a brilliant pool of red that dripped like teardrops around its wide and frightening mouth, the slit of its pupil rolled upward into its socket as though in agony.

“Jesus Christ…” Henrik breathed beside him. “That’s awesome.”

It was terrifying. Snapping out of his daze, Anders turned and rushed to the shower, yanking the curtain back to find nothing but the stream of water.

“Hey, Vid! You gotta come check out what Simone did!”

He ran past his yelling brother, panic pumping hot acid through his veins as he flicked on the main light in the room to find it empty, the bed still made, a pile of clothes and a towel on the floor. He snatched up the towel, finding it wet. The brown rust color of drying blood stained it here and there, making his heart clench in a vice of dread.

“Holyyy shit,” he heard Vidar drawl from the bathroom.

Anders dropped to his knees, his thigh throbbing in protest as he checked under the bed. The nothing he found there hurt more than his wound. As he pushed himself up, he stumbled backward in shock when he saw Leif’s face glaring at him accusingly. A scream jammed in his throat, erupting from him in a gasping sputter as he scooted away from him along the floor until his back hit a wall, but it was just a painting. A horrifically realistic painting, drawn in the same rusted sepia of dried blood.
He panted in gulping huffs, unable to tear away from that sinister glare.

“What is that? Toothpaste? She made this with fucking Colgate?!” Vidar exclaimed.

Finally, he staggered to his feet and limped to the closet, throwing it open to find it barren. He leaned heavily against the wall, the dread and the panic overwhelming him as he threaded his tense hands into the roots of his hair.

“It’s an ouroboros, like a snake god or something,” he heard Vidar explain. “It represents the cyclical nature of everything, or some shit.”

“It’s a snake eating itself,” Henrik corrected him knowingly.

“You know what? I’m going to leave you at the airport. Go sell ass to cow farmers and buy your own way back home.”

“Why are you mad?! I’m right!”

Anders found himself at the doorway of the bathroom, baffled and enraged at how they continued to ignore the distressing absence of their niece. She was gone. She was bleeding and gone, the shower left running to give the appearance of occupancy. Kidnapped, wounded, all while he had slept like a lazy, stupid coward. He slammed his fist into the doorframe, the loud bang of his already split knuckles hitting the solid wood silencing their bickering and drawing their stunned stares.

“What the fuck is wrong with you people?!” he shouted. “There’s blood all over this fucking room and all you can do is bitch at each other about nothing! About bullshit! Fuck! If your heads weren’t so far up your asses, maybe you could have seen something was wrong before Leif went full fucking psycho! Can’t you fucking see that she’s gone?! Why don’t you ever look around you?!”

He had to stop himself before he kept yelling, panting from the effort and the anger, his hard glare focused on their drunk-slack and wide-eyed stares as they stood there completely stunned like a couple of dullards. He despised them in that moment almost as much as he despised himself.

“What are you doing just standing there staring?! Let’s get moving!” he snapped.

“Uh…” Vidar started, but Anders turned away from him in disgust.

In his rush to go alert the policeman, he collided with the person standing directly behind him, his arms reflexively wrapping around them to keep them from falling as he righted himself. His hands registered the soft texture of Simone’s skin before he looked down at the girl, her silver eyes wide and plush mouth parted in surprise as she looked up at him. She was safe. She was there. She was completely naked.

“Jesus!” he hissed, enclosing her in his embrace more protectively against the stares of his lecherous brothers.

“Yes, thank you, Jesus!” Vidar jeered.

“I’m waaay too drunk for this,” Henrik groaned.

Anders tightened his hold on her and lifted her slightly, carrying her light frame closer to the bed and yanking a sheet from under the aggravatingly tucked blanket. She wriggled in his hold, but he had to cover her nudity from his idiot brothers. He wrapped the sheet around them before he loosened his too-tight embrace, letting her feet reach the floor once more and feeling the electric thrill of their bare torsos sliding against each other. His ears burned at the slight feminine grunt she made at that
sensation, but this was neither the time nor place for that. His panic still thrummed through him despite his immense relief at finding her and he brought the hand that wasn’t gripping the sheet to her cheek, tipping her face back up at him. She was still hot with fever, her hair still damp from the shower, and her eyes still glassy with illness, but she was whole and safe in his arms.

“You are okay?” he asked. He needed to hear it.

“Yes… Papa,” she whispered. “Please, don’t yell like that. I’m sorry if I upset you... I was only hiding.”

That frisson of pleasure and excitement shivered down his body to coil in his pelvis at hearing her call him that again. The rapid chaos of his mind slowed to a blank calm as her arms wrapped around his middle under the sheet and she rose on her tiptoes. Without thinking, he bent to meet her kiss, that insistent coil in his pelvis drawing tighter when she slid her tongue along his lower lip. He parted for her begging tongue and she eagerly sought his out, turning her head to deepen the kiss and moaning quietly against his mouth. That intoxicating, heady brand of lust she brought out in him flooded his body and mind at the taste and feel of her warm tongue sliding against his. With one hand keeping the sheet wrapped firmly around them, he let the other slide down to grab a handful of her ass and squeeze that soft and springy flesh, drawing a more carnal moan out of her. Her nails ghosted down the length of his spine to dovetail to his sides and hook into the elastic of his shorts, her tug like a suggestion. Not yet, he imparted with a slow grind of his hips, his erection sliding against her smooth belly and making her shudder. He loved how impatient she was, loved even more to torment her with it.

His fervor was derailed when a low whistle drew him out of that fog of lust. He startled away from her kiss, confusion and alarm restarting his mind with a shock as he whipped his head to find Vidar watching them. He leaned against the corner of the wall that led into the short hallway to the bathroom and the door, a sly grin on his face and a looseness to his posture that Anders didn’t expect.

“Henrik, why don’t you go back to the room?” the leering man called out to their older brother, nothing in his tone to suggest anything was amiss. “I’ll keep an eye on these two for a bit.”

“Fiiine,” Henrik groaned, his drunken steps lumbering and heavy as he walked out.

At the click of the door softly shutting, the two remaining men stood rooted in the stillness of the room, the girl’s deep breaths the only sound. She nipped tenderly at his chest, her little tongue darting out to lap at the salt of his dried sweat, making his cock throb even as he glared at his brother. He squeezed her ass roughly, trying to convey the message for her to stop, but that only made her whimper and sigh. Her need was ruthless and infectious.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Vidar grinned, his voice slightly slurred from drinking. “I’m just here to keep an eye on you both. Please, continue.”

Anders realized, with a lurch of his stomach, that those sick things his brother had said earlier to get a rise out of him weren’t just for teasing. Except that didn’t make sense. For all his lewdness, Vidar didn’t mean any of it. He’d said it was all just him and Henrik joking around, that they could joke because there was no actual tension there. Thinking back, his stomach sank with the realization that only Henrik had said that.

“Vid…” Anders started, his voice quivering in his reluctance to hear the answer. “Did you… Did you do anything to her?”

Vidar huffed out a chuckle that was more of an exasperated sigh, his head tilting back in mild
annoyance. “Give me a break, littlest brother, I have more manners than to stick my hand in another man’s pickle jar without asking first. She’s your girlfriend… daughter-niece… sex slave thing.”

His relief was equal to his irritation and neither strong enough to distract from the sick feeling at finding out that his brother had harbored lust towards their niece. “She’s not a sex slave.”

Vidar’s eyebrows shot up in mocking disbelief. “Really? What is it that you’re planning for her future in Norway? Are you going to help her get a job, acclimate to the culture, get her on the track to finding her own place and moving on and away? No, you’re going to keep her chained to your bed where she’s ‘safe’.”

A cold pit formed in Anders that he rapidly tried to cover with denial. It wouldn’t be like that. He only wanted to help her heal and, if that meant keeping her protected from the world, then of course he would keep her where she’s safest. She squirmed a bit in his arms, making him realize he had squeezed her to him too tight.

“I’m not like him,” Anders hissed.

“No, you’re not like him. This is all you,” Vidar said, his voice heavy in solemnity, then a sharp grin split his face. “Hey, I’m not judging you for it, so don’t give me that look. That’s not to say other people won’t judge you. God, mom would just die of shame if she found out what her sweet little golden boy has been doing to her granddaughter.”

“Are you blackmailing me?!?”

“I’m just stating the facts. You’re going to want my help in making everyone believe she’s not your slave. You can both have a happy life together, free of judgment, free of the legal attention these matters attract. I can do that if you ask me to.”

That cold pit in Anders filled with a burning hostility towards him. The threat was clearly meant under the honeyed offers of help: if Vidar didn’t get what he wanted, he would make certain that everyone would know the worst possible versions of the truth and the police would take her away as his victim. She nuzzled against his chest, her forehead hot to the touch and her panting more from shortness of breath than the demand of passion, and she leaned against him heavily for support. She was so delicate. He had no idea what the sick fucks Maier worked for would do with her if he lost her, but he was certain it would be a lot worse than what he would have to put her through to keep her protected. This was the only way, even if it made him sick with hatred.

“What the fuck do you want, Vid?”

“We can start by having you drop that sheet.”

His fist clenched with fury and reluctance, shaking as he forced himself to relax. The sheet slipped from his hand and fell to the floor in a whisper. Simone brought her glassy eyes back up to look at him questioningly, her delirious stare seeming less than even half-aware of what was happening around her. For once, he was thankful for her detachment from reality, as much as her fever worried him.

“Get on the bed with her.”

“Vid, you can’t-”

“What we can and can’t do to each other stopped mattering when you stuck your dick in Leif’s dirty business and got us all drugged for it,” Vidar interrupted flatly. He pulled the chair from the desk in
the corner and rolled it to face the foot of the bed, his intentions horrifically clear as he sat down and said, “Come on. Show me what was so worth unearthing all this hell for.”

“Please, Vid, she’s been through so much…” Anders pleaded.

“She looks like she could go for a little more,” he smirked.

“I can’t… I can’t do this to her.”

“Do you want me to fuck her by myself, then? I’m not a gentle lover, Anders.”

An unexpected fear struck through Anders’ sickening dread. He wanted to go back to being angry, to want to beat his brother for this awful thing he was putting them through, but that fear for his Simone’s safety drowned out any such violence in him. He couldn’t think of any good that intimidating Vidar would bring, either. He couldn’t keep that sly and clever man under his thumb. He wasn’t Leif. She reached up and touched his face then, drawing his attention to her as she looked up at him through a haze of delirium and such heart-wrenching love. She stood on her tiptoes once more, her arms coming up to wrap behind his neck as she kissed his cheek sweetly.

“I feel so hot, Papa…” she whispered, her voice small and high, almost childlike. “Can we go home? I think… I think I have a fever.”

He nearly crushed her to him in a desperate hug, his guilt burgeoning over any hatred or fear as he buried his face in the soft cascade of her hair and breathed in her scent. He shut his eyes, the softness of her body pressing against his erection bringing a throb of arousal even in these terrible circumstances, and kissed her neck as he whispered to her.

“You are okay. It’s okay. Papa will… take care, yes? You lay down. Papa will take care.”

He eased her pliant form diagonally across the bed, her half-shut eyes watching him with an utterly undeserved trust that made him feel like the worst scum on the planet. Her skin glowed in a thin sheen of sweat despite the chill of the air-conditioned room and her eyes rolled each time she slowly blinked, increasing his worry at just how much of a fever she had. This would be quick and gentle, he assured himself. It didn’t seem like she even knew what was happening and, with any luck, she never would. Her legs dangled limply over the edge of the bed and he spread them open wider as he took his cock out of his shorts, the greedy organ red and wet at the tip with want for her.

“Papa…” he heard her cracked whisper as he leaned over her. Something in his chest ached at the uncertainty in her small voice and he looked up from his attention to aligning his tip to her opening, immediately regretting it when he saw the fear in her face. “What are you doing?”

“Oh… I, uh… We’re…” he stuttered, his confusion at her reaction smashing against an unsettling suspicion. Something wasn’t right with her, even less right than normal, but he couldn’t bear the thought of what he suspected.

“Papa’s going to make you feel better, sweetheart,” Vidar answered, grinning from his chair. Anders tried to ignore his mocking. “I guess I should have expected that she’d be into the whole ‘daddy’ thing this deep. Well, go on and ‘take care’ of your little girl, papa.”

Simone turned her head to look at Vidar as though noticing him there for the first time and Anders pressed his hand to her cheek to turn her back to him. “Look to me, dear, do not look to him.”

Her eyes wide in fear, she nodded her head and stared up at him. She was just confused. Feverish, delirious, and confused. He leaned down, pressing his lips to hers in another deep kiss, his tongue seeking access to her mouth in an attempt to clear that confusion. She let out a trembling breath
through her nose and her body tensed, but she parted her mouth for him. The shaking whimper she made as he coaxed her shy tongue into returning his caresses made his cock flex against her, the heat of her crotch almost burning against him. She jerked and grunted away from his kiss when he began to press into her, her soft slit still too dry to yield to him.

“Sorry, sorry!” he whispered, panicked, knowing he’d made her hurt. He backed away from her when he saw the tears leaking out of her scrunched-shut eyes and her face turned into the bedding as a sob gasped out of her. “Oh God, oh fuck, I can’t do this! She’s not well!”

“You can’t just shove it in like a fucking animal, dipshit,” Vidar sighed in exasperation.

Anders rubbed his face, her distress bringing an anxiety that clashed with the terrible demand of his arousal. Her distress did not add to his arousal. He wouldn’t let it. “No, no, she’s dreaming or something, I can’t do this when she’s- Jesus, she can’t even consent in this condition, it’s not right!”

“Well, she’s going to cry. She’s been fucked by her own father for God knows how long, you have to force her to like it.”

Anders’ panicked thoughts crashed to a halt, his shock at his brother’s disturbing nonchalance at delivering those even more disturbing words making him look at him for the first time since laying Simone down. Force her to like it. Force her. His stare drifted back to his girl, taking in her light brown skin and long dark hair, her talented fingers digging her nails into the hill of her shoulder, her shapely body trembling in fear and fever. He thought about what kind of men her vulnerability and submissiveness would attract. Men like Leif. Like Vidar. Like him. But he didn’t want to hurt her. Not like that. A strange comfort eased his tension as he realized that he wanted to hurt her only when she wanted the pain. Her submissiveness drew a dominance out of him that he was unaccustomed to, but it was with the care and authority of a father, not the cruelty or forcefulness of a master. He wanted to be worthy of that position. Standing in a hotel room with his brother blackmailing him into raping her, he was not worthy. If he had to do this to keep her, he would do it his way.

“Ssh, ssh, dearest, it’s okay…” he whispered to her, sitting on the edge of the bed and gently brushing her hair away from her face. “You are okay, yes? Not hurt?”

She flinched at his touch, but nodded her head in response. He scooted closer to her and, when she didn’t flinch again, he pulled her into his lap as he sat with his back leaned against the headboard. She curled around him, eager for comfort even though he was the cause of her distress. His hands caressed her sides in long, soothing strokes, easing the fear from her until she sighed into the crook of his neck, and then he maneuvered her to straddle his lap, mindful of the injury at the side of his thigh. She lifted her face from his shoulder, that uncertain expression so adorable on her face again, and he smiled at her reassuringly.

“Kiss?” he requested, tilting her face closer to hers. She obliged, giving him a brief chaste kiss on his mouth. He chuckled at that and pulled her closer against him, his cock nestled under her along her crotch. She wriggled against it curiously. “Kiss?”

This time, when she leaned in, he tangled his hand in her hair at the back of her head and held her still as he moved his lips sensually over hers. She made a small noise of surprise that was muffled by his mouth, her muscles stiffening but not trying to move away with his tight grasp on her hair. He encouraged her with a sound of his own, a low moan that had her melting against him as he coaxed her mouth open once more. With his free hand, he caressed the supple length of her thigh up to the inward slope of her waist and brushed over the swell of her ass as he moved back down again, earning him a whimpering moan from her. Even with her mind caught in some childhood nightmare state, her body responded to him so readily. He pressed his pelvis up into her, focusing the grind against her clitoris, and she rolled her hips almost instinctively into the motion with another moan.
The haze of arousal returned, stronger and more abruptly, bringing his hands to grasp her hips and rock her against him roughly.

She broke their kiss with a gasp and murmured something completely unintelligible, but her intentions were thrillingly obvious when she wriggled out of his hold and slid down his body. He let his mind sink into that thick arousal that altered everything into pleasure and impulse as she gripped the base of him. Surrounded by her scent with the sight of her kowtowed between his outstretched legs with her ass raised high, his only worry was coming too soon. Her mouth was as hot as her fever around him, making him tilt his head back and sigh at the first wave of pleasure from her wet tongue sliding over him. He had to twist his fists into the bedding to keep them from grabbing her head and forcing her when she slowly, carefully took him all the way into her throat.

“God damn…” he growled, the sight of her so dedicatedly sucking his dick far more erotic than he had so often fantasized. From the edge of his vision, he could see the motion of his brother stroking himself slowly behind her, but he found that he did not mind. Let him enjoy her. He knew who she belonged to and, as her moan vibrated around him, he knew she did too. A strange sense of power tickled his mind at the notion and, before he thought twice about it, he asked his brother, “Are you just going to stare at it all night, or are you going to eat it?”

The shock he caught on Vidar’s face brought a smug grin to his. It was rare that he got to stun the perceptive man, but he tucked that victory away for another time. This moment was far too interesting and his attention was far too narrow to juggle much thought outside of sex. When he saw his brother lean down behind her, Anders carded his fingers into her hair and held her still on his cock as she jerked in surprise at the mouth suddenly pressed to her ass. Her cries of shock and protest soon lengthened into moans of pleasure, each sound feeling heavenly on him. Her trust in him was, while undeserved, a thing that served to feed his assured dominance of her. It felt odd but overwhelmingly good to embrace that role, the focus on dominance never having much occurred to him in previous relationships. He looked down at her beautiful face taking his length and felt an overpouring of love for her strong enough to make him groan.

“Can I fuck her?” Vidar asked in a husky whisper, pumping two fingers slowly into her asshole. “I’ll be gentle.”

“I’ll tell you when I want you to fuck her,” Anders answered, surprised at his own words as they drewled out of him. A glimmer of discomfort at this side of him stirred in his mind before a long moan from Simone obliterated all thought from him, leaving only the drive for pleasure and power. His balls were heavy and tense with the need to ejaculate soon and he pulled her off him by her hair, the sight of the long thread of saliva connecting his tip to her darkened and swollen lips driving up that need. Her bleary gaze was still full of the delirium of fever and madness, clouded over with the heavy fog of arousal.

“You want to fuck?” he asked. She nodded languidly, tugging her hair with the motion and barely seeming to notice the slight pain. “Where?”

“Anywhere,” she answered.

“You want Vidar to fuck?” he asked.

Confusion furrowed her brow endearingly, making him chuckle as he pulled her onto his lap. He barely had time to line up his cock before she sunk down onto it, her strained moan loud and gorgeous as she took him too enthusiastically. She was molten hot around him, her cunt sucking him in snugly. He held her down to keep her from moving, making her squirm and groan in frustration as he beckoned his brother over. Vidar moved behind her quickly, a madness and disbelief to his expression that Anders could sympathize with. What they were doing was breaking too many taboos
to consider, but the forbidden fruit was sweet and ripe between them. Anders tightened his fist in her hair to keep her from looking at the man who slid up her copious fluid from around her cunt and swirled it at her asshole. He appreciated the care his brother took to wet his dick with spit before pressing it to her.

“Gently,” he warned.

Vidar nodded, his mad stare fixed to where he began to slowly fuck into her. Anders kissed her fiercely, eating her questioning and high-pitched cries as her body rocked with his brother’s careful motions. She was snug around him before, but as Vidar pushed past her ring of muscle and fed into her bit by bit, she was tightening on him like a vice.

“Try to relax, sweetheart,” Vidar whispered softly, stroking her thighs in a soothing caress. “Let it in. There we go… Breathe, baby, breathe for us… Oh, Christ, Anders, what the fuck are we doing? Easy, sweetheart, you’re doing so good… This is fucked up, too fucked up, why are you letting me do this?”

Anders glanced at him, practically reading his moral crisis on his face even as he kept fucking her ass, and had to refrain from laughing into the kiss. The calming whispers and caresses were working on her, easing that crushing pressure off his cock into something comfortable. Cautiously, he broke the kiss, resting his forehead against hers as he started to move inside her. She was shaking like a leaf between them, her cries animalistic in response to this overstimulation. He watched her frenzied disbelief waver on the threshold of hysteria, riveted by her struggle.

“It’s too much, Papa!” she cried in a broken gasp between her moans. “What’s… What’s happening to me? Oh, fuck, you’re tearing me apart! I’m gonna… I’m gonna…!

“Fuck-fuck-fuck this is it!” Vidar panted rapidly.

Anders could feel her whole body tensing and shaking, her back arching like a bow as her cries climbed in time with the deep pulsing in her cunt. He watched, astonished, as she came with a long and almost mournful wail. He fucked her harder through her orgasm, drawing it out, her teeth bared almost in agony and her entire being too beautiful in that moment. This was it. This was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He came in her then, her sweat almost sweet as he bit down on the side of her neck. Each flex and throb from the base of his groin as he filled her with semen brought a flash of white behind his eyes and drove a breathy grunt out of him. When at last he was spent, he opened his eyes and saw that she had passed out, her small body slumped against him as Vidar slowly pulled out of her with a heavy sigh.

“God… fuck… What the fuck,” he heard his brother pant as he stumbled off the bed. “I don’t… I was drinking and… just… yeah.”

Anders watched as Vidar zipped himself up and shuffled out of the room, holding his head in a perfect image of regret. He suspected he would join him in that emotion eventually, but for now, he was numbed by the euphoria of hormones. Adjusting his Simone to lie down more comfortably, he pulled the blanket over them and held her to him as she slept. The hell he would catch for the night’s debauchery would be there waiting for them soon enough.
Simone shot out and jerked the receiver of the phone in the middle of the first ring, the reflex waking her more than the noise. Her hand gripped it limply, her body halfway twisted out of the blankets and only halfway out of sleep as she blinked blearily at the phone. Her mind ascended to consciousness with the slowness of a diver avoiding the bends, making her squint at the strange device as she struggled to remember what she was supposed to do with it.

“… Hello?… Miss Valstad?” a voice came through the small speaker, reminding her how to hold it to her ear.

She hesitantly brought it to the side of her head, her voice cracking past her sore throat as she rasped, “Yes?”

A warm body turned toward her, the softness of skin sliding against her bare side as a white man’s arm snaked around her middle. She glanced over at the man, seeing only his blond head of hair and a well-muscled shoulder, then looked around the unfamiliar room nervously. She was in a hotel, a nice one this time. She never stayed the night with these men. Her brow furrowed in confusion, trying to recall how this happened, but memories smeared together with nightmares in a blurred frenzy of fear and pain and ecstasy.

“… Are you still there?” the man’s voice came through flat in the limited range of the speaker.

“Yeah… I, uh… Who is this?” she mumbled. The man pressed slow and sleepy kisses to her lower back, his hand languidly stroking her belly with a tenderness she was unaccustomed to in these scenarios. She usually avoided the lovey-dovey types. Too messy, too awkward.

“Special Agent Maier,” the voice answered. “I’m sorry to wake you, but I have your mother on the other line. Would you like me to patch her through?”

She looked at the clock and winced. 7:48. Her parents must have freaked out and called every police station in the boroughs. “Yes, please, go ahead.”

She rubbed her tender throat, resisting the urge to sigh in anticipation of her mother’s wrath as the line clicked into a brief silence before the low static of air came back through the line. Her sluggish mind ached to recall anything at all, but the many aches in her body gave her enough hints. Whatever this guy did to her last night, he did it rough and in places she typically didn’t let men go. She had either been very drunk or in the midst of another breakdown for any of this to make sense. A slinking strangeness crawled around in her mind, interrupted by the sound of Lisa’s voice cracked and strained with tears.

“Simmy? Simmy-baby, please… I… oh…”

Her mother never cried. Simone sat up, alarm bestowing a renewed energy to her. “I’m so sorry, Mom! I know I messed up, I should have called, but I-I don’t know what happened. Don’t cry, Mama, please.”

The mattress dipped behind her with the man’s shifting, his hands now rubbing her shoulders in a touch that was meant to impart comfort, but she could barely pay any mind to him now. Her mother was going to kill her.

“Ooh, my baby, my babyyy…” Lisa’s tearful groan pulled painfully at her heart. She could feel tears
stinging her own eyes in the deep agony of her mother’s grief. “It’s not your fault, none of it’s your fault, Simmy, don’t you ever, ever believe that! That- that monster, he hurt you, didn’t he? They won’t tell me anything, they won’t tell me where you are, but I know, I know he hurt my baby, didn’t he? That fucking white haole son of a bitch!”

“No, Mom, I’m fine! I promise, I’m okay!”

“I-I don’t know why I didn’t see it, I just… I wanted to leave him years ago and take you to Puna’s, none of this woulda happened, but I listened to him like a damn fool and I believed him!” Lisa’s ragged voice was interrupted by her wet sniffing. Simone clutched the phone tight in her fist, her sore throat thick with the want to cry too. There was something deeply disturbing blooming in her mind, those long nightmares coalescing into something vivid and overwhelming. “I believed him for so long. I failed you, my only baby child. I’m never gonna forgive myself. Oh, sweet Jesus, the things they’re telling me he did… You gotta stay with them, Simmy, they tell me… you can’t come home. They won’t let me see you, won’t let me see my own child and maybe I… Maybe I don’t deserve to, but I love you, Simmy-baby. I’m just… sorry.”

“I love you too, Mom…” Simone breathed, that aching in her pounding head splitting her mind open. Memory poured into her all at once, making the brief absence of it seem like a pleasant dream she’d just woken from. The terrible context of this phone call finally broke her down into tears. She wiped them away in resentment. She didn’t need to give her mother any more reason to cry. “None of this is your fault either. Be careful, understand? Leave, go far away, go stay with Puna! Don’t answer the door to strangers, don’t trust anyone. Papa isn’t the only.”

Simone grimaced with frustration when the line silenced abruptly, clicking into a brief static before Maier’s professional monotone came through. “Please refrain from divulging any details regarding the ongoing case, Miss Valstad.”

The line cut to a dial tone and she let the receiver drop as she buried her face in her hands, though the weeping refused to come. The sound of her mother’s voice tore open a wound in her she hadn’t expected, a wound existing only on the person she once was. That bright, ambitious girl had been long ago twisted into an unrecognizable monster of madness and sin by a mad and sinful man. It wasn’t her mother’s fault. They were all fooled. The harm he did to her was abhorrent, but the harm it had brought to her mother was unforgivable. Anders hugged her gently from behind, his bare chest hot against her back and his scent all at once comfortingly familiar and familiarly terrifying. Both sensations evoked that sick need in her that she could not bear to encounter amid this guilt.

“Please, don’t…” she said quietly, not lifting her face from her hands.

There weren’t many photographs in their home. Frequent long distant moves from city to city, then state to state made it hard to hang onto anything for long and keeping pictures in cell phones and cloud storage was simpler than having to frame and place them. However, there were a few photos that Lisa had always set out, either on a side table in the living room or on a fireplace mantle. The photo that came to Simone’s mind most prominently as she mourned the loss of her family as a unit was the one of Lisa and Leif on their wedding day, her father wearing his charming smile she now knew was entirely false and her mother in an empire waist gown to hide that she had begun to show in her pregnancy. For him to have taken so many years of her mother’s life and used them as a piece of his performance of normalcy struck her only now with the full weight of such abomination. Lisa was 22 when she had met Leif, still 22 when she had wed him and bared him a child. Only two years older than Simone was now.

She tried to imagine having a child in two years, tried to calculate what starting a family of her own in that short time would require, but it was impossible when all she could see in her future was blood.
She lifted her face enough to look down at the hands in her lap, the palms whiter than the rest of her light brown skin. She could not imagine doing something as reckless as holding a child with these wicked hands, certain that there was some toxic residue that murder had soaked into her skin. No, she could not be anything other than what she had to become. Normalcy was as denied to her now as it had been denied to the boy who would become her father.

The electric frisson of pleasure that Anders’ tongue sparked along her shoulder snapped her out of her thoughts and she recoiled in a twisting jerk, her grief igniting into a flare of anger as she snapped, “What are you doing?!”

His shock cooled her temper with guilt, but not enough to douse it completely.

“You are needing help,” he answered.

“There’s nothing you can do to help,” she said, trying to quicken the anger back into sorrow.

His saddened expression deepened her regret at having snapped at him, that guilt causing her to allow him to pull her to lie down with him again. There was no reason to be mad at him; he didn’t do anything to hurt her. She didn’t want his comfort, though. She needed to think and the heat of his skin against hers dragged her away from herself. Anders’ mouth resumed tasting her, this time in short licks along her chest she had to bite her lip in concentration to ignore. When his licks dipped lower, taking her nipple into his mouth, she yelped in the shock of arousal and pushed away from him to scurry off the bed.

“Stop it!” she gasped, her arms wrapping protectively around her traitorous body. The confusion and shame etched in his expression were intolerable, causing her to turn away before she gave into the urge to surrender, to soothe, to submit. “I can’t… I need to grieve. Let me grieve. Please.”

“I can help you feel good!” he argued.

Frustration at his well-meaning nature boiled up that anger in her again. “I don’t want to need this—this sickness! I can’t fuck my life back together, Anders!”

There was a desperation to his bewilderment that alarmed her, a disbelief and denial she couldn’t guess the origin of but knew made him reach out and pull her by her wrist. Her feet skid along the carpet, the reactive resistance doubling in worry that his desperation was going to force them both into a situation neither of them could want, but he was far, far stronger than she was. She yelped when he yanked her onto the bed, his large body pinning her down beneath him in a whirl of motion that left her dizzy. Panic sizzled at the edges of her mind and she squeezed her eyes shut in fear when he wedged his hand between her firmly closed thighs. There was nothing more she could think to say to deter him. There was nothing she could do against his will with her meager strength. It never mattered what she didn’t want; all she could do was try to passively resist until her sick need broke her. His scouring fingers finally pushed through to her vagina and the high-pitched whimper she stifled behind her clenched teeth was a pained animal noise of distress.

His abrupt stillness made her open her eyes to see him staring in horrified astonishment at her. No, she realized, at himself. The presence of any intense emotion in men had taught her that there was often a violent reaction soon following and she laid as still as a fawn in the grass as he moved stiffly away from her. It wasn’t until she heard the door softly shut that she let her body relax from its defensive tension, but disbelief reigned in the silence that followed. Unable to recover from the shock of what had happened and what may have almost happened, she stumbled into the bathroom for a brief cold shower.
Henrik had to drink himself into unconsciousness. The hangover he woke up with wasn’t as agonizing as lying awake in the dark, listening to the frightened and desperate cries of Simone through the thin hotel wall as his brothers did… something in there. Something to her, he could tell that much. He could tell a lot more than that, but he refused to. Vidar was in there with them; he could hear the taunting lilt and grumbling surliness he spoke with, even if he couldn’t make out what was said. Vidar wouldn’t let anything happen while he was in there with him. Besides, he’d told him that Anders wasn’t like that anymore, after all. Temporary insanity, he’d called it. Just a stress response, crossed wires, trauma doing funny things to the mind, but Anders was better now. They were all better now. No one wanted to hurt her that way anymore. He turned onto his side, looking across to his brother in the other bed, seeing him staring at the ceiling with a haunted expression. He wondered if Vidar had slept at all last night after staggering back and taking a shower hot enough to make the whole room humid.

“You wanna go get breakfast?” Henrik asked. “I need something to soak this alcohol up.”

Vidar only shook his head, his tense stare not breaking from the ceiling. Henrik braced himself for the headache and rolled out of bed, wavering on his feet until the floor stopped swaying. He was getting too old to drink that much. He stumbled into the jeans that barely fit over his muscular thighs and sagged at the waist and shrugged into a t-shirt that stretched thin over his chest and shoulders before stepping out into the hallway, surprised to see Anders leaving Simone’s room at the same time. There was that same haunted look in his face that Vidar wore.

Both men regarded each other in tense silence before Henrik broke it. “She, uh… She needs someone there for the nightmares, right?” Anders glanced away, pursing his lips briefly before nodding. Henrik opted to temporarily forget his baby brother’s obvious tells when he lied. “You want to go down for the breakfast buffet? We still have half an hour.”

“No, thanks,” Anders quietly answered, seeming very interested in the pattern on the carpet.

“Oh, okay,” Henrik tried not to sound disappointed or worried. He watched their littlest brother start to walk away, a heaviness to his mood that slumped his bare shoulders and kept his head low. He knew it looked like shame, but he decided it was a low-grade depression from everything they’d been through. Eager to cheer him up, he called after him, “Hey! We go home today, remember?”

Anders looked over his shoulder and offered a wan smile and another shallow nod without breaking his limping stride. Henrik’s fake grin withered as he passed the cop dozing in his chair. Sitting alone in the dining area with only two other small families still eating breakfast at tables each far apart from the other, the dry toast and orange juice charged to whatever tab they had running at this hotel, he noticed the news van parked across the street. Looking out the wide windows behind him, he spotted another one with passing interest. His attention was diverted to the unexpected sight of his young niece carrying a tray of food, her hair still wet from a shower and a loose sweater dwarfing her already small frame.

“Good morning!” he called to her, waving her over with a wide grin and ignoring the pounding in his head from his own booming voice. She smiled back at him and approached. It was nice to finally find someone happy to see him that morning.

“Hey, Uncle Henrik!” she smiled, setting her tray down next to his. She sat down very gingerly, wincing as she settled into the chair.

He glanced at the array of fruit on her plate and joked, “You are, uh, diet?”
“Just avoiding rich foods because, you know…” she said, mimicking a gagging noise to illustrate her point before picking up a slice of apple with her fingers. “What goes down must come up, right?”

He laughed at that, surprised that she was joking at all, let alone with him. It was a fantastic sign. If she could overcome the gloom and doom that seemed to affect his brothers so deeply, then they had absolutely no excuse to wallow much longer. He watched her, trying not to seem too obvious as he observed her, knowing he was doing a rather poor job by her frequent returned glances. There was a fork next to her plate that she didn’t touch and, seeing how her fingers shook as she brought the pieces of fruit to her mouth, he didn’t blame her for the lack of table manners. Withdrawal symptoms were unpredictable in duration and effect.

“How are you?” he asked, wishing he had the English to phrase the question better.

“Peachy,” she answered, then frowned down at her plate critically. “Wait, no peaches.”

He didn’t understand the joke, but that there was a joke at all was enough to make him chuckle. She took a sip of her hot tea, closing her eyes in appreciation of the warm beverage as she swallowed before flashing a charming smile at him. She seemed like a completely different girl from the wide-eyed waif he’d met, someone bustling with life and playfulness instead of fear and madness. He could actually picture her being Anders’ daughter this way. When a dribble of tea dripped over the edge of the mug from her tremor, she set it down quickly and tucked her hands in her lap. He pretended not to have noticed.

“So, you must be happy about going home today,” she smiled. “I know they always say this for funeral trips but I really, really hope we could get together under better circumstances next time.”

“Ah… We, uh, get together soon,” he assured her. “I ask Anders when is good.”

“Oh… I don’t think they’re gonna let me out of the country anytime soon,” she said, tilting her head surreptitiously to the police cars parked outside. “And I won’t take it personally if you never come back to America after this.”

Henrik wrinkled his heavy brow in confusion, working out her words to try to find anything that he might have not caught in translation. “Agent Maier say you… uh… live with Anders. Today, you come.”

She mirrored his confused expression. “Maier said that? That I’m going to live with Anders?”

He nodded. “Yes. Um, yes. Today. You are come with us, yes?”

She stared at him blankly, then exhaled in a long sigh as she sat back heavily in her seat. “No, I think maybe you misunderstood. I’m not going anywhere for a minute.”

“He say in Norsk,” Henrik insisted.

“Well, then, he misspoke,” she said, frowning. She bit her knuckle, her lip curled in disbelief as she muttered, seemingly to herself, “Live with Anders?! That’s… I can’t do that. I… I can’t.”

It was his turn to be astonished when he realized that she really had no idea. He didn’t know how to phrase his question of if anyone had even asked her about it, but he suspected not. Watching her struggle with this news that she was to move to another continent in a matter of hours, he pitied her all over again. It was hard to remember that she was too insane to have control of her life when she had good moments like this one.

“When did he tell you this?” she asked, a sharp focus chasing away any sign of that playful girl.
Agent Maier yesterday say to me and Vidar,” Henrik answered.

“Where is Vidar now?”

“Bed.”

“Thank you, Uncle Henrik,” she said, rising from her seat abruptly. She hesitated, then said to him with a sincerity that unsettled him, “Thank you for talking with me… and for showing me that photo album. You’re a good person. I hope I get to know you better someday.”

Henrik felt the heat of a blush redden his cheeks, the knowledge that he was blushing only making him blush harder, but thankfully she was back to avoiding looking directly at him. He watched, concerned at her sudden changes in behavior, as she walked away with her fists clenched. It couldn’t be helped, but he hated that this was the way she’d found out. He pulled her half-finished plate of fruit toward him and took a sip of her tea, spitting it back into the mug when he found it to be a warm cup of honey and something bitter spiced to an almost unbearable hotness.

“Fucking full of surprises, that child,” he muttered, reaching for his toast to sop up that spice.

She hated knocking on doors. Even after everything she’s had to do, she hated initiating social interaction, but she needed to know more about what Maier was throwing her into. She could just go ask Anders, but she wanted to put off thinking about whatever was happening between them as far as she could. One thing at a time. Vidar had better English, anyway. Pushing past her social anxiety, she set her jaw and rapped her knuckles on the door. After all that, no response came from within the room. A twinge of frustration helped bolster her courage.

“Uncle Vidar!” she called as loudly as she could through her sore throat, knocking on the door again. This time, the door flew open and she yelped as a flustered Vidar quickly yanked her into the room, hissing out a harshly whispered, “Fy faen, do you want him to hear you?!”

Her senses sharpened all at once at her uncle’s alarm, her eyes scanning quickly for the threat that had him warning her with such urgency. She jerked her arm out of his hold when she saw none, meaning the threat had yet to come to them. There was no time to waste on regret at having drawn attention to them. She grabbed him by his shirt and shoved him into the closet, snatching up the empty liquor bottle from the floor on her way. It wasn’t the best weapon, but she could stun a man by breaking it over his head and hoped for a nice sharp edge to sever an artery with. She crowded in after him into the closet, silently pulling the door to leave it open a thin inch.

“Simone, what are-”

“Ssh!” she interrupted, her hand shooting out to cover his mouth as he stooped low to avoid the closet bar. She waited a moment, listening for any signs of approach or any movement out there at all, before whispering, “How many?”

He pulled her hand away and she glanced back at him to see his brow furrowed in bewilderment as he whispered, “What?”

She stepped closer to him, needing to speak as quietly as possible as she brought her mouth to his ear and slowly asked, “Is it just one man out there? Did he have a weapon?”
“You are sick again?” he asked incredulously, then smirked, “Or this is game, *fristerinne*?”

She stared at him, squinting in thought as she tried to connect his sudden change in attitude to his previous warning and could not. “This isn’t a game, Vidar! Is there someone out there or not?”

“He is not in here,” he answered in a low, husky whisper, his breath hot on her neck as he stepped closer. “But we must be quiet or he hear us.”

She turned back to peer through the gap, clutching the neck of the bottle tight in her shaking hand. That wasn’t good. Her fever had finally backed off, but she was still in no shape to fight from starving herself so long. The little bit of food she’d managed to eat sat like lead in her adrenaline-cramped stomach. Vidar’s hands sliding over her hips distracted her, but she tried to be patient. He was probably as frightened as she was, after all. She placed her free hand reassuringly over one of his as he rubbed her body, his overly tactile approach a thing she had come to expect from these European relatives. He pressed close to her back, probably trying to see through the gap, but when she moved to give him room, he pulled her against him.

“Don’t do that,” she whispered, wriggling against his strong grasp. “I have to be able to move.”

“Oh, we will move,” he said assuredly, pressing her tighter against him.

She struggled harder, trying not to jostle the door or thump into a wall but needing to break loose. It was difficult to keep quiet under the pressure. “Uncle, let me go!”

She flinched when he pressed his hand over her face in a twitchy reflexive movement, his voice strained in horror as he hissed, “Do not say… do not call me that, not when we…” He let out a broken, breathy chuckle close to her neck, making her skin crawl and tingle as he whispered against that sensitive skin, “I think you are too sore to do it there again, yes? You are… not so much doing that, I know. Too tight, too fragile. I think maybe you want… there?”

The bottle slipped out of her fingers when she felt him slide his hand under the front of her cloth pants, the donated clothing fitting loose enough on her for him to do this too easily. The fear she had of the external threat shifted inward, warring with the confusion she needed to deny that this was done on purpose. His mouth was wet and warm as he opened it over her skin, dissolving that denial and allowing the fear to overtake her.

“Don’t…” she started to whimper, interrupted by his rougher touch stealing the breath from her words.

“I was not understanding… but now I know,” he whispered between sucking kisses along her neck. Her pulse pounded, beating out a steady insistence to run, run, run but she was frozen, as frozen as she always was when her father would touch her where he shouldn’t, kiss her where he shouldn’t, fuck her where he shouldn’t. That sick, traitorous need flickered at the similarity. “You did want this. You did want me to do this.”

He shushed her, having to shush her again as she whimpered louder at his fingers rubbing her dry and aching genitals. She didn’t want this. He couldn’t do this to her. This couldn’t be happening again. Something in her collapsed in a deep hopelessness, echoing a lamentation that wailed through her mind.

“You are the family whore, yes? It is why Leif made you, for you loving his cock inside you. Now you are loving us,” he whispered cruelly, his fingers rubbing hard, hurting her on purpose.

That wasn’t why Leif made her.
“So sweet and soft, so loving. You are made for sex.”

That’s not what she was made for.

“Say you are the family whore,” he hissed. He moved his hand down to her chin, wrenching her head back and forcing a fearful gasp from her. “Say it, sweetheart.”

That same splitting headache from earlier that morning hit her like a dull hatchet cracking through the front of her skull, splattering memories that bled and ran together with nightmares. The previous night’s forgotten fever dreams became real in a blur of repulsion and depravity as Vidar’s whispered Try to relax, sweetheart attached to the impossible memory of Anders holding her down against him to let his brother fuck into her asshole. The thin denial that Anders loved her enough not to violate her in such a debauched way crumbled under the certainty of sweetheart.

She slammed him through the closet door, the thin wood panel hitting the wall in a loud clamor as he fell to the floor in a flurry of long limbs. She lunged onto his prone body before he could scramble to his feet and pushed him down, one hand gripping his chin to shove his head back and expose his throat in the same way he had her. Her narrowed eyes fixed on that fragile column, at the white skin she knew how to rip open to drag the life out of any man. He was grunting and pushing against her, those long thin hands of his not strong enough to reach past her need to kill, to hunt.

“Do you see what I am now?!“ she snarled, hot tears streaming down her face. Her muscles trembled with a feral energy that hummed loudly in a hundred chanting voices.

“Hva i helvete?! Jeg trodde du var en masochist!“ he grunted, pressing against her body. “Kristus, du er sterk!”

Her instincts clashed violently, urging her to bury her teeth into the jugular that danced so temptingly while she was caught in the inability to kill what her nose recognized as one of her own family. Above those base mechanisms of instinct, that mournful wail shattered in her ears at this definitive proof that she was a monster, undeserving of family and love without the price of her flesh. There was no love without condition. There was no tenderness without cost. There was no shelter in this world that allowed the horror and torment of her father’s becoming. It was all just rot, down to the root, needing to be burned away.

His hands shifted from trying to push her away to pulling her closer, spreading wide over her ass and drawing her stare up to see his complete lack of fear. That thick, hot anger was smothered under the weight of acceptance. She could not determine the rules or set the price, she never could, not with her father, not with Anders, not with any of them. She was always going to have to pay what they asked, or she could be alone. Her hand slid down his neck, allowing him to lower his chin as she gently pressed her fingers to his jugular. The thundering pulse writhed eagerly against her fingertips, hot with life, completely ignorant to how close she had been to letting it all out. Shame mingled seamlessly with her sense of hopelessness.

“Where are you going?” he asked when she abruptly got off him.

She let the door answer his question with the quiet click as it shut behind her. She could either pay or be alone and she was so very tired of paying.
There wasn’t anything that was his in the hotel room. The clothes Anders had left at the seedy little motel the morning he went to confront Leif into saving Simone from her symptoms were taken as evidence. They’d taken the clothes he was wearing at the time, the stupid yellow souvenir t-shirt and sweatpants, but he wouldn’t want to ever see those again even if they weren’t ruined with blood. Everything else that had been left at Einar’s house was confiscated with no word on if, when, or how he would go about getting them back. Sitting alone on the bed in the hotel bathrobe, his skin scrubbed pink with the citrusy hotel soap, the last clean outfit from the box of donated clothing laid out next to him, he couldn’t shake the idea that he had lost himself along the way as well. It was a strange, silly notion. He knew where he was and what he had done, but there was a distinct lack of sense or meaning to any of it. It was as if he was seeing someone else’s memories and hearing their thin excuses for each horrible act with a detached disdain. He looked down at his hands, imagined them becoming transparent until he faded away, and kept staring in an impossible hope of that daydream becoming real.

“What’s happening to me?” he asked.

A knock at the door answered. He limped over and opened it to find Maier standing there with a bundle of plastic garment bags slung over his arm, one held up in his other hand toward him.

“Good morning, Anders Valstad,” Maier said in Norsk with his sterile smile and soulless eyes directed up at him. Anders didn’t even feel the expected repulsion at what slithered behind that professional façade. “Mind if I come in?”

He responded by stepping aside to give the man room to enter and followed him as he walked briskly to the bed before laying the garment bag over the donated clothes. Anders recognized them as the clothes he had worn to the funeral, cleaned and pressed.

Maier had an almost manic energy to him, stretching that polite smile into a crooked grin that was hard to look at as he gestured to the suit and said, “A bit somber, but perhaps that is the appropriate image to project. Hm. What do you think? Do you feel at all suited to shock and mourning or is it more sustainable for you to keep projecting outrage?”

Anders wondered if he had missed a sizable chunk of conversation in his trancelike daze. “What are you talking about?”

Maier turned that crooked grin at him. “Your image. There are about twenty reporters outside and we couldn’t have you making your media debut in rags. Leif Valstad is a very sophisticated killer; it would disgrace him if his family were portrayed in an unsophisticated light.”

A dry understanding settled over him. “Am I going to have to talk to them?”

“Under no circumstances should you even so much as look at them,” Maier answered firmly. “Nor should you regard the reporters in Norway. If I’m not mistaken, you’ve already been coached about the limitations on what you may or may not discuss regarding the ongoing investigation. Anything beyond that is determined by your level of tact, which is why I recommend silence from you.”

“In Norway?”

“Oh, yes!” Maier’s grin returned. “There’s quite a story already developing over there. The violence and corruption of the US influencing a Norwegian expatriate to such unspeakable crimes until at last
discovered by his visiting Norwegian relatives. Very nationalistic spin. You’re all being hailed as unfortunate heroes! Here, however, there are a lot of murdered Americans and no murderer to execute. They’re going to begin calling for blood, likely yours, and that is what brings your suit here.”

Anders’ head buzzed with this information, bringing him on the verge of feeling something before it teetered back. He sat on the bed, suddenly exhausted. “You want me to look good for the camera, basically.”

Maier pointed at him excitedly with both index fingers. “Exactly! Unfortunately, you are a very attractive family, so you can expect a lot of rather invasive media attention. I suggest keeping your curtains tightly drawn, especially considering you’ll be housing Leif Valstad’s daughter… and what you’ll be doing to her indoors.”

Anders should have felt affronted at the comment, but he could only acknowledge the necessity for privacy and wondered if she would even ever allow him near her again after what he’d done that morning and last night. That brief wonder floating through his thoughts stuck to the forefront of his mind. He should have been thinking about the inevitable inconvenience and intrusiveness of media attention derailing his normal life, but he was caught on the question of what she might do in response to what had happened. The first feeling that finally broke through in him was worry. He stood up quickly, bracing himself on his good leg that was now sore from overuse, and snatched up the cane as he headed towards the door.

Maier followed him with an eerie lack of surprise at this sudden change, his words equally as unaffected, “You’ll need to be very careful with what you say to everyone, not just reporters. They’ll be approaching your friends, coworkers, ex-classmates, dry cleaner, anyone who might have insight into your personal life.” The small man raced ahead of him and inserted the keycard into the slot to Simone’s room, apparently having anticipated their destination. He continued speaking as they entered despite Anders immediately becoming distracted by searching the empty room. “I’ve scrubbed your social media accounts, but I’m not your public relations manager. This is ultimately your problem to handle with the caution and discretion it requires.”

She wasn’t under the bed, in the closet, or in the bathroom. That worry began to edge into panic. “Simone, please come!”

“I am going to debrief Miss Valstad privately,” Maier said as he laid out something white and lacy on the bed. “So, I’m afraid you must leave.”

Anders circled the small room again, pausing when he accidentally locked eyes with the painting of Leif, that accusing glare seeming so aware of what he’d done. The guilt loomed over him, casting a dark shadow as he could feel the tremendous pressure of it beginning to bear down.

“I know it was wrong,” he muttered aloud, his thoughts too loud to be contained in his mind. “I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to hurt her. I did what I could to make her feel good, I didn’t hurt her.”

“Far be it from me to inquire, but a guilty conscience needs no accusers,” Maier said airily, stepping into his line of vision to block that awful glare. “You have my curiosity, if not my interest. What exactly didn’t you hurt Miss Valstad with?”

Anders’ mouth hung open, the weight of what had happened on the precipice of his mind, but not quite within reach. “She’s not here. I don’t know where she is. I don’t know where she is.”

“Did you look where you left her?” Maier smirked, mimicking the deliberate slowness to Anders’
Her bare foot stepped out on the windowsill before the rest of her emerged from behind the curtain. Anders swallowed his surprise; the curtain didn’t even appear to have bulged where she had hidden among its folds. She stepped down from her hiding spot, her face impassive as she kept it focused somewhere around Maier’s chest until she brought it slowly to the agent’s face. Anders noticed with a hollow feeling that she didn’t acknowledge his presence at all.

“I didn’t know you were so fluent in Norwegian,” she remarked pointedly. “Henrik told me that you said something very interesting to him yesterday.”

Maier’s mouth twitched once more into its polite smile, but there was something else in his face as he leaned towards her that made Anders’ neck tense. “Did I?”

“How long were you going to wait to tell me that I’m their carry-on to Norway? Until we were on the way to the airport?”

He turned to Anders, mild amusement etched everywhere on his placid face but the dead space of his eyes. “I had assumed that the good news would be this young man’s privilege to relay to you, but I see now where assuming gets us.”

Anders jumped at the sudden movement of Simone grabbing Maier’s face and shoulder and she threw him onto the bed, the edge of the plastic garment bag crinkling under their weight as she held him down and growled, “I don’t need you fucking with me, Maier, I’ve evidently got my uncles for that!”

Anders’ ears burned at her harsh words as he reached to pull her off the man, but Maier stopped him with a raised hand and gleeful laughter, the disturbing high-pitched noise a startling departure from his usual monotone.

“Be careful with mee-heehee, Miss Valstad, I’m a-ahAHA- wounded man, remember?” Maier said mockingly, his speech high and stilted through his laughter.

She responded by grabbing the curve between his neck and shoulder, squeezing hard while his back arched off the bed and his mouth fell open in a howl of pain. Anders flinched to yank her away, but for some unfounded reason, Maier still held up his hand in a now twitching signal to hold off.

Anders couldn’t look away from this grotesque display, watching the man’s grimace twist into a grin while his laughter gasped and panted out of him under her grasp. Seeing her anger and hatred pour into Maier’s pain echoed something in him drawn to the agony this man was receiving. It should have been him beneath her, subjected to whatever punishment she needed to enact on him to alleviate the pain he’d caused her. He wasn’t sure how to seek a forgiveness he didn’t feel he’d deserved on any level, but he had to give her something, some sort of justice or retribution.

“Simone…” he started, the name coming out raspy through the thick filter of his guilt.

“Anders Valstad,” Maier’s clinical tone was uncanny and abrupt through that crooked grin, “I’m afraid I must ask you to leave.”

“I need to talk with her!”

“You’ll have a nine-hour flight to talk all you want,” Maier responded, his tone flattening as his patience thinned. “What you need is to prepare for a ten-second walk that will likely determine the public’s perception of you and your family.”
“Why not keep me locked up and under surveillance? Whose idea was this? Yours?” Simone demanded, leaning more heavily on the agent. Her lip curled back menacingly from her teeth as she said in a low, warning murmur that chilled Anders’ spine, “I’ve paid your price, Maier, now you pay mine.”

“You’re not very good at bargaining, are you, Miss Valstad? The objective is to make me ask for less, not want to get more. Do you often find that people want to get more and more out of you?”

Her hand shot upward and wrapped around Maier’s throat, a feral growl building in hers to a frustrated cry as she shook with effort, seemingly just from trying to resist strangling him. Anders had to keep his feet firmly rooted to the floor to refrain from pulling her away from that psychopath, but his will to obey Maier’s signal to hold back was disintegrating. At the very least, she was assaulting a federal agent, if not a murderous associate of Leif’s. That she didn’t even seem to be aware of the dangerous impact of her actions said much to him of her shattered mental state.

A sick, heavy weight added to his guilt as he suspected that he may have only set back her healing, perhaps irrevocably after last night and his bumbled attempts to soothe her mere hours ago. Seeing her in this nearly savage state, the weak hope that she had not been aware enough to form memory of it fizzled down to a grim acceptance that he very well may have lost her forever. That he had even hoped for such a selfish thing confirmed to him that he never did deserve her, regardless if it was equally wished to spare her the anguish of defilement. Defilement. He couldn’t doubt that it was anything other than that now. Those reedy and sophomoric ideas that it was anything less because she’d climaxed or had consented to him in her fevered daze were only pathetic excuses to assuage his own shame. None of that had spilled over into allowing the defilement he’d welcomed into their love.

Maier’s voice broke through the loud wailing of his thoughts, his professional tone incongruent to the vulnerable position he lied in beneath the savage girl’s rage. “As you can see, this is a private conversation. I’m not going to tell you again. Go put on that suit and practice your best traumatized glaze for the camera.”

“Listen, I only-”

“What is it that you want, Anders?” Simone interrupted, though she kept her glare fixed on Maier’s neck. Anders froze, his shame choking the sound from his voice. He wanted too much to say. Impossible forgiveness, utter condemnation, undeserved mercy, ruthless punishment. “Do you want to ‘help me feel good’ again?”

The venom in those words stung. He needed more. He needed her to flay the flesh from his bones. He needed to scream, but all that came was a whisper. “Speak to me. What... What can I do to help? Anything...”

He could see Maier’s amusement at Simone’s silence, those black hole eyes darting between her hard stare and his undoubtedly tortured face with the zeal of an entertained spectator. Anders waited for her wrath to turn on him, to press him down beneath her and inflict pain on him as she had Maier, but seconds dripped by slowly only in her silence.

At last, she answered with a softly spoken, “Leave.”

It felt eerie to wear this suit again and prepare once more to get into a stranger’s vehicle to ride to the
airport. Henrik combed his beard, wetting it down to a more tailored edge. Less mountain man, more sophisticated, as the FBI agent had insisted. There was nothing sophisticated about the brutality of such violence. Henrik could never understand the romanticizing of something so ugly, as though murder was more fascinating than horrifying. Yet there he was, playing along in single-minded desperation to get out of this hell hole, dressing himself in finery like a beast decorated in flowers and jewels before the ritual sacrifice. He wondered if that was how Leif had seen people, as candidates for sacrifice to whatever drove him to kill, but he recoiled from the prospect of wondering how Leif thought on anything at all. He did not want to understand that murderer’s mind. An irrational fear cried out in him that if he could understand any part of it, he might find that the same cogs of madness that turned his brother’s mind would begin turning in him.

“Are you done making up your pretty face, princess?” Vidar asked from the bathroom doorway.

“Are you done being a complete and total asshole?” Henrik quipped back. “I don’t know what you’re in such a hurry for. The plane won’t take off any sooner if we’re early.”

“And I want to be sure that we’re on that plane when it does.”

Henrik couldn’t fault him for his impatience. It was hard not to feel like the rug was going to be pulled out from under them at any moment before they make it out of this Hell. There were many corners a murderous maniac could be hiding behind before they arrive back in Norway. An uneasiness bestowed in him a need to hear his brother’s voice even if it was nothing but irritated surliness and sarcastic jabs.

“It’s pretty weird that Anders is going to be the first one of us to have a kid, right?” he asked, grasping for conversation. When silence stretched on in response from the room, he nervously babbled on, “It feels like he just graduated upper secondary school a few years ago and here he is, taking a kid into his home. They’re not going to look like father-daughter, though. More like brother-sister. Er, brother-half-sister. She really took after her mother, thank God. Oh, hey, you know who is going to be super happy about this? Mom! She always wanted a daughter, I mean, she tried four times and got none, but now there’s going to be a girl around for her to do girly stuff with! Guess we’ll have to get used to having a baby sister around to break up the boy’s club, eh? You know, this is going to be really good for-”

“Will you shut the FUCK up?!” Vidar shouted from the room. Henrik did, his mouth snapping shut in surprise at the acrid growl in his brother’s voice. “She’s not a kid, she’s not Anders’ daughter, and she’s not our god-damned sister. She’s nothing! She’s not even our niece because that maniac isn’t our brother, remember? Stop saying that bullshit like any of this is normal!”

Henrik stepped out of the sanctuary of the bathroom, his heavy brow looming low in a disapproving frown at the insensitivity of his brother. “Hey, asshole, what the hell is your problem?! Like it or not, Simone’s family! It’s not her fault she’s his daughter, but that doesn’t make her any less related to us!”

Vidar sneered at him in disgust. “You’re an idiot if you believe that. She doesn’t even know what family is. Her version of family is a hard cock and a hard bitch of a mother pretending not to notice.”

Henrik was nearly staggered by this crude cruelty. This wasn’t the brash wisecracker he knew. “What the fuck, Vid?! What the actual fuck?!”

Vidar stood up from his leaned perch against the small writing desk and began pacing the short width of the room, a rigid tension to his posture that was sharp and angry as he grinned mirthlessly and said, “Don’t misunderstand me, I don’t like what happened to her. It’s sick. It should never happen...
to any child. But it did, and it made her what she is. No amount of pretending or playing house is going to change what she is.”

“Okay, Vid, I’ll bite,” Henrik relented, folding his thick arms over his wide chest, the jacket of his suit stretching at the seams. “What do you think she is?”

Vidar’s entire demeanor shifted at the question. Where there was anger now became nervousness, sweat shining along his temples as he seemed unable to stop fidgeting with his sleeves and his widened glare darting around at nothing. He sighed agitatedly through his nose and dragged his hand over his face before he started to say, “She’s, uh…” He paused, huffed out a short nervous laugh. “Simone is what she was made to be. It’s not complicated, right? I just think it’s useless to try to make her into something she’s not. It’s… irresponsible to even try. You and Anders have just been confusing her; it’s like… it’s like trying to feed a wolf only bread and saying it’s not a predator. When it’s all she’s known, it’s actually cruel to deny her of it, right? She needs, um… that kind of dynamic to feel loved. It’s hardwired into her psyche at this point. Really, I just want to give her what she needs. It’s good for her, you see?”

Henrik’s gut tightened in revulsion as he listened, his brother’s words making less and less sense until he couldn’t guess what he was talking about. It was obvious to him that Vidar was only agitated and fatigued. In fact, he was too. He no longer paid any mind to what had just been discussed between them, writing them off as meaningless bickering. That’s what they did, after all. They always bickered and it seldom ever actually mattered. He tuned out the pointless jabbering as he bent to put his shoes on, the fine leather having been cleaned and polished of the mud from the field. He wondered why they would return the clothes that had been splattered with the mud from that crime scene, but maybe they didn’t make that connection. It was funny. Special Agent Maier was the one who had personally taken the clothing as evidence and he was the one who had personally delivered them back cleaned and devoid of even a stain. They might not have been the best detectives, but they ran a good laundry service. Henrik chuckled to himself at the thought, finally bringing Vidar’s blathering to a pause.

“… Are you even paying attention?” he groused.

Henrik cleared his throat before his chuckle could grow into a laugh. “Oh, no, sorry, I spaced out for a minute there. Heheheh! Ohh, wow… What were we even arguing about?”

Vidar stared at him as though he had grown two heads. “We were discussing Simone’s role.”

“Oh! Right!” he exclaimed, embarrassed at his absentmindedness. Vidar really hit the nail on the head when he’d said trauma did funny things to the mind. He’d have to be careful not to make this into a recurring habit. “It’s pretty weird that Anders is going to be the first one of us to have a kid, right?”

Simone touched the soft curls she had tamed her neglected mane into, her reflection showing the lie she was to maintain to the public. The makeup and the ivory lace dress brightened her sickly complexion closer to its usual golden undertone and the plum pea coat encouraged a more composed posture than the defensive hunch she wanted to curl into. It was a clever, disgusting lie. She would have to get used to being a lie, though. This was easier to maintain if she just considered it training. Her lips pulled at the corners, revealing her teeth, all straightened from braces and whitened from a diligence to hygiene her mother had drilled bone-deep into her from a very early age. She practiced
smiling for a moment, trying to find the divide between grinning and baring her teeth. Both a smile and a bite could be weapons. She tried to maintain her smile when she heard the door open.

“Well, well, well,” Maier said from the doorway, his clinical voice somehow more sarcastic than if he’d been able to achieve any other tone, “I think Heaven is missing an angel.”

“It won’t take much to make me vomit, Maier, so please don’t press me,” Simone responded, sincerely and without ire.

“Just don’t do it in front of the cameras,” he said, approaching her from behind as he watched her watching him in the mirror. She tried not to visibly tense. “You won’t see or hear from me after today. Not in any traceable way. Any contact I have with you will be secondhand at closest.”

“Is this our tearful farewell?” she asked, insincerely and with ire now.

“This is a warning,” he answered. “And an apology in advance. Should you see me in person, I will not come to you as a friend. I will be a member of the network in the employ of the Marceaus.”

“Hmm, an apology…” she nodded, pursing her painted lips. “And whatever you do to me will be nothing personal, right? I don’t see any difference, if that’s the case.”

“Au contraire, mon frère. All of our dealings have been quite personal to me. I’m hanging my greatest hopes on you; I wish you luck in carrying out both of our desires. That said, I hope to live long enough to be reckoned by Leif Valstad, so please forgive me should that will to live drive me toward any undesirable actions against you.”

Simone stared at his face through the mirror, the degree of separation emboldening her to look long enough to see him. It was none of her business to know him and she had no desire to understand him, but she could know him the way he preferred to be known. He had earned at least that base respect from her.

“Thank you,” she said. “For your honesty. Not with just me, but with yourself. I’m finding that to be more valuable the more I notice its absence in those around me and within myself.”

Maier’s face didn’t change, but she had stopped expecting it to. “You sound like him sometimes. Increasingly so, in fact. It’s really quite charming, but you should resolve your own identity before they come for you. There’s a psychiatrist in Trondheim who is interested in helping you, if you don’t mind that he’s part of the network and probably only interested in studying you.”

The carefully cultivated focus and peace she had constructed within her collapsed under his observation, causing her breath to pause as her chest constricted in alarm. It wouldn’t have been so disconcerting if she didn’t feel her father’s presence so powerfully in herself that it sometimes felt like he was eclipsing her. Sometimes, she wished he would. She could robotically dedicate her will to a greater cause, but she would always have to deal with her thoughts, her feelings, and her terrible needs. Suicide was not an option available to her but to carry on without the burden of being herself was an idea that brought a powerful peace. Complete lack of identity was an impractical dream, though. She needed to have a functioning mind if not a healthy one, at least.

“I… uh… I would appreciate the help,” she forced herself not to mumble or scream. “Is it time to leave yet?”

“One more thing,” he answered, reaching into his pocket.

Her tightened chest could breathe again when he produced Bjørn’s watch and she drew in a deep breath of relief as she touched the worn leather straps, the texture familiar and comforting after so
long of feeling alienated and adrift. She might have thanked him, but she was unaware as she wound it without setting the time first. It didn’t matter that the time would be off. Her hands were shaking again, making the winding process clumsy and slow, but the insect movements of the tiny cogs were soon enough squirming to life once more. She held it to her ear and listened to the soft ticking, the feel of the leather and the sound of it working reminding her of the turmoil in the moment she admitted the confusion of feelings she held to her own father. Her feelings had only grown more intense and less clear since then; the lust and love both at odds and blending with the fear and hatred. She missed him. It was a dirty trick played by a mind he had methodically broken, but she missed him.

The reporters were crowded outside the entrance door, flocking around the windows and peering inside for any sign of their approach. Simone joined her uncles outside the elevators, each emitting a jumble of emotions that boiled down to a heavy gravity on them. Her knees shook and heart pounded achingly as she stepped up to Anders, schooling her features not to break down crying when he slowly brought his downturned gaze up to her. No, she couldn’t face him yet. Stepping to his side, she swiftly clutched his hand as they had been instructed to do and kept her stare forward. His fingers curled around her hand to engulf it, his palms sweaty and his scent heavy with alcohol recently imbibed, but otherwise his touch was thankfully as mechanical as hers.

Maier looked them over appraisingly, his FBI persona veiled over the kindred creature she knew peered out from behind those stale dead eyes, as he instructed, “Ikke se på dem, ikke snakk med dem, ikke bli provosert av dem. Fortsett fram til kjøretøyet, Simone kommer først, Henrik beveger seg til passasjeretet, Anders følger Simone, Vidar følger Anders. Forstått?”

A muttered response in affirmation chorused from the men and then they were walking, their nice shoes clicking along the stone tiled floor of the lobby and hitching Simone’s anxiety up with each step. Her modest heels nearly cemented to the floor when she balked at the flocking cameramen on the other side of the glass, their united flurry of motion as they pointed their lenses seemingly directly at her immediately engaging her flight response. She couldn’t go out there. She thought she knew what to expect, but faced with them now, she couldn’t move. Anders’ hand tugged her arm when he kept walking as she stood frozen, causing him to turn to her and she knew he saw her fear, but she couldn’t control herself.

“Come, kjære,” he softly commanded, his arm wrapping around her waist and pulling her against his side. “They are not to hurt you.”

Her heart raced like a hummingbird crashing around in her chest as he nearly dragged her along, her arms wrapping around him automatically for comfort. If she could think, she would know what this closeness would look like and in the back of her mind, she laughed at this image of her clinging to this tall and handsome blond-haired-blue-eyed savior like some corny fantasy paperback cover. At the front of her mind, however, the chaos of panic reigned over her as he pushed and pulled her toward what her brain could only interpret as fatal danger. The clamor of voices hurled at them the moment the doors opened was overwhelming.

Making their way through the swarm, police officers shoved them back as Simone caught only snippets of questions, “How many victims did-” “- Valstad keep any murder trophies from-” “Simone, where were you when-” “- Did you know-” “- deny any rumors that the I-80 Killer-” “- any history of abuse-” “- Miss Valstad, did you know that your father-”

Microphones and lenses reached out to them like swords eager for blood and she couldn’t stop herself from looking around wildly, the camera flashes startling her senses in a pulsing strobe of light. Henrik’s hulking mass stepped up to flank her exposed side and she looked up at him gratefully when he petted her head. This was new. Usually their size and strength threatened her, but now she
found protection in their intimidating masculinity. She could feel humiliated at this pathetic idea later. For now, she had to keep moving. Henrik broke off when they finally made it to the large unmarked black SUV and Anders’ arm slid away from her waist, turning her to help her into the backseat with his hand on her lower back. Before she could stop herself, she stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him into a hug he returned with a swiftness that ached her heart. The furious flashing of cameras and the betrayal he had wounded her with didn’t matter in this moment. She had needed him and he was there for her. Tears slithered down the sides of her face as she clung to him and she could hear him apologizing again and again into the burning bite at the crook of her neck, but too soon they were pulled away from each other. Maier gripped Anders’ shoulder and Simone retreated into the cover of the vehicle before her shaking knees collapsed.

Vidar pulled her into the middle seat, his long arm reaching behind her shoulders to yank her against him as he smiled at her reassuringly.

“You are ready to go home, sweetheart?” he grinned, a dark possessiveness so sorely familiar in how he looked at her.

She couldn’t think to answer or pull away, locked frozen under his sharp eyes as the panic from the reporters shifted into panic at his touch. Anders climbed in after her and she once more found herself snuggly tucked between these two men with her mind too far gone with fear to resist. A rush of warmth bloomed low in her abdomen and high in her cheeks at the tactile memory, issuing a blackened slither of deep self-loathing along with it. She clenched her thighs together and hated herself.
Chapter 43

Anders should not have ordered so many gin and tonics at the hotel bar, but by the time they had arrived at Chicago for the layover to the flight to Copenhagen, he had begun to sober up dangerously.

“Vidar,” he sneered down at his brother lounging in the waiting area by their gate. “Let’s go find something to drink.”

“Go by yourself,” Vidar sneered back.

“No! We gotta talk,” he tried not to slur, sober enough to know he was failing in that task. “And I gotta drink. Right now. Come on.”

“Ohhh no. No, no, no way are we going to talk in public when you’re drunk. Fuck all the way off with that idea,” Vidar said firmly, slinking down further into his chair. “Take Simone with you if you want to talk.”

“She’s not old enough.”

“Fuck, don’t you start on that bullshit too,” Vidar grumbled as he pressed his fingers to his forehead in aggravation. “She’s not a child, for Christ’s sake!”

Anders teetered on his feet, confusion hurting his head. “What? No, she’s not a… I mean she’s not legally old enough to drink in this country. Wait… you don’t think he was lying about that, do you? Shit… Shit, she looks younger than twenty, doesn’t she?!"

“Remember the whole talking thing I’m not doing with you?” Vidar frowned. “Fuck off.”

Anders glowered at him before pivoting on his heels and walking out into the busy terminal. His brother was usually right, but he was always a tremendous jerk about it. Except for last night. There was nothing right about that. He needed a drink before he started thinking again.

“Gin,” he said as soon as he caught the bartender’s eye. He decidedly hated airport bars. They were too sterile and controlled, the atmosphere already too oppressive from the heavy police presence and constant urgency of flight times. He suspected they watered down their booze and made up his mind to drink twice as much based on that assumption.

“Gin and tonic? Coke? Soda?” the young bartender asked.

“Gin.”

Two hours was plenty of time to work up a decent drunk and twenty hours was plenty of time to sober up. He leaned against the bar counter as he drank the first gin and something, the taste ghosting over his tongue unnoticed as he tried to become interested in the baseball game playing next to the screens running cable news stations. It was dreary work.

“Is this seat taken?”

Anders blinked out of his daze when he realized the question was directed at him. He glanced at the woman, then at the several other unoccupied chairs at the bar. He wondered briefly if she was either rude or an idiot before it occurred to him that he was about to be hit on.
“Oh...” he frowned. “My English... not so good. Sorry.”

“I don’t mind,” the woman smiled, wriggling onto the stool next to him. “Wow, you get into a fight or something? You’re all banged up, buddy.”

“Yes,” he answered stiffly. He waved to the bartender, calling out, “Gin!”

“Make that two!” she added.

Anders glanced at her again. She was attractive, maybe just a little older than him or his age, friendly and forward. There was no reason for him not to be flattered at the attention, at the very least. He was used to these types. Easy, hearty women who knew what they wanted. Uncomplicated, predictable, fun, comfortable if only for an evening. Two hours was plenty of time to waste getting acquainted with the American breed of this type.

“My name’s Chloe Cole,” she smiled, all porcelain and perfect between red lips. “What’s your name, hun?”

“Anders,” he answered, leaving out his last name. “You are from here, Chloe?”

“Colorado.”

“Ah. Chloe Cole from Colorado, it is nice to meet you,” he smiled.

She giggled. He wasn’t sure at what, but that’s how these things went. He drained the dregs of his glass before swapping to the fresh one the bartender placed in front of him. A strange exasperation irritated him since she’d sat next to him. Maybe he wasn’t drunk enough to relax yet. Or maybe he was too drunk to know this was supposed to be fun and easy, something he’s done a couple dozen times before. He frowned as the bitter taste lingered too long in his mouth.

“And it’s nice to meet you, Anders from...?”

“Norway.”

Her nose wrinkled and she gave a frown that was too tailored for maintaining attractiveness to be sincere. “Wow. You’ve seen the big news about that crazy killer from Norway that got away from the cops the other day? What a clusterfuck! I wish they didn’t tell us anything about it until they catch the nut again.”

Anders looked back up at the baseball game almost reflexively and shrugged out of his suit jacket, feeling suddenly too warm to the point of sweating. “No, I do not know.”

“You kidding? It’s all they wanna talk about on tv!” she lamented, turning her face up to the television screens. “See? They’re even talking about it now! Like there isn’t anything else going on in the whole wide world.”

He didn’t want to, but his eyes shifted to the other screen. Indeed, there was Leif’s impassive face, neither smiling nor frowning, the professional shot even one he’d recognized from the architecture firm’s website except with the words “SERIAL KILLER AT LARGE” in red across it. The liquor sat heavy and frozen in Anders’ gut as the photo minimized next to a newswoman speaking, the closed captioning moving too fast for him to translate before it cut to moving footage. Chloe was saying something, but all he could hear was his own thoughts mentioning that he knew that hotel shown on the screen. That was their hotel. How odd. And there were the reporters, the cameraman struggling through the flock to get a shot of the people exiting the hotel. And then there they were. He no longer heard anything, not Chloe, not the airport noise, not the raging din of his own racing thoughts...
as Special Agent Maier came out, followed by an irritated Vidar looking stonily forward, then Henrik and Simone and himself. He was distantly aware that the woman next to him abruptly left. As the camera shakily zoomed in on Simone’s tearful face gazing up at him with her body pressed close as she stood on her toes, she looked like she might kiss him before leaning forward in a hug. He finally broke his stare away from the screen.

“Gin!” he called out.

“Gross,” Simone murmured, watching as the television screen showed a still of her clutching onto Anders, a slight breeze floating her long hair away from her made-up face.

There it was, the damsel in distress swooning against her knight in shining armor. She popped up the collar on her coat and hid her face behind it in pure mortification. It looked more like a model photoshoot than a bombardment of reporters descending on a traumatized family. They looked tragic and intimately close, the shot far too flattering to be appropriate for the seriousness of their circumstances. She’d shot a man between his eyes to save them, dragged her father’s murderous attention away from them at great harm to herself, directed them to safety and was almost too ready to kill for them again at any moment, but there she was, looking like a fragile pretty thing begging to be protected. More than anything, she regretted reinforcing these regressive stereotypes, but that was exactly what Maier had wanted to encourage. It made her sick with resentment. When the headline for this segment read on the screen “Beauty from the Beast?”, she couldn’t stop the audible groan erupting from her throat. It would almost be preferable if they’d pegged her as crazy and a possible killer to follow in her father’s footsteps like Agent Gladwell had believed. That would be troublesome and dangerous, but this was far more humiliating than she could have predicted.

“It is… good picture, yes?” Henrik asked, his voice soft and encouraging.

“It’s demeaning,” she responded, muffled from beneath her coat collar. “This entire culture is demeaning. There’s no reason to include us in this bullshit circus.”

“I did look good,” he noted proudly.

She couldn’t appreciate his attempts to lighten her mood, but she couldn’t be cold to him either. Henrik was the only one willing to be seen with her, anyway. “You always look good, Uncle Henrik. You’re the ‘Beauty from the Beast’.”

“We are the beauty,” he determined confidently.

She peeked out from her collar, her smile still hidden under the scratchy wool coat. “That’s very inclusive and positive of you.”

His good-natured grin faltered just slightly in the way his face would become blank when he didn’t understand something, but he gave her a thumbs-up despite his confusion and said, “Awesome!”

She did manage to laugh then, even if she didn’t completely feel it. It didn’t have to matter what the world thought, after all. It’s not like she could ever be a part of it anymore.

“Ah… I go… to Anders, okay?” he said as he stood up.

She almost moved to follow him, but the discomfort at the idea of being around Anders again so soon won out over her discomfort at leaving Henrik alone out there. It was bad enough when just
one of them was out of her sight; adapting to not being able to hear or see that they were alright throughout the day was already shaping up to be rough on her. Airports were perhaps the most secure places for them, though. She assured herself that she didn’t have to worry so much here, or anywhere. If this “network” Maier referred to was efficient enough to have infiltrated the FBI all the way from their supposed base of operations in Europe, there was little difference she could make in trying to protect them. Still, taming back those instincts proved easier said than done.

She glanced up at the television, revulsion roiling her gut at finding pictures she recognized from her mother’s social media accounts plastered across the screen. A beautiful, successful family with a dark, deadly secret. Too ripe for the media to resist and no reason for them to do so. She walked over to the wide window instead, looking out at the tarmac and the green beyond it. In about an hour now, she would be leaving her home country to enter a completely new life. She had no idea what that new life would be like and with the clues she currently had, especially after recovering her memory that morning, she didn’t dare speculate. Living with a man she couldn’t bear to look at without bursting into tears, in a country she didn’t speak the language of, with nothing to her name but what she had on her, she didn’t dare speculate. It didn’t have to matter. Her new life wouldn’t really begin until the network brought her before her father. Until then, she needed to become stronger. Her focus shifted to her reflection in the glass and she inhaled sharply in shock at seeing Vidar’s image directly behind her.

“You are okay, sweetheart?” he asked, placing his hands on her shoulders to steady her.

“Uh… uh-huh…” she nodded dumbly, her heart not ceasing in its racing gallop at his nearness or how silently he’d sneaked up on her. She tried to step away, but he only stepped forward to her side, slinging his arm around her shoulders and pulling her toward him easily. That specific note of family in his scent mingled with the stale vodka that still clung to him, transporting her thoughts instantly back to last night. Her breath hitched at the pulse of arousal and anger flaring in her and she wriggled to try to disengage this unwanted contact.

He smiled out at the view as he held her still and said, “You are happy, yes? You live with your new master. You serve. But you are not with him. Why?”

His hand slowly rubbed up and down her arm in a caress so similar to how he had soothed her last night as he had pushed his cock into her ass. Intentionally similar. She shuddered at the memory of the confusion and terror mixing and heightening with the fever as he invaded her body, his gentleness at the time almost worse than if he had been uncaringly rough. It was the threat of roughness, the sense that he could decide how he wanted to handle her that terrified her the most. He was trying to evoke that same helplessness in her and it was working despite her knowledge of his manipulative trick. She was abruptly short of breath and sweating in response to these purposeful reminders, reducing her ability to think or control her reactions. This man was clearly every bit her father’s brother, but he was still not her father.

“I don’t have a master,” she said, taking a small victory in how her voice did not waver.

“You don’t?” he mused. “You don’t belong to Anders?”

“I belong to no one.”

“You are lying,” he said, turning that sharp smile down to her. “But I forgive you. You belong to no one, you are belonging to everyone. That is what you want?”

The hand stroking her arm slid up to her hair, tangling in the strands to card his long fingers into the roots. How often her father had led her around by the roots of her thick hair ran through her mind until the tactile memories led up to how Anders had done it last night, holding her still to let this man,
her uncle who she had trusted as much as she had come to trust Anders, invade her. That stab of betrayal still bled within her heart, but she was far enough away from it to revisit it without being blinded by the agony. With Vidar so craftily forcing her to revisit it now, she could analyze it differently. Where the desire for survival and the desire for sex should have divided to determine what was a willing act and what was forced had been melded together by what her father had so often done to her. Every line blurred. Pain, pleasure, love, fear, lust, survival, rage, passion, it all blended together until the meaning of each was lost. Or perhaps it was only her that was lost.

“Belonging…” she whispered, tasting the concept like foreign fruit on her tongue.

She looked up at Vidar’s face. Try all she might, her perception had always been blunted when she tried to see either her father or his brothers. It was like looking at a painting too closely to tell what it was supposed to be of. All similar brushstrokes and materials, but she couldn’t step back far enough to see the bigger picture. However, she had been watching her father long enough to recognize the pieces of him in these men.

“When did you see a space for you in me?” she asked.

His sharp smile softened into something less guarded as melancholy shifted that focus inward. There it was. Confusion and shame. Regret, perhaps, but it was far too late for that.

“The Golden Key Motel,” he began. “You did want to lie, to protect Leif. He hurt you, so long, so much, but you love him. You are a masochist, a submissive. I…” His hand tightened in her hair, the familiar sting making her draw in a sharp breath that cleared any of that confusion and shame from his expression. “… I can suit such tastes in you.”

Her mouth fell open into a nearly silent, “Oh…”

A masochist, a submissive. If only it had been that simple. She wasn’t completely ignorant to those sexual games and roles people played, but outside of recent experience, such things simply didn’t occur to her. Sex had been a means to its own end, something messy enough to not need further complication, and she had never had a partner she trusted enough to explore those options with. It made sense now that he’d said it in such simple terms that she was a masochist and submissive without even realizing it, but it left out so much that still couldn’t be explained. She felt so young and green now faced with the evidence of such knowledge and experience Vidar evidently had of these matters, and really, she was young and green. There was so much in life she didn’t know; this reminder of that fact made her mourn for the life she would very likely not live to experience. It frightened her, but that was the risk of what she had to do. Time was precious; there was not enough of it to waste on anger or regret.

“I don’t know much about that,” she admitted.

“You don’t?” he chuckled, his laughter dying off as his disbelief deteriorated. His stroking fingers in her hair stopped when a grave discomfort overtook him. “You… don’t. Faen i helvete, what did you think we were doing? Anders, he grab your hair and he… You did want it.”

She wasn’t sure if she should respond. There was a desperation in him to hear the answers he wanted to hear. Needed to hear. An impulse to deny him that response had her ask instead, “Does it really matter what I want?”

He froze, startled at the question, and she caught a glimpse of him in that moment. He needed to believe that he hadn’t done the wrong thing. A suspicion chased through her mind and she followed it on a hunch.
“Earlier, you asked me not to call you uncle. Does incest make you so uncomfortable?” she asked.

“Of course,” he answered, disgust gnarling his expression.

“But you fucked your niece.”

“You—”

“You **fucked** your niece,” she cut him off. His hand fell from her hair and he stepped away from her, his confident and sly composure collapsing under what she could recognize as the emotional distress of an internal crisis. She was very familiar with that experience, but instead of that empathy encouraging her to sympathize and soothe, she moved closer to him and continued, “You’re able to ignore the **fact** that we’re related, so I must ask, what else can you ignore to get what you want?”

That strange presence of her father was strong in her then, her words narrated to her in his voice before coming out of her mouth as though he were whispering what to say into her ear. It felt like he was actually near her.

“You think you know what matters to you,” she said, stalking slowly around to his front, keeping her face carefully towards the window instead of directly to him. “You’re not a savage. Just because you forced me into sex I couldn’t – and wouldn’t – consent to, that doesn’t mean you’re a rapist. Getting my consent just didn’t matter as much as getting your dick in me. Besides, you had Anders’ consent. That’s worth far more than mine. Why should what I want matter so much to you now?”

When Vidar twisted away from her, gripping his forehead in the stress her words put on him, she could feel Leif’s cruel amusement beside her. The watch wrapped around her wrist felt warm and alive as she recalled something he had said to her shortly after gifting her that watch. She grabbed his forearm, her reach drawing her sleeve back to reveal that timepiece, the gold and glass catching the light as she held him still and stepped close to him.

“When you strip away everything society has told you,” she recited, Leif’s voice meshing with her own, “everything you believe what we should be, what is it that you really feel?”

It was suddenly easy to look directly into his startled dark blue eyes to search out his fear of being honest with himself. She envied the simplicity he had available to him in achieving that honesty after one linear set of self-made obstacles. Her own honesty was a goal that shifted away from her as fluidly as her sense of identity. Her lips pulled away from her teeth in a grin, or perhaps it was just a baring of fangs.

“Did you know I can still juggle?”

Henrik looked incredulously at his very, very drunk youngest brother. “I’ve never seen you juggle once in your entire life.”

Anders’ grin widened as he took three of the empty glasses from the collection in front of him and swiveled off the bar stool, wavering as he found his footing. “Well, you’re going to see me juggle now.”

Before Henrik could reach out and stop him from trying, Anders tossed all three glasses in the air and passively watched as they fell and shattered on the floor. Everyone within hearing range turned and stared at the loud crash while Henrik was caught between hiding in mortification and dragging him...
through the airport by his shirt collar.

“What the fuck.”

Anders burst into laughter, clutching his sides as he managed to choke out, “HaHAAa! I never said… pffahahaha! I never said I was any good at it! HAH!”

Henrik had never seen prompter service than the bartender closing out the tab and asking him, with an impressive politeness despite also threatening to call security, to leave. Henrik then opted to drag him by his shirt collar, but his brother spoiled the humiliation by simply being wasted enough to find the whole thing hilarious.

“That was not funny,” Henrik frowned.

“It was very funny!” Anders insisted, struggling to keep up with his heated pace. “I was famous for that joke in university!”

“Well, you’re not a student anymore, asshole, so act your age!”

“I’m still only in my twenties!”

“For another two weeks! Shit, I am on the edge of just leaving you here!”

Anders stumbled over his own feet, his shoes clapping loudly on the floor as he struggled to avoid falling. Henrik yanked him up harshly, not pausing in his aggravated march through the crowds that had begun to gawk. Between having to tiptoe around Vidar’s temper tantrums and now literally having to pull Anders’ away from his own idiocy before he got kicked out or arrested, he felt like the mother to two massively overgrown toddlers. As he complained, he was very aware that he sounded eerily like their mother.

“You’re a damned fool, is what you are! Are you aware that people are going to recognize you now? It’s not just your own dumb ass that you’re embarrassing anymore, shit-basket, you’re making all of us look like assholes with that behavior!” he nearly yelled, yanking his brother to walk faster.

“Since when did you care about what they think?” Anders slurred.

“Oh, probably when the whole fucking world started watching us!” Henrik fully yelled then, his booming voice drawing stares from all directions. He winced, glad none of them probably spoke Norsk, and clenched his jaw shut as they marched on.

“So, you’ve seen us on the news, then,” Anders said conversationally as though he had no idea that Henrik was a centimeter away from screaming at him. Perhaps he was drunk enough to be that unaware. “That was fast. Did you know that they found the remains of 78 people buried at father’s property? 78! Just imagine that many people – dead! And we were going to make it 81!”

“Shut up,” Henrik grumbled. His gut clenched at hearing this. He could have avoided knowing that and been able to sleep a little more comfortably for it, but now that knowledge would squirm in his brain for the rest of his life. Everything he was finding out about Leif, the brother he’d known his entire life but had been at such a literal and figurative distance since being taken to America, seemed like a new and shocking horror on a list of horrors. It made his initial theory that Leif had Münchausen syndrome by proxy with his daughter seem so trivial when a few days ago it was enough to make him weep. A serial killer. Their family would never escape that shame.

“Could we stop for a second? I think my leg is bleeding.”
Henrik came to an abrupt halt, causing his brother to stumble into his back but he was solid enough not to even budge from the impact. “Oh, shit, I forgot about your leg…”

“It’s okay,” Anders slurred heavily, plopping down on the floor right there in the hall. He poked around where the stab wound was with clumsy hands, searching for the moisture of blood through his dark slacks. “I can’t really feel it right now. Or anything. I took a few more of those painkillers before you showed up.”

“You compounded oxycodone with alcohol!?” Henrik shouted, drawing stares once more. He barely noticed. “People go into comas from that, you bumbling prick!”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

Henrik’s concern shifted into alarm. He knelt next to him, keeping their faces level as he chose his words cautiously. He wasn’t good at this sensitive stuff, though, and he was never more aware of that than when he said, “Hey, don’t talk like that. Don’t even think like that. We’re all going to deal with this shit and get through it; there’s no dropping out. If you commit suicide, I’m going to kill you.”

“That’s the sweetest threat I’ve ever gotten,” Anders giggled at him, chuckling to himself softly before throwing his head back in full laughter. Henrik felt mildly offended. It took him several gulping breaths to calm down enough to speak again, but when he did, that mirth left him abruptly and he seemed almost on the verge of tears. “I just… I’ve done something bad and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Well, what did you do? Maybe I can help.”

Anders hunched forward and hid his face behind his hand. “What I did to her, I… She won’t even look at me anymore.”

“Anders peeked out at him, looking so much like the littlest brother he knew from their childhood. “So… I just have to force her to see that there’s nothing to be scared of?”

“Yeah!” Henrik grinned. Maybe he wasn’t so bad at this sensitivity stuff after all. “Be firm! Like pushing someone out of a burning plane to parachute to safety! Okay, not the best example before we fly, but you know what I mean.”

Anders smiled back at him, his eyes brightening with hope and understanding. “Be firm and push her to make her see… I think I know how to manage this now. Thank you, Henrik. You’re a good person.”

Henrik beamed at having received that compliment for the second time that day. He really must be better at this than he’d thought.
Simone awoke on the plane, confused and bewildered but at least knowing enough to assure herself she was supposed to be there. There was no Leif to coax her back to functional consciousness; she would have to do this herself. Her mind felt oddly split. Half of her was a savage, chaotic mess and the other half was a rational observer to that jumble of disorganized thought. She looked around, seeing the other passengers either asleep or fitfully near it, the windows revealing the pitch dark of night outside. The last thing she could recall, it was the afternoon and the sun was shining bright outside the airport window. Her brow furrowed as she dredged up more information. The airport was in Chicago and they were headed to Europe. It had been a while since she'd lost time. She reached into her pockets and found her plane ticket, taking it out to find a pack of gum wrapped in it. Blearily, she chewed a piece of the mysteriously acquired gum, the strong mint flavor waking her up a bit and driving that dryness from her mouth. She tried again to find her last known memory only to find a headache waiting for her each time she attempted it.

“Fine…” she muttered bitterly, accepting that she would have to be patient with her broken brain.

In the meantime, she cautiously stood up and looked down the aisle, her eyes fully adjusted to the dim lighting to see Henrik’s head towering above the other passengers, his bearded face turned upward as he reclined in sleep. At least she was on the right plane. In the jagged way her thoughts bounced around in this stage of recovery, she realized she had to pee. Badly. The light inside the lavatory was blindingly bright after awakening in the darkness, but she was able to narrowly avoid wetting herself and making this million-hour flight any more miserable. The roar of the apparently jet-powered flushing mechanism was deafening, startling her into slamming against a wall. As she washed her trembling hands, she realized that at some point she had swallowed her gum.

“You’re doing great, champ,” she smiled sarcastically at her savage half.

She pushed open the door to exit the claustrophobic space, but a large body crowded her back inside and clapped a hand over her mouth before she could cry out in surprise.
Chapter 44

The unreality of Simone’s life made any mood-altering experience more potent in its dissociating effects. The high stress of violence, the hormonal flood of sex, the physical shift of drug use, even an interrupted sleep pattern could unmoor her further from reality and herself. It had taken her this moment, her front pressed against the plastic wall of the tiny airplane lavatory while a man hiked up her skirt from behind and kept his hand mashed firmly to her mouth, to determine that the psychological effects of what she had been through were directly influencing her judgment. She should have been throwing her elbow back into his ribcage until he folded and then screamed for help, but there was no urgency to fight. Not yet, at least. Though her heart raced and time seemed to slow, there was no panic or rage where her mental state had driven her to protect herself from this attack. In objective awareness of the myriad of ways this could go, the multitude of injuries she risked by resisting simply outstripped the possibility that she could successfully defend herself in her current condition against a man of his height and strength. When his hand hesitantly moved off her mouth and she did not scream, he rewarded her by moving her hair away from her neck and sucking on her sweat-dampened skin. She could smell him now: alcohol and family, the combination draining the strength from her muscles until she was shaking just to remain standing. Sexual submission to her male relatives was no longer a conscious choice for survival; it was a defense mechanism she could not control this time, and this effect alarmed her more than being bullied against a restroom wall.

She whimpered as he yanked her panties down to her knees and kicked her feet apart, the wordless pleas in her fearful mewing quieting when he fondled her hip and ass like one would stroke the flank of a spooked horse. That he was soothing her was a hopeful sign that he would be gentle, but she still flinched at the hot, smooth tip of him pressing against her vagina, smearing a bit of the wetness she was bewildered to feel had gathered at her opening. The body was capable of many extraordinary feats to mitigate physical damage and she marveled at the infuriating evidence of how adapted the female form was to the violence of men. His panting was heavy against her cheek as he crouched slightly to align them, his breath hot and moist from how his mouth watered in anticipation of sex. Her body responded to his desire, warmth pooling in the cradle of her pelvis to signal the onset of arousal, but it was far from enough to ready her for his entry. The discomfort of being stretched so unprepared and uncaringly began to slick her cunt for him rapidly, enabling him to advance into her with an urgency that had her mouth fall open in a stuttering gasp to manage the pain.

A cold sweat broke out all over her when she felt the wound inside her vagina stretch dangerously and she shut her eyes and evened her breathing to relax enough to allow him into her body more easily. He responded to her surrender with a deep groan, his hands caressing up her sides under the ivory lace dress as he kissed her neck and pumped into her further. The unwelcome intrusion of his cock sliding out and then sinking back in deeper was alien in the absence of the consuming, savage arousal her father would infect her with when he forced sex on her. This was an animal act, a mechanical performance of sex devoid of emotion and motivated on necessity. What pleasure sparked along with the pain was only a physical stimulation of nerves wired to derive pleasure for this purpose, but it was enough. This was likened more to the sex she was used to in her adolescence; the meaningless hotel hookups to somewhat alleviate a need she didn’t even know was there until she’d found it in her father’s bed. She could pretend he was Leif, the Leif she had fallen into such a strange and overwhelming romance with before his murderous nature had turned on their family. The scent was correct, the drive to dominate was similar, the forceful taking was right, but he was not her father.

“Please, uncle… stop this,” she whimpered.
His driving hips slowed at her request and he let out a shuddering sigh, but he did not stop. It would have been more saddening if she’d actually expected him to cease. She had to bite her lip to keep from yelping when he bottomed out, his tip mashing too painfully at her limit, and he pressed her against the wall more firmly to keep her still when she twitched and squirmed in the pain. Small, high-pitched grunts escaped her throat with each jerk of his hips as he began fucking her in earnest and his stifled groans were loud this close to her ear, their sounds a conflicted chorus of pain and pleasure above the steady drone of the airplane engines. Beyond the physical pain, the rudimentary sexual stimulation, and the repulsion of violation, this was all so oddly easy to accept. Earlier that same day, she had nearly killed when this was attempted on her, but that murderous rage eluded her now. Perhaps it was because she had been primed to attack earlier or perhaps she was simply caught too unaware this time. Or perhaps she needed this.

His kisses became bites along her neck that made her sigh in pleasure and the thrill of teeth so close to such vital arteries and veins, prompting him to bite harder and make her moan. Finding enjoyment in this act no longer shocked her as much. The lines had already been blurred and boundaries meant so little anymore. The longer he fucked her, the more her body responded to him, and she was warmed to a steady arousal at this point. It didn’t have to matter that this was forced. The things that used to matter didn’t really as much anymore. Sex was sex, whether it was wanted or not, whether she loved him or not, whether she was fully conscious or not.

“Ha-ahn… Oh, that’s… ah…” she breathed, tipping her hips back to offer him an easier angle and earning her a strong suck at her pulse point that made her eyes flutter shut and toes curl. “Hnn, please, uncle, I’ll be good, just…”

His hands felt nice as they fondled and caressed her body. Touch was a thing she had always craved and seldom received throughout her life, making this recent trend of frequent intimacy all the easier to accept. He leaned off her enough to slip his hands over her breasts, squeezing them in his palms in a rough way that had her moaning for him again, and she bucked into his motions despite the punishment it put on her. The pain was good now. The erogenous connection between the pain in her cunt and the pleasure he kneaded into her breasts sparked her ascent to climax. He seemed to sense this, either in the clenching of her pelvic muscles or the heightened pitch of her moans, and drove into her faster, an almost feverish excitement to his thrusts. Her nails scraped the plastic wall and her head bowed low in shame as she met those thrusts.

“Oh, God-!” she gasped, his harsh pace from behind rubbing the thick ridge of his tip against a heavenly spot toward the front of her cunt. Each thrust pushed her higher and higher to climax, making her beg in panting breaths, “Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t- ah!”

When his cock twitched in her at the first sign of his orgasm, she came apart on him, gasping through the pulsing pleasure that rose in jagged spasms deep in her cunt. Her back arched as much as it could against his pressing body while she broke that crest of ecstasy. Shame and self-loathing crashed down on her even as she still came, smothering the satisfaction into a purely physical response that was stemmed by a sickened revulsion to her weakness. She was an animal, a subhuman beast trained to entertain these men’s base desires, the family whore. He pulled out abruptly and she sagged against the wall, her knees quivering like jelly as she fought to remain standing while she listened to him stroke himself rapidly. He let out a low, guttural moan and she felt the hot slick of his semen shoot onto her bared ass. Her pain, humiliation, and subjugation were all part of his pleasure, something he had in common with Leif. Although she could now turn and see who it was who had violated her this time, she stood frozen in reluctance to look. None of her options were at all comforting.

The option to go on not knowing was taken from her when she heard Vidar say through his panting breaths, “Gud, Simone, se på deg... du er perfekt... Ah... I, ah...”
Her arms slid down along the wall to her sides, the watch dangling loosely on her thin wrist. She opened her eyes and looked down at it, observing the motion of the gears inside it squirming. It only operated on the power she gave it. Wind it up, watch it go. When she had stripped away everything society had taught him to believe, this was what was waiting to be released, but she did not manage to tear his shroud of denial or rip the truth out for him to see. Nonetheless, she was curious to know what would happen and now she knew. Her father would have been satisfied with the results, but she wasn’t. If she somehow lived to be as old as Leif, she might be able to show people what lied in the depths of their own darkness as well as have them see it.

Slowly, achingly, she straightened, holding her skirt gathered above the mess on her ass as she wiped the tears from her face with the hem of it. Her voice cracked as she asked, “Is this what you really wanted?”

His silence answered for him. His sadism was something he had in common with Leif, but the guilt, shame, and self-loathing were what he had in common with her. There was no need for her to answer or berate him; this was all a punishment on them both. Punishment on her for tempting, punishment on him for giving into temptation. Neither of them were in control.

“It’s a very pretty open-face sandwich.”

Anders looked up from the herring smørrebrød he was already halfway through to see Simone sketching her beef tartare one with the pencil and blank diary she’d somehow pilfered along the way. She looked so focused when she sketched; the serious expression exclusive to the task, her hands and eyes moving quickly as the rest of her was stock still, a slight furrow in her smooth brow. He could watch her for hours, but he looked away before she caught him staring.

“It taste pretty,” Henrik informed her before guffawing at his own joke.

Anders was surprised to hear her laugh and even respond back with, “Hey, I don’t have a phone anymore, so I have to take annoying food selfies the snooty still life way.”

Henrik laughed at that despite Anders knowing damn well neither of them had any idea what she’d just said. He glanced between his older brother and Simone, wondering when they got so chummy as to sit across from each other and joke casually. She leaned across the table and put her onions on Henrik’s fourth herring smørrebrød, stacking them to mimic the impractical but aesthetically pleasing way they arranged their toppings. Henrik grabbed her little sketchbook while she was distracted and she nearly launched across the table trying to snatch it back, both of them grinning like misbehaving children as he made a show of keeping it just out of her reach and while he looked inside. She wasn’t acting like a traumatized victim. If he didn’t know the terrible things she’d been put through, both at Leif’s hands and his own, he wouldn’t have thought she’d had a care in the world. It was unsettling to see her acting so normal when nothing about her was normal.

“Whoa! Look at this, littlest brother!” Henrik grinned, showing a page to him.

“Wait! That’s- Don’t do that!” she protested, straining for the book, all pretense of play gone in her demand.

Anders couldn’t help but look, seeing a very detailed and shockingly recognizable drawing of him and his brothers as they were when they were children. She even got Vidar’s nerdy glasses down to the comical thickness of the lenses. He took it from Henrik, now fully out of her grabbing reach, and
looked at it more closely. This wasn’t just a guess at how they looked as kids, this was an exact recreation in pencil and paper.

“How did you… How you… did this?” he asked, glancing up from the sketch to see how she reacted to him addressing her directly.

Her face was not turned to him nor did she look at him, but she responded in a shy mutter, “It’s just a drawing.”

He kept watching her as she brought the knuckle of her index finger between her teeth and bit down on it nervously. He knew he was making her uncomfortable, but if he was going to start being firm and consistent, he had to start somewhere.

“It is perfect. You did have… photo?” he asked.

He could see her jaw tense as she bit down harder. Indentations of her teeth were pressed into her skin when she pulled her knuckle away and pursed her lips before answering, “Um. Henrik showed me a photograph.”

Henrik’s attention was briefly turned away from his food at hearing his name. “What did she say I did?”

“Nothing,” Anders answered dismissively, not wanting to lose this very slight conversation he was having with her. His brother frowned at the obvious lie, but resumed his breakfast. Anders turned his body toward her now and leaned on the table as he continued scrounging up his English. “You did this from photo showed one time?”

She wrapped her arms around her torso, hugging herself defensively as she answered with a silent nod. That wouldn’t do. He had to keep her talking.

“You have a, ahh… photo memory, yes?”

“I have dreams that keep memories fresh,” she murmured.

She picked up her food and took a sizable bite of the raw meat mixture on bread, fixing her gaze to something in the distance. This conversation was over, signaled loud and clear. He sighed through his nose and sat back heavily in his chair, trying not to feel so disappointed. It was progress, just not as much as he’d wanted. He would be firmer in a little while.

The layover in Copenhagen was a few hours that stretched on to eternity as Vidar tried to find anything to distract him. As usual, his brain multitasked on several things at once and as he sat in the annoying airport sports bar eavesdropping on conversations, watching a replay of a rugby match, speeding through sudokus and solitaire on their game tablets, and trying to achieve intoxication on overpriced beer, there was still an unfortunate amount of his attention available to torment him with the thing he had done. There was no point in ruminating or regretting. He’d done it and then he’d done it again. He had no right to regret it after the second time, but the way her voice broke when she asked him that plaguing question derailed all of his thoughts in a cringe of utter remorse each time it replayed unbidden in his mind.

“Is there anything else you’d like to order?” the waitress asked in accented German.
“Another pint,” he answered.

“Would you like any food or appetizers?”

“Certainly not from here.”

He didn’t look up from the puzzle he poked at on the touchscreen as she hovered, apparently waiting for something that he couldn’t care less about providing. Eventually, though, she seemed to get the hint and left. People who couldn’t take no for an answer were beyond aggravating. Clearly, he didn’t need anyone to lead him to what he really wanted. He knew himself. He was aware of what he was doing and what he wanted and what he didn’t. Self-discovery was a journey he’d ended in university like any other reasonably intelligent human. He had over 35 years of practice at figuring out what he was and he was comfortable with what that had turned out to be. Some insane girl who had just barely exited puberty and didn’t know him at all couldn’t make him second guess himself on these facts. He absolutely didn’t want to actually abuse her. The crack of a belt striking across her bare skin was beautiful, but not the way Leif had done it, not the way it had left her skin split and mottled blue in bruises. He knew himself, there was just something like a sickness making him think there was something in him he didn’t recognize. Incest was a sick, repulsive wickedness and the taboo of it was one of the few sexual restrictions of society that made sense. Leif had broken her so irreparably with it, molded her into a perfect little slave to serve and depend on her master. If he ignored the means, the result suited all his darkest fantasies.

“But that…” he muttered. The condensation on the mug dripped over his knuckles and he watched the droplets crawl and trail moisture across his skin, the water taking the shapes of snails slowly eating into his flesh. It wasn’t real. He knew they weren’t real even though they tickled and itched as they chewed.

Is this what you really wanted?

“No!” he exclaimed, gripping his head to expel that horrible sound of her voice cracking with sorrow.

The conversation at the next table paused at his abrupt shout and he could feel that he’d drawn stares from those around them, but they could all piss off. Let them gawk. Let them see the guilt written so clearly on his face and judge him for it. None of them mattered any more than the dull-eyed cows they all resembled. He’d fucked his niece - his blood-related, undeniable niece - and it was good. It was better than good. He wanted to fuck her again and again, have her every way he had imagined, have her screaming and sweating for him. Her accidental admission that she had that kind of relationship with Leif was like a cancer in his brain that had slowly eaten away at him. Her scent clung to him, her sweet and clean sweat mingling with the deeper and thicker scent of her arousal slathered on his crotch, transmitting animal sentiments of lust and control to his brain. He wasn’t turned on by knowing, feeling, smelling that they shared the same tainted blood. There was no further meaning to his desire than fucking an exotic and beautiful sub. And she was so submissive when she wasn’t mouthing off, whispering such poison into his thoughts, dredging up urges and feelings that weren’t any realer than nightmares. There were better uses for that sweet mouth of hers.

Is this what you really wanted?

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table and his forehead in his hands. There was something wrong with him. This sickness kept twisting his repulsion into further debauchery when all he wanted to do, needed to do, was think. His brain was still scrambled by the acid - or whatever - Leif had dosed him with. He never really felt like he’d woken up from that night, unable to shake the suspicion that he was still hallucinating all of this. It was more insane to believe that they’d been on the run from a serial killer than to believe it to be a delusion, anyway. Leif still watched him from
behind her eyes, those same horrible storm gray eyes that flitted away from him in nervousness and now shame. Forcing her and hurting her felt good in a way rough play had never felt with any other partner. It was more than just play. Punishing her, debasing her, dominating her gave him something back that Leif had taken. No, not taken. Distorted. He was different in places and ways he couldn’t name and it was frightening to encounter these changes, but when he was with her, it all clicked together. The brutality of it all had a purpose. She needed to be trained and he wanted to train her.

*Is this what you really wanted?*

No. It’s what Leif had wanted. Vidar pushed himself back in the chair, the world around him blurring as his fractured thoughts merged into sharp focus.

Simone watched the news on the many televisions hanging at their gate, glad that there was no mention yet of them or Leif, less glad that there was a monstrous mud slide Bangladesh to soak up the media attention instead. There never seemed to be any news unless it was bad news, but the bad seemed to be what shaped people more. She couldn’t say that she really knew herself as well as she did after these terrible and terrifying times. At the same time, it was getting harder to believe she knew herself at all, especially now. It would be so much better if she simply were nothing at all, her person an empty vessel through which her goals can be achieved instead of this writhing mass of confusion. If she were clear and empty of desire, thought, and emotion, life wouldn’t have to feel so bad. Without feeling or desire, she could be free even in the servitude of her circumstance and task. She shut her eyes and envisioned glass fishing buoys rocking on the waves, knotted in frayed rope macramé, clear and empty, holding a net hidden beneath the murky saltwater to trap the fish that wandered through. Clear and empty, floating above the mayhem of the life it collects below. The great white shark she traps might drag her down with it into the depths, but she is watertight, empty except for the air that suspends her. Down and down they sink into peaceful oblivion until they are nothing.

“Kjære.”

Her eyes blinked open to find Anders sitting closely beside her, his body turned toward her and his hand holding hers atop where their knees touched. The ocean was still clear in her mind, the waves lapping up her smooth sides. Sensation tainted that peaceful nothingness inside her, just a glimmer of hurt that ached where they touched and echoed a pain in her heart. She tried to slide her hand out of his, but he tightened his grip.

“Kjære,” he repeated. His body heat and scent made her stomach twist into knots and she leaned away, prompting him to only lean closer. “You… We are to speak. Now. Please.”

She wasn’t ready for that. The betrayal was all too fresh. She needed more time and distance to bury it deeper to where even he couldn’t exhume it. She couldn’t even bring herself to look at any part of him, her face and body twisting away from him in shame.

“I need you,” he whispered, the raw emotion in his voice tearing that thin layer of protection she had managed to cage in her feelings with. She couldn’t move, couldn’t even dare to breathe without the risk of coming apart. The softness and sincerity he spoke with trampled her heart. “I do not want to hurt you. Jeg har begått uutslettelige forbrytelser som har forårsaket deg skade. I did… bad to you. I’m sorry. I am not good. I love you, kjære, do you understand? I’m sorry. Tell me… Speak to me.”

It was so tempting to let him keep fooling her. She was never happier these days than when she was
with him. Even with the proof that he was lying still aching in her violated body, an astoundingly large part of her wanted to just forget what had happened and go back to believing that he could love something as wretched and wicked as her. She couldn’t be mad at him for playing such a nasty trick. She should have known better. That soft and warm love wasn’t meant for monsters like her. He wasn’t budging from this vulnerability he performed to her despite his act having been so clearly revealed. She might as well play her role in this cruel game.

“I understand,” she whispered. Perhaps if she spoke quietly enough, he wouldn’t hear her dishonesty. “It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me.”

“It is not okay,” he insisted, his fingers interweaving in the spaces between hers as he leaned closer. She bit her lip and kept her face hidden as she fought to control the heartache he wrought when she felt him nuzzle his cheek against her head. His stubble dragged her hair, making her scalp tingle as he softly continued, “I want to help. Help… fix. Help you. I did bad to you, it is not okay. Tell me to help. Anything, kjære, understand? Anything, I love you.”

It was quite a beautiful lie. He didn’t even have to do any of this, really. He already had her trapped in a position where she had to depend on him so wholly. There was nowhere and no one else for her to go to.

“I love you too, papa.”
“Keep your eyes closed, Simone.”

The room was already dark, leaving her in complete blackness when her eyelids firmly shut. An echo of fear drifted up from her gut at the unknowns approaching out of the darkness, but there was no need to be afraid. She was also unknown, hiding among the hidden, but unlike those real and imagined things, she knew there was reason to fear her.

“Exhale.”

Her breath rushed out of her lungs, warm and heavy like smoke, and she held that ache in her chest at leaving them emptied. As she waited, she heard the squeak of a glass container opening and felt the air shift as Leif held something near her face.

“Inhale through your nostrils. Slowly.”

The air carried many particles that caught in her nose, burgeoning with scents she did not notice before. Beneath the target she was to identify, she could smell the detergent that clung to the cotton fibers of his shirt, the fragrant oils in his shaving lotion and deodorant lifted on the rapid evaporation of his sweat, the wood polish and ink that was smeared in trace amounts on his hands and forearms from working at his desk all day, and a scent that was uniquely and always simply him. Working past that familiar bouquet, she focused on the target. Earth. Mineral. Wet.

“Clay,” she answered.

“Good.”

She waited among the dark as she listened for his next instruction, hearing the snap of the lid on the airtight container and the slight clinking of hollow glass as he brought out the next target. This could go for dozens of rounds until she was lightheaded from holding her breath so many turns and her muscles grew restless with the need to move, but she kept as quiet and still as he liked her to be. However, it wasn’t enough that she be obedient; she also had to be correct.

“Exhale. Hold… Inhale.”


“Good.”

She huffed out a relieved sigh. It was a lucky guess, but luck was as important as skill. Valstads had both on their side. They went through several more rounds. Black tea, beeswax, lard, burnt gunpowder, aloe vera cuttings, goat hair, hydrogen peroxide, egg shells, salvia divinorum, thujone, camphor. She was sweating halfway through, her nervousness mounting with each correct answer, dreading the one that would topple her winning streak. Cedar wood, juniper berries, deer musk, sauvignon blanc, wood varnish, neroli oil. Each correct answer was met with the same response; his brief and calm “Good” that thawed the chill of dread in her with the warmth of his approval. She was shocked when she found out that she’d gotten them all correct. That almost never happened.

“You’ve earned your treat today, Simone. Keep your eyes closed. Can you tell me everything that is in your treat by scent alone?”
She cleared her lungs, paused long enough to reset her olfactory sense, and inhaled with a laborious slowness when he held her treat out to her. This was always the most fun challenge, mostly because she still got the treat either way, but she wanted to get it right this time.

“It’s an oatmeal raisin cookie!” she smiled.

“Yes. But can you tell me what it’s made of?”

She concentrated, separating the individual scents from the overall amalgamation that she could immediately recognize as the cookie. There was always a trick to this preventing her from just referencing what she knew commonly went into the confectionaries he rewarded her with.

“Wheat flour, raisin, brown sugar, oat, umm... butter, salt, egg, sodium bicarbonate, vanilla, Saigon cinnamon…” she rattled off, mentally discarding those components from her attention as she sniffed for that secret ingredient. There was definitely something there, something familiar but odd. She leaned forward, her brow wrinkling in concentration as she scoured her mind for that scent. It almost smelled like him, but there was an intriguing difference there, something that was both him and not.

“No peeking, darling girl.”

She flinched when she felt his hand cup the side of her face but thankfully she did not give into the reflex to open her eyes, not even when he tilted her head back and pressed his parted lips to hers. This was never part of the game, but her bewilderment rapidly fell away to the heat of this contact. Their kiss sent waves of tingling pleasure through her entire being, coiling outward from the fire growing deep in her belly and fueling her need for more even as the sensual slide of his tongue threatened to overwhelm her. He was being sweet and gentle with her, almost hesitant in a way her increasing eagerness couldn’t abide. She brought her hands to his shoulders and leaned up to deepen the kiss, earning her a quiet moan from him that vibrated into her mouth.

“Hmm... ah, kjære…” he whispered between their soft and open kisses. “We should not... not here... mmm...”

He sounded even stranger than he smelled, but these feelings he incited in her were right. She squirmed in her seat, that restless need quickly making her almost desperate for his sex. This felt like that first night, caught in a drug delirium that made this sin so irresistible and simple. She briefly wondered when the seat under her had become cushioned and when he had taken to sitting beside her instead of across from her, but those details fizzled out of importance when he pulled her flush against him. Despite that difference in his scent and taste, he was just as potent and addictive. She licked into his mouth, chasing more of that flavor and sensation as the rush of hormones dumping into her system left her dizzy in arousal. The animalistic drive to fuck burned in her muscles, urging her to mount and move on him, but she couldn’t bring herself to be so aggressive with this aggressive male. A thrilling quiver of fear tempted her to do it just to goad his wrath. He was being too reserved, too patient, too kind with her. Her hand slid down his body and he pulled away from her kiss, gasping when she cupped her palm against his hardened length through his pants.

“Min Gud, kjære, du må ikke gjøre dette offentlig!” he whispered, tight in alarm.

She opened her eyes in surprise — he only reverted to Norwegian when he was either especially agitated or especially drunk — and froze when she was met with a very flushed and flustered Anders. Her hands drifted away from him to press against her head as she slid heavily back into her seat. Her seat on an airplane. With Anders. Going to Norway. That’s right. Leif hadn’t played the scenting game with her since she was eight or nine. She had completely forgotten it had ever happened, but the memories were as clear now as that vision she’d been in. It seemed so real because so much of it had been real at some point. How she could forget something like that unsettled her more than
realizing that she’d been unknowingly making out with Anders. Her deceitful body still throbbed with need, but the disturbing rediscovery of memories so precious to her left her shaken to her core. She shouldn’t have forgotten. That was why she still had a habit of smelling everything and probably why she was so good at it; she would have connected the habit with the memory to keep it fresh. There was no reason to forget, no cause for it to have been so thoroughly blocked out of her mind.

“Why… Why…” she muttered under her breath, raking her nails over her scalp to alleviate the pressure rising in her. “What could be the reason…”

Anders laid a comforting hand on her thigh, his roughened thumb dragging over the lace as he squeezed and rubbed her reassuringly. She could feel his sympathetic gaze on her while her eyes darted around unseeingly, focused entirely inward, but his pity never grated her like it did from others. Why he would pity her now was beyond her, but she didn’t have the attention to spare on that quandary. She searched these memories for any sort of trauma or any reason at all for them to have been repressed, but there was nothing worse than nervousness and discomfort there. There was no panic, no terror, no violence, no sex or molestation of any sort, only fond memories of bonding with her father through this special game they’d played. The more she exhumed of these memories, the more evidence she found that only told her she had every reason to revisit and cherish them. It was their secret thing, an innocent and interesting tradition between only them. All the times she’d felt unloved by him, she would have clung to those memories for comfort. There was no reason for her to repress them. There might have been reason for Leif to repress them in her, though.

“Oh, Jesus…” she sighed, folding over her legs to curl tightly and tuck her face into her hands as the weight of that thought nearly crushed her.

Anders’ hand shifted to rubbing her back, his touch light over the tender bruises and cuts hidden beneath her coat and dress and stoking that flame of desire in her. She burrowed deeper into herself, trying to maintain focus. No one could take away someone’s memories without them knowing, but there were so many holes in her past, jarring her like potholes in the road whenever she tried to follow through her history. Entire places, people, life events would go missing only to resurface at some benign reminder, sometimes only making her realize they were ever gone once they’d returned. She’d thought it was because of her madness and maybe it was, maybe it would always be, but Leif had played his part in deliberately never bringing up that they’d ever had those moments together. Surely, he would have mentioned or referenced them at some point. It could only mean he’d wanted her to forget, to continue believing that there was nothing to secure her emotionally to him so she would always clamber after any opportunity to form some kind of bond. It was all so obvious in hindsight and yet she still couldn’t see why. There was never any need to manipulate her so thoroughly. She’d always loved him, obeyed him, idolized him. She could never see his full pattern, never know the total intricacies of his design, and she couldn’t bear the thought of how close she’d come to never being able to even have the opportunity to find out.

“He’s alive,” she whispered. She didn’t know when she had begun rocking slightly back and forth, the need for comfort running bone deep at the thought of having killed him. The bluish tint to the edges of his features chilled her into cringing. “He’s alive… he’s alive…”

This time, there was no fear accompanying that statement, only an alien sort of relief. The watch at her wrist ticked loudly, pressed so close to her ear as she cradled her downturned face. She didn’t know when or how or what would happen, but she would see him again, that was the only certainty she had. In a world where everything she knew was taken from her and everything she had was gone, she clung to any certainty available. Until the time came that she would finally take her answers from him, she would prepare, even if the only thing she prepared for would be her death.
It was safety by the time they were all piled in Anders’ compact SUV, but it wasn’t home until they were well within the city. None of them seemed to feel all that talkative, an exhausted melancholy descending on their mood that was sporadically broken by attempts to verbally acknowledge that they had somehow made it home. What none of them wanted to vocalize was the anticipation of what would come next. Anders turned down the winding roads in Henrik’s neighborhood, the engine of his car growling almost in protest as he sped up into the turns, but the vehicle handled well enough not to jar or sway the occupants. He was sure Vidar would have had some nagging quip on his speeding if he wasn’t just as eager to get to his house.

“I’ll call mother,” Henrik said as he unlatched his seatbelt, the vehicle idling in front of his duplex. “I’ll calm her down before she freaks out on you guys. Um… We should probably go see her, either way. Soon.”

“Right,” Anders responded.

Neither of them were sure how to leave off on that note, so Henrik lumbered out of the backseat with an awkward, “Well… uh, so I guess I’ll see you guys later. Drive safe.”

Vidar watched him as they waited for him to find his spare housekey hidden in the little garden area leading up the walkway, a habit they all had fortunately replicated from their forgetful mother having locked them all outside of the house enough times. His head was still turned away from Anders as they drove off once Henrik had made it inside the front door and hadn’t come running out with a homicidal maniac chasing after him.

At the stoplight, waiting to turn back onto the main road, with only the gentle hum of the engine and the rhythmic clacking of the signal, Vidar’s voice was calm and clear through the quiet. “So, any plans for tonight?”

Anders rubbed his aching face in nervousness at thinking even that far into the future and muttered, “Um… no, no just going to catch up on rest. And start getting Simone set up in the guest room. That’s all for today.”

“Separate rooms, hm?” Vidar mused dryly. Anders frowned, feeling his blood pressure already rise at the sarcastic remark he knew was coming. “You really know how to make a girl feel wanted, littlest brother.”

“As if you’re the authority on what she wants…” he seethed in return. “My home is her home too; she should have a space in it to consider her own.”

“You’re going to need a very long leash if you let her roam around that far from your bed.”

Anders sneered in disgust and his voice rose without his intention, nearly growling out, “Will you just stop saying that shit? She’s not a pet or a slave or… whatever it is you keep thinking! We’re not like that, so cut it out!”

“It’s only been a few days and you’re already moving into ‘we’ territory with her? That’s adorable.”

“You’re insufferable,” Anders spat. There was no point in talking when Vidar got like this. The man was a seasoned expert in goading people to react and, although Anders had a lifetime of practice trying to avoid it, it was still easy to fall into his games. Eventually he’ll get bored. It was easier just to let him run his mouth, as aggravating as that could become.

“I was only saying that I think it’s sweet,” Vidar said. Anders could hear him grinning and he
gripped the wheel tighter, steeling himself for the teasing and testing that would undoubtedly continue. “And so classically you. You tip your dick into a girl and you think you own her. And they say that I’m the brother with controlling tendencies. Tch.”

“I don’t own anyone,” Anders muttered. He shouldn’t react, he knew that, but these things he said stung worse to let them go unchallenged.

“No, I suppose not.” Vidar slowly relented. “That would imply that you take some sort of responsibility for what you own. Better that you both remain free from any expectations with each other, right? No need to muck up whatever it is you two have going on with things like labels or obligations.”

Anders adjusted the rearview mirror to look at Simone, finding her curled up in the backseat, hugging her knees to her chest as her wide eyes watched and examined everything of her new life out the window. Vidar was wrong. There were already too many labels between them, too many angles through which his care and concern for her could flow. Glancing between the road ahead and her image in the mirror, seeing her chewing on her knuckle and her smooth brow furrowed in some internal calamity of thought, that familiar pang of guilt stabbed through him. He couldn’t help but feel responsible for the fear and nervousness written so clearly in her expression because he was the reason she was there, so far away from the home she’d known. That her home was a godless place of terror and pain and he would provide her a better life did little to assuage his guilt when he considered the price he had paid to have her, a price written on her body no less. None of this had gone the way it was supposed to.

“And you even know how to take care of a thing like her?” Vidar asked. “She’s not your common stray, Anders. She’s more like a feral, exotic pet. You can’t just keep her kenneled and kibbled with your dogs and expect that to be well enough. She might be cute and cuddly now while she’s good and scared, but if you don’t train her properly, that’ll change.”

“She’s not a pet,” Anders repeated in a grumble. She wasn’t his slave or pet, but he had been able to take her on the basis that he was to be her “surrogate master”. Hearing his brother address this subject in the context of ownership without his even knowing that rolled around in his brain unpleasantly.

“All I’m asking is that you consider the kind of training she was receiving from her previous master,” Vidar said, his tone strangely sincere and level, no longer the languid air of nonchalance he preferred to tease with. Anders glanced at him, but he still had his face turned toward the passenger window. “The kind of dynamic she was responding to. You know firsthand that a well-trained animal is happier than an untrained one. She could thrive under the right guidance, or she could be allowed to suffer in the chaos of her madness. It would be so very rewarding for all of us if you just allow her to be trained.”

“What the hell are you even talking about?”

“You have to train her to fill her role properly. She needs at least one firm handler to satisfy her will to serve and submit. Papa Leif did that through force and pain and she’s seeking that from you now, isn’t she? Has she asked you to be a little too rough, perhaps even directly asked you to punish her?”

Anders opened his mouth to refute these disgusting assumptions on their relationship, but the memory of her pleading yelps and moans when he experimentally drove into her too hard stopped his words in his throat. She’d practically begged for him to keep hurting her that night after he’d scolded her for mouthing off to that cop. Her pursuit of pain disturbed him. What he almost did to her left him sick with guilt.
“She was abused,” he said instead. “I’m not going to feed into that cycle. Leif fucked her up in a lot of ways, but that’s not her life anymore. She doesn’t have to submit or serve to earn anything from me. She’s… lost and confused, just reverting to what’s familiar to her to find any sort of footing.”

Vidar turned to him then and he could see his sharp smirk and raised eyebrow in his peripheral.
“Well! Look at you, psychoanalyzing the little psycho!”

“Jesus, shut up…” Anders groaned.

Vidar did not shut up. “I think maybe we’re both correct, which is all the more reason we need to discuss this so immediately. If she is lost and confused without the dominant-submissive dynamic, there’s no reason not to provide that comfort. If submitting herself to the pain and control she craves from her sexual partners brings her fulfillment, there’s every reason to provide it. What experience do you have in BDSM?”

“None,” Anders answered flatly. “And none of your business.”

“None?” Anders answered flatly. “And none of your business.”

“Oh. That’s too bad. You had a firm grasp on her the other night, but without a firm grasp on the concept, she won’t be getting everything she needs from you.”

Anders bit his tongue to keep from yelling, “That was a mistake. We should have never… I should have never listened to you.”

“It could have been handled better, but for a first pass, it went well,” Vidar shrugged. “We all had a good time, anyway. My God, did you feel how hard she came? It felt like my dick was going to-”

“Is that really all you can think about?” Anders interrupted, abrupt in his irritation. “I’m not talking to you about this… whatever this is anymore. Simone is my responsibility and I’ll handle her the way I believe is best. Chaining her to my bed and whipping her isn’t what I believe is best, so keep that weird shit to yourself and away from my… from her.”

“I never said anything about whips,” his brother responded casually. “Although, I could bring over a few.”

“Stop it,” Anders warned.

Vidar’s smirk widened into a full Cheshire’s grin, showing teeth as he twisted in his seat to turn to Simone. Anders watched, caution dampening his alarm as his brother asked, “Sweetheart, you are so quiet. Are you alright? Is there anything we can do for you?”

Anders had to resist turning to see how she reacted, risking glances away from the late afternoon traffic to check her in the rearview mirror as her wide-eyed stare fixed to Vidar. There was something in the way she tensed her jaw as she swallowed, something in the way she uncurled herself to sit properly. Vidar’s eyes followed the slow movement of her legs as they crossed, baring just a bit of her smooth thigh as she bunched the hem of her skirt in a tightening fist. Something passed between them then, all of them, a weight in the air that gave focus to every miniscule movement and reaction. The deepened rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, the slight tilt of his brother’s brow as his grin took on a more interested slant, the quickening of his own pulse as Anders detected that strange wavelength of something almost dangerous, almost antagonistic. It was her excitement, a thing straddling the lines between fearful anticipation and needful desire, that drew their attention. He could tell his brother was reacting the same way he was: like dogs with a cornered rabbit, their prey frozen in fear as they waited for her to leap just so they could catch her in their jaws.
“Jesus Christ!” Anders blurted out, needing this to stop before something, he wasn’t sure what, grew out of this unbearable tension.

He couldn’t acknowledge what it was, the shame of it too excruciating to consider. He caught the way Simone flinched at his sudden noise, seeing her turn to look out the window once more, though with a much more troubled pinch to her expression as she looked through the glass without really seeing. Vidar only chuckled as he turned back in his seat, the corner of his wolfish grin still visible in Ander’s peripheral as he gazed cheerfully out the passenger window. None of them were looking in the same direction, each avoiding the other as they rode to the same destination.

Simone could hear the dogs excitedly barking in the house up the long grassy walkway to the boxy red house. The light on the covered porch turned on when the door opened and a dark-haired boy came out with a charging wave of dogs. Anders was immediately overrun by the pack as they jumped and yipped joyously at his outstretched hands while he began trudging through the overgrown lawn. Simone moved to follow, eager to meet the swarming dogs, but was stopped by Vidar’s hand grasping her shoulder to pull her into a sudden hug. Her shoes skid on the dirt as she struggled not to trip, causing her to lean into this unwanted embrace.

“I do not think he did invite me in, so now I am to leave,” he spoke into her hair, holding her forcibly to him. She shivered at the context of how she came to be familiar with the feel of his body pressed against her, that same disgusting tug of desire from earlier echoing as he spoke lowly, “I will come visit very soon, sweetheart. I am a short walk away, you know.”

“Oh…” she whimpered, wincing at how pathetic her wavering voice sounded. She shouldn’t let them see how they terrified her, especially not him. She forced her arms to wrap around his chest, returning his hug without shaking as she cleared her tightening throat and said, “That’s good to know. It’s nice that I get to live so close to my family.”

She stretched out the last word, emphasizing the aspect she knew he reviled in what he had subtly threatened her with. It both horrified and uplifted her when she felt his fingers curl in her hair at the back of her head after she’d said it. Her horror won out as his displeasure at her minor show of obstinance became evident in how he tugged her head back and glared down at her. It was all she could do to maintain a blank expression.

“Very soon, sweetheart,” he whispered, his face close enough to fill her field of vision. Close enough to kiss. Close enough to bite.

The heat of a blush swept up from her chest to her scalp as her insides tingled at what her muscles trembled to run from. This was so close to how her father might react. The way he could twist fear into arousal was almost enough to crush the surge of hostility that rushed up from that thick pit of darkness in her. If she could not have love, then she would have hatred.

“Call before you come next time,” she whispered up into those narrowed blue eyes. She could see his surprise shift into intrigue and amusement in the slight twitch of his brow and curl of his crooked smirk.

His response was drowned out by Anders pulling them apart, his kind eyes blazing with a wrath she’d only ever seen him direct to her father as he snarled, “Ikke rør henne, dritsekk!”

She darted out from Anders’ arm hooked around her middle, nearly tripping over the beagle that ran
up along with the other dogs to join their owner in barking. Her heart hammered and her haunches hummed with the need to keep moving as she wrapped her arms around her body and paced compulsively at the symphony of aggression from Anders and his pack. She watched, eager for something she couldn’t name as he advanced on his brother, his normally relaxed and easy manner completely transformed into a broad display of hostility and threat. The patchwork pack of mutts swirled around them, baying and yipping, some assuming the aggression of their master and some engaging in play to disperse that aggression. Vidar backed away slowly, his hands held up palms-forward and posture loose and passive in blatant surrender as he grinned and said something she couldn’t hear over the barking and undoubtedly wouldn’t understand anyway. Simone’s body reacted viscerally, but her mind was oddly clearer than it had been all day. Or possibly two days. Time bent in strange ways between cross-continental and mental traveling. Whatever he’d said was apparently enough to stop Anders’ hostile encroachment, but the younger man’s threat did not accept the peace offered in his brother’s retreat. She balked at the sly wink Vidar threw her as he turned and began walking down the street as though the confrontation had never occurred. However, it was still occurring within Anders. His shoulders were still squared, his muscles bulged in the restless demand of a fight response, and his hard expression was a far departure from the calm warmth and kindness it typically exuded as he approached her. She’d never noticed how large his hands were before as he clenched and unclenched them, the knuckles distended and thick and his calloused skin folding like leather. Fighter’s hands on a softhearted man. He stepped through the long grass as she stood stuck under his heavy glare, his anger rolling off him in waves.

She felt urge to placate and soothe before that anger latched onto her in the absence of his target, an urge helped along by the exhilarating gratitude she felt for him then. Not for saving her from Vidar’s uncomfortable propositioning, but for showing her this switch in him. She could follow his emotional pathways like a bloodhound on the trail of a scent and she found that switch in him that turned him from rational, cooperative and passive to openly and eagerly hostile. This call to violence was cooked out of polite society and the profound breed of it her father possessed was as impossible for her to follow as the rest of his inner workings, so she rarely had the opportunity to study it. Here, in the clarity that was now coming to her more often and more potently than it had in years, she could see through Anders and find the beast that he kept bound inside him. In seeing him, she felt closer to seeing herself, the self she’d thought she’d lost but she was coming to realize she just never knew. What she didn’t have in common with normal people, she had in common with the Valstad brothers: a unique psychological blueprint that went deeper than their individual personalities and preferences. Inside the landscape of her mind, she could reach her arms into that thick black pit where murder was hidden and feel the shape of its jaws. The mantle of madness wore her for so long, now it was time for her to start wearing it.
The sound of the spider crawling along the wrought iron of the barred windowsill produced very little noise, but its many shuffling legs still made a slight sound in the echoing silence. Its choppy, stop-motion movement was interrupted by frequent pauses to examine its surroundings, its two largest forward-facing eyes on its square head like a pair of circular sunglasses. The small appendages at its front stroked over its fangs like an old man would stroke his mustache in nervous thought, but in comically increased frequency and speed. It made its jagged, meandering way around to the web tucked into the corner of the windowsill and, curiously, plucked on the strands. The occupant, a common house spider, eventually crawled over in eager anticipation of a meal caught in its web. The visitor leapt onto it with a powerful speed and precision, its fangs penetrating the thick carapace of the larger house spider and injecting its venom to kill it quickly. The jumping spider had lured its prey to it by making the house spider believe it to be prey. Fascinating.

“Your daughter has arrived in Norway,” a woman’s voice spoke in a deep, palatalized French through the iron lattice in the window on the heavy wooden door. Her words echoed off the stone masonry that made up the cavernous room.

“Thank you, Mrs. Marceau,” Leif responded.

The little visitor sat in the web, taking its time to suck the host dry.

Pretending to be calm was not doing much to alleviate that savage wrath within Anders, aggression billowing like smoke from the roaring flame of rage within him as he maintained a more-or-less friendly tone with Fredrik as he answered the teenager’s awkward but polite questions.

“How long do you have to use the cane?” Fredrik asked.

“Until my leg stops hurting,” Anders replied, trying and failing not to sound so stiff. He cleared his throat to cover for it and attempted to participate more actively in the conversation his young neighbor seemed so eager to engage him in. “Did the gang give you any trouble?”

“No, not really. They’re all good dogs. Bolle keeps trying to eat the corner of your sofa, though.”

“Ahh, Bolle…” Anders sighed in mock aggravation. The white spitz mix perked up at hearing her name, her tongue lolling out and eyes brightening up at him innocently. The dogs still crowded around him, watching dotingly as though he was the resurrection of Christ, but to a dog, he supposed he might as well have been the dead come back to life after having gone missing for over a week. There was no resurrection after the death that had almost caught him, though. Not everyone was as lucky as Leif or Jesus.

“Um… Did you hurt it fighting that guy?” the boy asked.

Anders’s mouth twisted in a grimace of a frown, pushing down the reflexive defensiveness with some effort before forcing himself to say, “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Sorry,” Fredrik responded, quiet now in awkward embarrassment.

“Here, let me pay you so you can go enjoy your evening,” Anders said, moving towards the study
for his checkbook.

The boy was as on his heels as his dogs, his shyness vanished in an instant as he began speaking with renewed excitement, “You don’t have to pay me, Mr. Valstad, it was fun! What was it like in that house? That girl’s his daughter, right? She’s shorter than I expected. Like, tiny. Does that mean it’s true that she’s going to live here, with you? So, you really saved her from that guy? You’re all bruised up. Did he do that? Oh, damn! Did you get into a fistfight with the killer!? That’s so cool!”

Anders pursed his lips and pulled his checkbook out of his desk, ignoring all his questions in an effort not to lash out. “Of course, I’m going to pay you, Fred. You worked, you get paid.”

He wrote out a fair compensation for the boy and handed him the check, not meaning to glare at him as he did it but figuring his exasperated expression was the only thing preventing the kid from refusing further. Fredrik took the check, staring openly at the bruise that spanned from his cheekbone into his eye from the haymaker Leif had thrown on him. Anders twitched away from that stare, his bruises aching under that scrutiny.

Out of nowhere, the boy announced, “There were reporters hanging around earlier, waiting for you to come home.”

A spike of uneasiness brought him to face Fredrik again in surprise. “What?”

“Well, I told the vultures you weren’t coming back until tomorrow and they flew off,” Fredrik bragged proudly.

Anders tried to wrap his mind around the reality of reporters coming to his home, invading his life with questions that would make him think and remember the Hell he had escaped from. Every answer and every move he made would be broadcast for the world to know. Anxiety poured into the corrosive mix of his anger and frustration and he pressed the heel of his palm against his head as he tried to push it all down.

“Fred, could you do me one more favor before you go?” he asked.

“Yeah, absolutely, anything you need, Mr. Valstad,” the boy brightened cheerfully.

“Could you help me close all the curtains and lower the blinds?”

Getting Fredrik to leave was an aggravating process, but Anders had managed to accomplish it without shouting or shoving, a promising testament to the recovery of his shattered emotional control. He leaned against the door after shutting it behind the boy, sighing heavily. He was exhausted, that’s all this lingering anger was. But he was home and his bed awaited him. There were just a few things he had to attend to before he could rest.

“Simone?” he called out into the house.

He kept his forehead pressed against the door, trying to calm that storm churning inside of him. The dogs circling around him camouflaged the sound of her bare feet on the hardwood, surprising him when he felt her arms wrap around him from behind. He smiled and turned to her, that maelstrom of rage and anxiousness in him abating as she leaned up against his front and pressed a small kiss to his neck when he hugged her. She had been so affectionate since they’d arrived home, only hiding away shyly when Fredrik had come out to talk. He let himself bask in the relief of her forgiveness for having violated her trust, indulging in the proof of it in how she nuzzled him and kissed her way up to his cheek. Maybe this really was going to work out well despite all the obstacles thrown in his
“Come, we are to go, ah, your bedroom,” he said, disentangling their embrace.

They made it five steps down the hallway before she hugged him again, pressing herself flush to him and nuzzling the uninjured side of his chest. He gripped her shoulders, almost prepared to ease her away so they could get on with the necessary chores of the evening, but the feel of her body molded to him had him slide his hands down to her ass and pull her closer. He craned his head down and she rose on tiptoe to meet his mouth eagerly, her plump and shapely lips so pillowy and welcoming; yet another attribute he was glad she had inherited from her mother’s exotic heritage. It didn’t take more than a few seconds of this delicious contact before his cock stiffened uncomfortably in the confinement of his pants. That aggravating beast seemed to stir at any provocation from this tempting creature in his arms.

His lungs seized when he felt her step closer, his certainty that she had felt his eagerness brush against her flat belly confirmed when her lips parted from his with her soft, “Oh…”

“Ah… It is…” he muttered, trying to find the English, his exhausted and flustered mind leading him to none that would help. “Ah… Sorry…”

He didn’t want to pressure her, especially after what had happened, but he didn’t know how to convey that. He shifted, embarrassed at his lack of control when all she wanted was some reassuring affection, and leaned down to resume their kiss. His heart sank when her arms slid out of their embrace and her hands came down to hook onto the edges of his belt.

"Sorry, I’m sorry…” he repeated. He was a brute. It had been less than two days since he’d broken her trust and he was already overstepping her boundaries like some sex-addicted sociopath. He shouldn’t have grabbed her ass; he wasn’t thinking, but that was always the problem. He couldn’t think around her. His entire mind felt foggy and lost in her presence since she had admitted to returning his love, but now he couldn’t even think enough to protect that love from his foolishness. “I’m sorry, dear.”

She wasn’t moving away, just standing so close, her eyes cast down to where her fingers had hooked onto his belt at his sides. Then, those fingers slowly slid around to meet at the center, sliding the leather out of the buckle. He hesitated to move or make a sound as he watched her undo his pants, the metal buckle jangling as she opened his fly and attracting the dogs to come see what was happening. His hesitance broke when her bare touch along his shaft sent a heated shock of pleasure tingling up from his groin as she maneuvered him out of his underwear.

“Wait… Wait, you…” he started to say, his vocabulary completely dissolving as she stroked him.

She didn’t have to do this. She didn’t have to service him whenever he displayed desire for her. He didn’t bring her there to just use her as he pleased. He wanted to say all of these things and more, but as she bent at her waist and swirled her tongue around the head of his cock, all that came out of him was a strained sigh. Her deft tongue massaged the underside of his cock as her mouth enveloped him, those plush lips stretching and sliding slowly down his shaft a breathtaking sight. His back leaned heavily against the wall, suddenly needing the support as she cautiously took him all the way into her throat. The squeeze of her unyielding throat and the rub of his tip along the back of it was almost too exquisite and, knowing how rare it was that someone could deepthroat a man of his size, he couldn’t bring himself to say no to this even if he’d retained the ability to speak in much of anything other than expletives. Not that he had ever been able to say no to her on any other account.

“Oh, hell, dearest, that’s so goddamned sweet…” he groaned between near-panting breaths, gently carding his fingers through her hair.
That nagging shame burned in the back of his mind even as he moaned when she slid him out of her throat only to slowly ease him back in, her tongue massaging him in her warm and wet mouth and her lips sealed tight around him the entire time. He didn’t want to wonder if it was Leif who had taught her to suck dick so expertly, but his mind inevitably constructed that query, tagging along the question of how young she was when he’d begun training her throat. He hated these intrusive thoughts. He hated that he was so often reaping the benefits of her abused past. He didn’t hate how dutifully she kept to a consistent and slow rhythm, building up a blissful pressure in him while keeping him just on the verge of being unable to resist orgasming. That feeling that he was teetering on the precipice had his cock drooling precum copiously into her mouth. He nearly fell off that edge when she backed off enough just to swipe her tongue over his tip, tasting and swallowing down the excess moisture while she slipped her tongue under his foreskin. His hips jerked in a spasm at this, too much stimulation making him grip her hair and push past that curious tongue in a reflexive movement. She gagged at the abrupt intrusion and he released her immediately.

“Sorry! S-sorry…” he gasped.

He was too far gone to feel embarrassed at that impolite gaffe, his entire body feeling tight and tingly and his sac heavy with the need to come. The warmth of love that rushed up in him for her as she brushed it off like it had never happened and took him back into her throat made him gaze down at her in near drunken adoration. She was so beautiful, so sweet, so talented, and now she was his. Somehow. He knew how. He didn’t want to think about it.

The dogs weaved around them, curious at what she had been doing to their master, the movement of her mouth taking his cock probably reminding them of eating as they seemed to be looking for scraps. Anders was just present enough to know he would find this hilarious later, but watching them position themselves around her as she serviced him so diligently, her small form bowed to his dick, a very different impression came to him. He’d adopted another stray, a rare and exotic animal that had been trained to perform. It was a cruel visual joke and he hated that he was reminded of it, but there she was, among his dogs, subjugating herself to perform this trained trick that must have earned her a nice treat from her previous master. All she needed was a collar around her pretty little neck. His cock twitched with the now unstoppable inevitability of his climax triggering at the combination of her wet mouth, the beautiful sight of her bowed and taking his dick so lovingly, and the sickening depravity of that line of thought.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, dear, you’re gonna make me, ah, ah, fuck…” he moaned, gasping as she gripped the base of his shaft and worked his foreskin up as her mouth slid down.

The opposing directions of her hand and mouth and her tongue massaging up his shaft to swirl around his tip threw him abruptly over the edge and his fingers tangled in her hair to hold her still as he began to pulse in orgasm. She looked up at him, her silvery eyes expectant, knowing, wanting. He let out a low and ragged groan with each deep throb that pumped his semen into her waiting mouth, shuddering at the feel of her throat constricting to swallow as he shot against the back of it. Her sensual hum in response to him spilling in her vibrated against the tight seal of her lips around him, transmitting a powerful shiver up his spine that trailed sparks through his body. When at last that almost distressing high descended into a wave of overwhelming relief, it drew the breath out of him in a long and shaking sigh.

She slid him out of her mouth carefully, adorably mindful of how oversensitive a spent cock could be, and he melted at this small sign that conveyed so much of what a caring girl she was. He was a bastard for letting her do this, but he couldn’t bring himself to feel bad about that. There was no part of him that seemed capable of feeling any negativity or pain at that moment. He gently pulled her up by his fingers still tangled in the soft waves of her hair and kissed her swollen lips, tasting traces of himself on that beautiful mouth and smiling into the kiss with the knowledge that she’d swallowed
every last drop of his come. It brought a different but almost as heady surge of satisfaction as having her cunt slathered with his seed did.

“You’re so perfect, my sweet little dear,” he whispered, closing his eyes and leaning down further to press their foreheads together. “Very good girl. I love you, Simone.”

She lunged at him, her arms wrapping around his middle in a fierce hug that took him too by surprise for him to return before she just as suddenly bounded away. Rolf followed after her, his claws scraping the floor as he chased her silent feet, the yellow lab mutt no doubt certain that she stole away with whatever she’d been sucking at for so long. Anders’ back slid down the wall until he sat among the remainder of his pack, too exhausted to join the chase. He might never fully understand her. With his mind still softly reeling in a pleasant cloud of euphoria, he propped himself back up on the cane, feeling at once light as a feather and rickety as an arthritic old man. The steps to the attic room had never looked so daunting.

Odette never slept in the same room as her partners, possessing a natural revulsion to emotional intimacy and trust that Vidar preferred in what passed as a relationship to both of them. Lying awake in his sweat-dampened bedsheets, his bedroom still reeking of sex and smoke, Vidar weighed the idea of inviting her out of the guest room just for the comfort of another’s breathing in the dreadful silence. But that was not the kind of comfort she could offer, so he lit another cigarette and waited for either the oblivion of sleep or the oblivion of death to come. He suspected with alternating reassurance and discontent that neither would come this night. The demons that crawled behind his eyelids would not let him shut them long enough to obtain rest. At least he could keep blaming these hallucinations on stress and lack of sleep. He could blame a lot more on those factors, but he knew with a sickening certainty that it would be a bullshit excuse.

The sex he’d had with Odette was as good as it had ever been. The literal trappings of their play littered in the empty space next to him on the mattress: belts and harnesses, ropes and straps, spreaders and shackles. Odette would let him tie her up and use her any way that pleased him, but this was the first night she’d used her safe word with him. He took a long drag off the cigarette as he wished he’d felt guilty about hurting her like that, but he didn’t. He’d gone beyond his own established foundation of ethics and he didn’t even care. He’d changed without his awareness or permission. It was Leif’s fault for chemically altering his mind. It was Simone’s fault for planting the poisonous weeds of desire in him with her pain and her love. It was his father’s fault for dying and dragging them all to Hell with him.

“Bullshit,” he muttered, the slight bobbing of the cigarette dusting ash on his chest.

He didn’t have to act on these disturbing whims. He simply wanted to act on them. It was the distressing absence of his once iron self-control that allowed him to do it. He should tell his therapist. He should be calling her right then, at two in the morning, panicking over this crisis of morals or identity or trauma that had allowed him to shove his way into his own niece’s snug little cunt in a snug little airplane restroom. Instead, he shut his eyes, letting the demons replay her damning question over and over.

_Is this what you really wanted?_

God help him, it was.

He wanted to do so much worse and there was nothing inside him to stop him from doing it. He’d
tried to quench that want in him with Odette and he’d ended up hurting her before he could even achieve some tawdry level of satisfaction. There was no substitute he could employ to fulfill these desires; it had to be Simone. Their slave, their pet, their plaything. Their niece. He cringed, the cigarette tumbling out of his lips as he sat up and clenched his forehead in the span of his hands. There it was. The last bastion of his humanity. Whatever disease had infected Leif and Anders to fetishize something so against basic natural order as incest had not infected him. He hurriedly snatched up the burning cigarette and stamped it out on the dark cherry wood of his nightstand. To Hell with the furniture. To Hell with everything. Nothing made sense anymore anyway. He owed no decency to a world that had allowed such wickedness in it. His brother was a monster; it was not unexpected that they all shared that same evil gene.

He looked at the leather and steel items piled next to him, taking hold of the wrist cuffs and examining them. The length of nylon rope holding them together was drastically shortened in an alpine butterfly knot and he stared at that loop as his mind walked through Anders’ house. The dogs were familiar enough with him not to be a problem and he still had the spare key his little brother had entrusted him with, so entry was not an issue. His mind formulated new uses for the slatted stairs to the attic and the sturdy coffee table in the living room as he thumbed the thick leather cuff. He might need to punch another hole in the leather to make sure she can’t wriggle her tiny wrists out of them. A smirk grew out from his scowl as he thought on how he would make her wriggle. Wriggle and scream. God help them both.

Simone tossed and turned in the narrow bed Anders had directed her to sleep in, a fearful restlessness denying her that task. It was impossible for her to sleep with how alone she was. The thick insulation of this house prevented any noise from reaching her, a factor somehow worse than if she’d heard every snore and shift of the other occupants. She couldn’t hear if anyone was coming until they would set foot on the creaky wood slats of the ladder. By then, they would have already killed Anders and the dogs, a thought that echoed in this dreadful silence until she’d begun to believe it might have happened. She pulled the collar of Anders’ t-shirt over the bottom half of her face, breathing in the masculine pine scents of his body wash and deodorant she’d used. A strange idea that she could harbor his life by wearing his scents and his clothes stirred in the broken parts of her mind.

Recognizing the signs of her madness spiraling out of control, she shot out of bed, draping the comforter around her as she opened the door and leaned down the ladder. She couldn’t be alone with her thoughts. Without anything familiar or someone else there to anchor herself to, her mind drifted into unreality. Even if it was dangerous for her to seek him out, she couldn’t lose sight of what was real, but she hesitated at his door. If she went in there, into his bed, surrendered to the comfort of the touch she’d once found such safety and love in, she would have sex with him. She’d almost succumbed to that sick need in her as he’d, in his limited and broken English, expressed a strong desire to return the favor she’d done him in the hallway. She shouldn’t have done that either, but he was hard and she was weak. He could trick her into trusting him again if she wasn’t careful. She pressed her ear to the door and listened for signs of life. Hearing the slight sound of his breathing within, she continued down the hall to the living room. The sight of seven dogs, all strewn out on massive square dog beds in the center of the room, eased away her anxiety with delight.

“Room for one more, gang?” Simone whispered as she squatted next to the yellow lab who seemed to like her.

His tail awoke before the rest of him, batting the sherpa with a thump thump thump that a few of the
others returned in response before they drifted back to sleep. He stood up when she crawled onto the bed, his excitement and curiosity waking him further as she curled up next to him. She hid her face under her blanket when he moved to lick her chin, the smell of canine morning breath not something she found enjoyable, and stroked his shoulders soothingly. After giving her a lengthy inspection with his snuffling snout, he seemed content with her intrusion enough to turn himself clockwise three times before settling down against her.

The weight of his back pressed to the cradle her torso formed as she lay in the fetal position was unexpectedly comforting. Dogs were easy in ways people could not be. There were no hidden or secondary motives, no lies either polite or poisonous, no complicated muck of emotions to stain her mind with. They were open with their wants and affections. Their emotions were simple and reactionary. They would never ask her to give them any more validation than a scratch behind the ears. They would never hurt her with cruel deception or pressure her to fill uncomfortable and unnatural roles. She stroked his side, his short coat smooth and soft under her sliding hand, soothing them both in the release of oxytocin from the friendly touch of a living thing. She’d always loved animals, but pets weren’t anything her parents were ever interested in letting her have. As she quickly drifted off into the comfort of being among the pack, their breathing and snoring a beautiful symphony of companionship, she wondered if this was why her father had always refused her requests for a puppy.

When she next opened her eyes from a blissfully dreamless sleep, it was to the sight of Anders staring at her with an expression of worry and horror. Her bedmate lifted his head and they both looked up at their owner in bleary regard.

“God morgen,” she said, her voice cracking from disuse. He only continued staring, the disturbed frown on his face piercing through her fog of sleep. She tilted her head to the side in curiosity. “Is there something wrong?”

“You sleep here?” he asked. There was a guarded hesitancy to the question that roused her further.

The labrador got up and stretched languidly beside her as she answered, “Yes… Is that… Did I do something wrong?”

He shook his head absently. “How… Why you did this?”

She shrugged. It was far too early to get into that subject. He still had that deeply disturbed expression as he limped to her and pulled her up off the dog bed. The blanket slipped from her shoulders and the cold early morning air plastered itself to her skin immediately, making her step close and hug him for warmth without thinking. He wrapped his arms around her before she could move away, hugging her oddly tight to him.

“Du er ikke min hund,” he muttered, stroking her back. She tried to look up at him, but he squeezed her to him almost harshly. “You are my… Do not sleep here. Come, to me. Understand?”

She did, with a deflating heart. She’d wanted to sleep among the dogs again, maybe always, but if that was his rule, she had to obey. “Yes, papa.”

He tugged her along with him down the hall and her chest tightened as she realized he was leading her into his bedroom.
Sunlight glinted brightly on the quivering water in the large marble fountain. Koi meandered through the shadows of waterlilies, their shimmering scales catching and reflecting the light to show off their brilliant oranges, metallic whites, and obsidian blacks. The songbirds in the courtyard whistled and trilled in seeming celebration of the sun, occasionally drowned out by the wails of the peacocks that strutted the grounds. Leif watched as a visiting crow pecked at the ruined corpse of one of those elegant koi, a victim of some trespassing predator that had made good use of this wealth of defenseless prey in the night. The sound of footsteps echoing from the bricks of the surrounding loggia caused the crow to take flight, a thing that these songbirds could not do with their clipped wings in their steel cages. He wondered if they still longed to fly and he imagined that they did. To have an instinct and not be able to engage it was one of the cruelest denials a life could endure. It was a thing that, if bore long enough, could clog the mind with madness.

“Mr. Valstad,” the young man spoke, standing at a safe three meters from him, “you are requested in the conservatory.”

One of the trapped and crippled songbirds beat its useless wings against the bars of its cage and trilled out an angry cry, but its selectively bred voice still sounded sweet even through its agony. The bird rattled and screamed for the freedom of flight that it might have never experienced, but knew by its own shape to be its birthright.

“Sir?... Mr. Valstad?”

Leif dipped his hand in the fountain and a large dark fish swam over to tentatively mouth at his fingertips, searching for treats. This unguarded behavior was undoubtedly what had made these decorative fish so easy to catch and so endearing to feed. The survival instinct to flee from threats had been conditioned out of it by the benefit of appealing to visitors for food. The koi’s long black fins swayed in a flourish as it turned away from his empty hand, reminding him of how his daughter’s hair had swirled around her in the bathwater. That night he and his darling girl had bathed together in that psilocybin dream world was not long ago, though for him, it had been a lifetime since. He could even still taste the spice of her blood on his lips and he yearned to wet his tongue on the life he’d created once more. A grin twitched into place on his placid face as he turned it toward the sun. His appetites were returning.

“Mr. Valstad, the-”

Leif grabbed the majestic black fish, its slippery body wriggling uselessly in his clawed grip as he threw it at the young man’s face. The messenger boy didn’t recover quickly enough from the unexpected distraction to unholster his sidearm before Leif lunged upon him. He had only roughly eight seconds before the guards that were positioned to monitor him would react and come with their tasers, but he didn’t need more than two to latch his mouth over the messenger’s cry of pain and suck his tongue into his mouth. The spongey, slick flesh snapped and tore easily under Leif’s sharp teeth and he spat it onto the grass next to the thrashing fish.

“I’m not someone to be sent for like a scullery maid,” he patiently let the screaming man know.
encountered in her smattering of experiences across the United States, meaning that her interest in these new environments waned quickly and she struggled to find things to distract her mind from the reoccurring fever that agitated her crazy. She’d hate to be a bad guest- or whatever she was- to Anders by having an anxiety attack in the middle of his deliberation between an iPhone and a Samsung. However, she also considered that it might be wise to establish realistic expectations early on. She just had to attract as little attention to herself as possible while maintaining her attention away from the nauseating tremor in her entire body and the paranoia the fever cooked in her bad brain.

After all, it wasn’t real. Nothing was happening. There weren’t any clocks anywhere, but it hadn’t been as long as she thought. Her watch was ticking away in the attic room. It was early on a weekday, there weren’t even that many strangers around. No reason to panic.

“No reason to panic,” she whispered aloud.

“God morgen! Trenger du hjelp?”

Simone jumped back from the salesman, the roar of blood in her stuffed head drowning out whatever she’d muttered as she dodged away from him. It might not have been words. Too late, didn’t matter, she was outside, walking, walking, buzzing, shaking, stopping, puking. She clutched the bark of a sidewalk tree as she retched at its roots, thankful that she’d opted to skip the dairy and have dry muesli and tea for breakfast.

“Ugh, glad for dry oats and bird food, that’s real fuckin’ optimism…” she mumbled.

A hard knot cramped in her churning gut when it occurred to her, brutally out of the blue, that her birth control might have failed. She still had another month before her next shot, but as her mother had often harped on, nothing was one hundred percent effective. She did not need this thought spinning around in her brain while her paranoia and anxiety were set on high.

“No, no, that can’t be right, don’t be stupid,” she mumbled, wiping her sweating forehead on the sleeve of her coat.

Her body was drenched in sweat but she wore nothing beneath it except a bra and a pair of Anders’ jeans she’d had to roll up a ridiculous amount to fit, so she unbuttoned the coat low on her chest. A woman pushing a baby stroller stared as Simone hawked up the sour bile from the back of her throat and spat it into the mess she’d made on the tree, the proximity of an infant in this moment putting her on edge. She wouldn’t be feeling these symptoms so soon even if she’d conceived on the first night. That was just a week ago.

“Or two weeks…?” she mused. She wasn’t sure anymore, “It’s just a flu.”

She’d snag a pregnancy test from somewhere to shut her brain up, as though that logical proof would be enough to quell that barbed bur of a worry. More than halfway out of her mind, broke in a foreign country, and possibly pregnant with either her father’s or her uncle’s baby was not where she had thought she would be at 20. The reminder of how far she was from home made her shiver and tense, so she pushed it down until she could breathe again.

“You’ve got better problems to hide from than being in a fucking mall,” she grumbled.

Her head swam as she straightened, but her stomach felt comparably stable enough to remain fully upright as she popped a stick of gum in her bitter mouth and turned to trudge back to the shop before Anders noticed she was gone. She made it just in time to see him burst out of the door with a wild panic written in his entire demeanor, making her freeze in the cold shock of having that wide and intense stare of his light eyes fix on her. When he rushed over and grabbed her by her shoulders,
however, she saw the bag slung over his arm and perked up at knowing this errand was finished.

“Hva faen, kjære, do not do this!” he said worriedly, shaking her slightly with his command. “Be together, understand?”

She shrunk again under his scolding tone, but there was no anger in him, only fear. Inexplicably, she wondered how her father would have reacted in his shoes. Leif had always seemed to know exactly where to find her, though the one time he didn’t, the one time she’d hidden from him and stumbled into the darkroom through the hidden door in the closet, she had ended up getting whipped like an Antebellum era slave. The racial aspect linked to that thought turned her mind to an uncomfortable space. Looking at Anders’ blue eyes, his lank blond hair slightly disheveled to fall over his fair face, his thin lips drawn tight in worry, and his narrow and sharp features pinched in fear, it seemed impossible that she shared half of her genetic makeup with him. With her mother’s snide remarks on Leif’s “European influences” as though they were trespasses and his disinterest in engaging her on any part of the culture he’d come from, she had only ever seen the white half of her primarily as a dilution that kept her locked out of being able to identify fully as anything. Her father’s family and heritage were always on the other side of the world and, though she straddled that border inside of her, it was so glaringly obvious to anyone that she was not Norwegian. She could never really hope to fit in anywhere, but she was never more aware of how unattainable that comfort of belonging was than she was here.

But none of that mattered. She had to stop thinking of herself as though she were still a person.

“Can we go home?” she asked.

He looked off to the side as he often did when obviously working to translate before speaking, “No. You have need for clothes.”

She knew what she was, it was just so tempting to pretend that she wasn’t. Creatures like her, like Leif, like Kyun, like Maier shouldn’t even exist, let alone belong anywhere in the world. She had to figure out how to destroy the spaces where they did belong. It wouldn’t be enough just to hunt the wolves all down; she had to eliminate their niche in the ecosystem or another host of predators would simply fill it. She knew almost nothing of this network that had captured her father, but she had to prepare herself to destroy it. She had to stop pretending her life could be anything more.

“Can we go home and fuck instead?”

Henrik called Anders’ house phone six times before calling Vidar back to ask him to check on their brother and niece, but the man had been as aggravatingly unhelpful as usual. However, their mother wanted to have them all over for supper that night and he’d promised they would make it, so that was how he ended up driving through lunch hour traffic to Anders’ house. By the time he turned onto his block, he decided to go to Vidar’s house afterward and slap the son of a whore upside his head for being so obstinate.

“Heyyy, gang!” Henrik grinned at the dogs as they jumped and barked joyously at him from the other side of the gate.

Usually Anders would be sitting on the porch watching over them or playing with them while they were outside, but there was no sign of him out there. Maybe he was cooking or something and just sent them out to get them out of the way. Maybe they had just gotten home from somewhere and
that’s why he hadn’t been able to reach them all day. Maybe they were both murdered and lying in a pool of blood inside the house. He slipped through the gate, squeezing by to prevent any of the dogs from escaping, and held out his hands to ward them off from jumping on him as they swarmed gleefully. As he stepped up to the door, ready to pound on it and confirm that nothing was wrong, he heard a high feminine cry come muffled from within the house. The sound hit him like a shock of cold water, a thousand worries screaming at once in a jumble that pushed him to panic. That was Simone’s voice. Something terrible was happening to her in there. He jolted, starting to run back to the car, then remembered that his cell phone was long gone in the US and jolted back, taking the spare key to Anders’ house he had brought. He knew something had been wrong. His gut had been twisting with that awful feeling after his third call had rung unanswered. This time, he wouldn’t hesitate to act. Twisting the key in the lock silently, he reminded himself that he would do whatever it took to protect his family this time, even if it meant getting violent. The door opened, blessedly quiet, and he could hear her panting and moaning clearly as he stepped inside and shut it behind him carefully. She must have been in agony to make such noise. He grabbed up the ax Anders kept next to the door and crept silently down the hall toward her high, quivering moaning.

“Aahh, God, papaaa… Papa, it’s too much, I can’t take it!”

He froze, a chill spilling down his entire body as he processed what her words meant. Leif was in there, he’d followed them all the way back, he had probably already killed Anders and now he was doing something in his bedroom to hurt his own daughter. The ax shook in Henrik’s fists as he willed himself to continue on. Leif wouldn’t be expecting him. With any luck, he could bury the blade in his back and end this nightmare for good. The thought made him want to vomit, but he had to do this. He had no choice. The door to Anders’ bedroom was wide open and he pressed himself to the wall next to it, taking deep breaths to try to steel himself just to risk a peek. His muscles trembled and cramped as he slowly leaned toward the doorframe and he bit his lip to keep from screaming. He expected, with mounting dread, blood and gore strewn everywhere and his baby brother’s mutilated corpse displayed in some gruesome manner. He was not prepared to see his baby brother kneeling between their niece’s spread legs, his hands forcefully holding her bare thighs apart as he sucked and licked at her while she writhed and moaned beneath him.

“Mmm… You taste so good…” Anders groaned in unabashed enjoyment. “Are you going to come again, dearest? You will come for papa, yes?”

“Yes, papa-ah!” Simone gasped sharply, her hands clutching the mussed bedding as her back arched.

Henrik’s mind went quiet as he watched her come apart under Anders’ eager feasting. Her long hair was sprawled in dark filigree on the white sheets beneath her, the cloth twisting in her fists as her arched back pushed her breasts high and prominent, the gentle sway of that especially supple flesh catching his eye. He could smell her arousal and sweat, both thick with pheromones, making his own mouth water in response to what his brother’s mouth was doing to her. As silently as he had entered, he left, leaving the ax where he’d found it and locking the front door behind him. He didn’t pay any mind to the joyous dogs leaping at him or the reporters approaching him from their parked van when they saw him exit the gate. He got into his car and drove.

He decided that they just weren’t home. That’s right. There was a lot to do after coming back, after all. Many errands to run. Anders was the type to want to get all of that out of the way as soon as possible. They weren’t home, he was worried over nothing, he would call later and then see them at mother’s. It would be so nice to have a family dinner. There was a lot to celebrate even amidst these tragedies. They had all survived and there was a new addition to the family in Norway. Anders was going to be a great father to Simone. She was already calling him papa. No. Henrik didn’t know that yet. He plucked it from his mind and stuffed it into the box of other things he didn’t know.
All the photographs containing Leif were taken down, a thing that Vidar was relieved to find that Astrid had done before he got to the farm. He considered asking her what her exact reason for doing that was, but even he had some respect for social boundaries. Also, she would likely pinch him for not minding his manners.

Instead, he asked her, “Mother, what have you been doing lately?”

Astrid didn’t look up from mixing the raw meat and egg with her hands as she sighed, “Oh, I suppose I’m not really doing much outside of work these days. Give me a hand and pour in a splash of milk, yes?”

He tried not to roll his eyes in exasperation at his mother’s typical avoidance of unpleasant topics as he did as he was asked. He was still wracking his brain for any other safe questions to dance around the issues she wasn’t ready to tackle when he heard the front door shut and Anders call out a greeting from the entryway. Finally, his entertainment for the evening had arrived. Astrid muttered excitedly as she quickly washed her hands and he followed languidly after her to the front room, opting to lean against the doorway and watch Simone stand awkwardly to the side while his mother scooped her youngest son in a crushing hug. Vidar smirked when Simone caught him staring at her and, to his delight, she looked away nervously and closed her body language by wrapping her arms around her torso. After her little show of bravery the previous evening, he was wondering if he’d have to teach her to respect him, but Leif had trained her well. It was only mildly disappointing that this step was denied to him. Checking to make sure their mother was still going through her fretting process over Anders, he approached the girl.

“Nice dress, sweetheart,” he remarked, tugging on the overhanging sleeve of Anders’ sweater that engulfed her small frame. “You are wearing his underwear also?”

She looked away too quickly and bit her lip, confirming to him that she indeed was wearing his brother’s underwear and she was embarrassed of it. He chuckled in genuine amusement at how she still had the capacity for shame after the debased life of sexual servitude she’d lived— and he planned on continuing to have her live.

Simone cleared her throat and whispered without looking up from her fixed glare on his tie, “Your mother— does she speak English?”

He tilted her chin up to face him, but she kept her eyes low and to the side, avoiding his gaze with an ease and immediacy that hinted at well-practiced habit. His smirk twitched in interest at this behavior he had witnessed in her before. She was trying so hard not to seem afraid, but she was practically spilling fear everywhere. It was thrilling to be feared by a thing as dangerous as her. It made him want to push her to see what might be hiding on the other side of that fear and he felt giddy in knowing that he would soon get to push.

“She does not speak well,” he answered.

Her brow furrowed, frustration marring that delicate sheen of fear in her pretty features, and when she spoke, it was as though a different creature said from behind her veil, “Then I need your help to talk with her. I need to know everything she knows about who Einar, Bjørn and Leif were. Where they would go, the people they knew, what they were like. I need everything.”

“Well,” he smiled. “Lucky that I am practicing of English. Not lucky that you try to get information
from her. She does not speak of her ex-husband or his brother for many years and, perhaps, now
does not speak of your dear papa for many years also. She is... difficult that way.”

“Why?”

“I can tell you many things...” Her skin was almost glowing in the gleam of sweat that covered her
and his eyes followed the trail of his thumb slowly dragging up her neck. She resisted recoiling at the
contact rather admirably. “… but not for free.”

He could almost feel her resentment in the flash of hatred in her eyes when he said that. Good. She
should hate him. What she and Leif had twisted him into was a monstrously awful thing that
deserved to be hated. But it was too fleeting, too temporary, just a flash and then the dull embers of a
bitter acceptance.

“What do you want?” she muttered.

He cupped the back of her neck, the clear but subtle suggestion of dominance joyously not lost on
this young submissive as her breathing and blush deepened. An eagerness to earn her full and
undivided hatred thrummed excitedly through him in seeing how she responded to this signal, but he
had to be patient. She was Anders’ toy to break, not his. Not yet. He kept his smile friendly and his
voice quiet in awareness of his family members so near as he answered, “You will keep what we do a
secret.”

Her throat bobbed in a nervous swallow, her dread nearly palpable in her whispered, “And what is it
that we will be doing?”

“Oh! Baby Simone!” Astrid interrupted in a plaintive cry, scooping the girl up into her turn to be
hugged and fuss over. He watched in smug amusement as she crushed Simone to her bosom, the
small girl shocked by his mother’s personal brand of overbearing affection as she struggled to
politely disengage from an embrace that would only end when Astrid was satisfied. “Oh, this poor
child, she’s too thin! Anders, I thought you said you were taking care of her! Hmph. Leave it to a
man to let a little girl go hungry.”

“I’ve had her for only a couple days, mother,” Anders piped up defensively. It went unheard, as did
most counterpoints posed to the matriarch.

“You poor dear, what have these boys been doing to you?” Astrid cooed sympathetically, stroking
Simone’s hair dotingly.

Vidar had to fake a cough to cover his bark of a laugh at that. What they’d been doing to the poor
dear was far worse than whatever neglect their mother could accuse them of. Through the shower-
fresh fragrances of soap and shampoo, he could smell the slow trickle of semen leaking into
Simone’s borrowed shorts. He threw a sly smirk at his youngest brother, seeing how miserably he
reacted to Astrid’s question. If he didn’t already know Anders had fucked Simone and then tried to
wash the evidence away right before coming there, he might have suspected something just by how
obviously guilt-striken the man was. Anders had a head start on using her for sex; it was pathetic
how far behind he was in fully embracing his role in that dynamic. There was nothing else they
could realistically have been expected to do with such a temptation on their hands except to give into
it. Leif had left them with many lingering curses, but she was a gift. It would be imprudent of them
not to use her the way Leif had made her to be used and Vidar felt as though he might be the only
one who understood that, no matter how he tried to influence their littlest brother. He felt sorry for
him; Anders seemed to have no idea how beyond redemption they already were. It would be so
much easier once he accepted that there was no amount of guilt or repentance that could stop or slow
the trajectory of where this all was headed.
Home. Every cross stitch, heirloom vase, creak in the floor, and stain in the rugs was saturated in that type of familiarity that was so fixed that it felt as though nothing could ever alter it. This was where Anders had grown up, where his father had grown up, and where his father’s father had grown up. It was expected that one of the brothers would continue that trend with a family of their own, but when Leif had made his intentions to stay in the States clear and the rest of them had passed year after year without any plans or means to procreate, that pressure of that expectation had steadily waned.

Looking across the table at his Simone as she pushed around the meatballs in her soup, her weary stare fixed to the bowl, he could see himself fulfilling that expectation with her. He wanted to. He could bring the dogs and her here where he could be the father she would need through the healing that was ahead of her. No bombardment of reporters waiting mere yards from the house to shout those horrible questions at them whenever they went out and no nosey neighbors to gawk at their bruises this far into the property. He could teach her how to shear their sheep and fish for salmon in the river that ran through nearby. She could thrive here, not just survive.

“Henrik, how’s that woman, what’s her name? Ann? Aud?” Astrid asked.

“Camilla,” Henrik corrected her, then solemnly added, “We broke up a few months ago, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right, Camilla! I liked her. You know, you should really try to settle down with the next one. None of you are young bucks anymore and soon all that’s going to be left are divorcees and floozies looking for easy money.”

They would have to wait for Astrid to die first, though, and she wasn’t going to pass on anytime soon. Maybe their grandchildren would carry on the tradition for them by the time her ample health failed.

“Vidar, ask baby Simone how old she is,” she said, gesturing to the quiet girl with her spoon.

“She just turned twenty, mother,” Vidar responded.

“I want you to ask her for me. Translate. I want to have a conversation with her,” she clarified in a clipped tone.

Whenever Anders resented his father for walking out on them to go live in the US, he could always count on his mother to remind him the reason why he felt he had to go so far away.

Vidar grinned tersely at Simone and asked in an overly cheerful tone that mocked their mother’s speech, “Baby Simone, how old are you?”

Simone stirred her soup as she considered the question, then shyly muttered, “I’m, um… I’m twenty-years-old. I think.”

Vidar turned his rigid grin back to Astrid and announced, “She said she’s twenty, mother.”

Astrid reacted as though she hadn’t already heard that information earlier, bringing her hand to her mouth in delightful surprise as she exclaimed, “Well! I wouldn’t have guessed that! Doesn’t she not look a day over fourteen? It’s hard to tell how old they are, isn’t it?”

“Yes?” Anders chimed in curiously.

“You know, brown people,” she explained dismissively. Anders wondered why he expected a better
explanation from her than that. “Doesn’t she have the loveliest skin? I’d turn red as the devil if I tried to get a tan anywhere close to that color and she’s lucky enough to be born with it! Doesn’t she look just like Beyoncé?”

“She doesn’t look anything like Beyoncé,” Anders responded exasperatedly. “Vidar, do not tell her mother said that.”

“I’ll tell her she said Rihanna instead,” Vidar smirked mischievously.

Astrid gasped. “You’re right! She’s Rihanna!”

“No, she doesn’t look like either of them! Stop naming mixed celebrities!” Anders frowned.

Henrik, barely glancing up from sulking at his soup, sighed heavily from the end of the small table before raising his deep baritone to forcefully change the subject. “So! When are you guys going back to work?”

“I still have about three more weeks before I even have to check in with the office,” Vidar bragged.

“This happened at a bad time for my job, so I’m going to go in and catch up on some work tomorrow,” Anders answered. They were only in the developing stages of their most recent project when he found out about his father’s passing and he almost wasn’t going to take the time off to go to the United States, but his supervisor had insisted. If only his supervisor hadn’t insisted. He rubbed at the tension in his neck that stiffened whenever he thought about the horror they had encountered in that country, then noticed Simone looking at him with a gentle concern in her slight frown. Not everything that came out of that trip was bad. He smiled at her, reassuring her that he was fine. And he really was fine. She was with him now.

“Are you going to be gone long?” Vidar asked, looking at him over the rim of his wineglass.

“A few hours, at least. Why?”

“Oh, just wondering if you wanted me to come by and mind your pets.”

“Simone will be home to do that.”

Vidar swirled the wine in his glass disinterestedly as he muttered, “I see.”

Anders felt a little awkward talking with Vidar after losing his temper on him last night. He had intended to address it and apologize earlier, but that just didn’t happen, and now it seemed as though it was better to forget it had happened. He watched Vidar turn and smile down at Simone, giving her shoulder a friendly squeeze that she looked confusedly at him in response. His brother wasn’t a bad guy; people just did strange and sometimes bad things after strange and bad things happened to them. Simone had forgiven him for the bizarre threesome they’d forced on her. Perhaps she had forgiven Vidar as well. He had to stop letting his protectiveness over her get in the way of having a normal relationship with her other uncles. Sitting around the table like this, getting on each other’s nerves through a family supper together, they could have been any family in Norway. What they were behind closed doors didn’t have to interfere with their familial dynamics; it was possible to have both. He was Simone’s uncle, her father, her lover, anything she needed him to be and it was working. He would be there to watch over her whenever Vidar was around, anyway. They would all work out everything between them with time and the right boundaries would establish themselves along the way. They were family, after all.
“They’ve been accusing him of moving towards a dictatorship for months and there are those in his own cabinet calling for his resignation,” Mrs. Marceau’s strong, smoky voice and echoed off the sleek marble walls of the dining room as she paced the length of the table.

The high-ranking members turned in their seats to follow her as she paced. She looked toward none of them, orating almost to herself. Leif watched out the window, having to turn his neck far to see the trees swaying in the storm outside as his torso and legs were bound to his chair.

“They are not aware of our agents acting within the resistance or within parliament. They suspect that the US is funding the opposition to fuel dissent, which is fortuitously correct and therefore all the more convenient as a smokescreen. They’ll be looking for involvement from other political entities and that is why they will never find us.”

He could almost hear the leaves rustling in the wind, just as they did as he lied under the canopy of ancient maples with his darling girl sprawled halfway atop him. He could kill everyone in this room with the wineglass in front of him. Lock the doors, let them run screaming as he tore through them one by one, make an example of those who put up a fight. He could remind them they were all made of the same soft, delicate stuff. Slice them open, let their bowels tumble out in a splatter on the marble floor, let them slip in each other’s blood as they tried to outrun their deaths. Well, he could do that if he weren’t tied to the chair. The distant marching of many feet heralded the imminence of supper, anyway.

“As we enter stage eighteen, we will disclose to the media the court’s intentions to nullify any movement made by parliament, shifting the dictatorship rhetoric to the court. According to the projections, we should have their government secured in less than a year after stage eighteen has been implemented. You will find a fully detailed timeline in the dossiers. Refer to it before posing your questions.”

Mrs. Marceau sat down at the head of the table just as the servants arrived in uniform fashion to deposit the steaming silver plates on the table before each guest. Leif didn’t have to look at the display of thinly sliced meat fanned out beneath the dark drizzle of a tomato and wine reduction to know what it was. He was already laughing when the scent of braised cow tongue had entered the room with the servants.

Simone scrolled through the settings menu on the cell phone Anders had given her before he left for work, still utterly astonished that he had gifted her something that held so much power and meaning to her as though it were simply expected that she has it. He had no idea what this meant to her. He had no idea what being disconnected from the world had done to her, how lonely and isolated she had been, how lost and ignorant she was. She didn’t realize how much she had taken for granted in being able to find the information she needed with just a few keywords until she found herself floundering in frustration at not knowing and having no one able or willing to explain. Every curiosity she’d had, each question that had haunted her, every time she had struggled to understand, missing some vital piece of information, clogged back into her mind all at once. Her thumbs hovered over the touchscreen as the cursor in the search bar blinked, paralyzed in indecision of what she needed to know first.
She typed a few words only to delete them before hitting Search. “International serial killer network”, “Marceau serial killer murderer”, “Symptoms vomiting fever paranoia shaking”, “Sexual attraction father daughter causes”. Her hands gripped the sides of the phone tightly, her palms sweating and fogging the edges of the screen. She typed the next line without trying to think, just to get through this ridiculous anxiety that prevented her from committing to any of her queries, and hit Search before she could delete this one. The results for “Leif Valstad” popped up with top stories from major news networks and, for some reason, TMZ, as well as his own Wikipedia page. She scrolled up and down the first page of results repeatedly, just reading the headlines and the snippets, her eyes snagging on pictures of him and of the house in Vermont.

The world now seemed as frightened and fascinated by her father as she was and the headlines were just as conflicted. Leif Valstad is a prolific serial killer still at large that terrorized multiple states with murders that had gone unsolved for years until now, a true psychopath whose victims are still being tallied in the dozens. Leif Valstad is a loving, compassionate family man who donated to charities and did pro bono architectural work for several nonprofits, a charismatic and handsome man who was liked everywhere he went. Her thumb hovered over “leif valstad daughter” in the related searches section, below “leif valstad missing” and “leif valstad how many victims”. She shouldn’t select it. She should do anything but select it. She was never good at impulse control.

“God damn it…” she muttered, seeing her image pop up in headlines that ran in disgusting tabloids. “‘Leif Valstad’s Daughter Will Shock You’, ‘Fatal Attraction: If Looks Could Kill’, ‘Leif Valstad Daughter Bikini Photos’… What the fuck is wrong with the world…”

If this was the media control that Maier had planned, she would have worn a Catholic nun’s habit to the airport. She looked down at the ratty oversized university sweater she’d borrowed from Anders to wear around the house, then out the large circular attic window to where she knew those awful so-called reporters were stalking about outside the gate. She could show them what the world should be looking at. The bruises, the stitches, the bite, the violence and ugliness that marked far deeper than these flesh wounds went. This was nothing to sexualize or objectify. Her life was disfigured, as well as the lives of the families and friends of the many people her father had murdered. She didn’t want to line the media’s pockets with her grief, though.

She stood up from the narrow bed and yanked off the sweater, standing in the attic room in nothing but a pair of Anders’ boxer briefs that hung low on her hips. Facing the dust-covered mirror leaning against a tower of storage bins, she looked for the more vibrant injuries still on her body and used her new phone to snap pictures of them. She chewed at her lip as she tried to approach this task with the detached eye of an artist seeing only color and hue, but each bruise and scrape had a memory attached to it. She hesitated, then stepped into the light, taking a shot of the barely there there but still present ghosts of finger marks along her neck. The hickies from her uncles were brightly prominent among those stripes. By the time she had taken the last painful photo of the bite mark that marred the crook of her shoulder and neck, a mark that would undoubtedly fade into a permanent scar, she felt drained and disgusting. Her body was a map of both the unspeakable trauma she had endured and the depraved sins she had enjoyed; in too many instances they were both at once.

She needed a distraction. Sitting down heavily on the little bed, she tried to log into Tumblr, only to find that her password wasn’t working and then that her email wasn’t even registered with the site. That was also the case with her Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, every social media site she used, even the Bandcamp page of her brief foray into post-punk-synthpop-retrowave. There was no simone.valstad@gmail.com registered anywhere. Simone Valstad was everywhere on the internet, but she was nowhere. Her online presence had been deleted and replaced with an ugly, sexist tabloid spread, her appearance now a matter of public property. She set the phone down next to her and rubbed her aching forehead. She still had artwork at home in New York, if she lived long enough to make it back there. She could replace her portfolio with new photographs of what she hadn’t sold
and get to work on new projects, but so many hours of labor and materials were gone without proof she had done any of it beyond her signature on the physical pieces. Simone Valstad, the up-and-coming artist thrown out of art school, the socially awkward paint punk, the mentally unstable pursuer of psychedelic inspiration, no longer existed.

“F*ck this planet,” she frowned.

That Simone Valstad had stopped existing that first night in Vermont, dissolved under the corrosive change wrought through that first kiss she had initiated with her father. That was the cataclysm that had set off a chain reaction into all this chaos. She wondered if, in a different world, one where she did not open that door of incestual lust, Leif would not have tried to kill Anders. Her father and her would both still be in that house in Vermont and her uncles would have gone home to Norway, as unscathed and unknowing of these terrors as she would be. Leif would have continued fulfilling his lust on her unconscious body and his bloodlust on the world in secret while she would be bored and resentful at being trapped in the middle of nowhere, believing it all to be some tedious attempt at healing her mind. It was her fault that any of this was happening. It was her sin that had spread to her father, then to Anders, and then to Vidar. She was poisonous. She was a curse. She needed a break.

She opened the door to the attic room and called down the ladder, “Rolf! Bolle! Here, pupparonis!”

No scuffle of blunt claws came charging up the hallway. That was odd. Anders didn’t mention that he’d put them outside and it seemed unlikely that he would leave without at least reminding her to let them back in.

“Come on, let’s play!” she called, leaping down the steps, eager for the comfort of their friendly faces.

Her feet hit the floor with a powerful thump, her knees and hips bending to absorb some of the impact. It was not the most graceful landing, but not bad for someone who hadn’t been to gymnastics class in nearly half a decade. As she straightened, rolling her back and shoulders to work out some of the stiffness from another restless night alone in the attic, her muscles locked up in shock at the very unexpected sight of Vidar standing just a few feet away. Every hair on her raised in a wave of gooseflesh at the instinctive response that told her he brought danger with him. Danger in the slight smile he greeted her with, in the darkness shadowing his eyes, in his slow and steady approach, in the heavy black bag he held in his hand.

“Okay, sweetheart,” he grinned. “Let’s play.”

She ran, scrambling in a sudden bolt up the ladder toward the attic, exactly as he had expected her to. As he had wanted her to. He let her jump up a few steps before grabbing her around her middle and yanking her back down, the feel of her soft skin under his hands exciting him as much as her immediate thrashing. He had her boxed in against the steep ladder, trapped between his much larger body and the wood edges of the steps, narrowing her options of resistance down to trying to push him away. The length of chain jangled in his hand as he grabbed her wrists and pushed them up against one of the steps above her. Her torso heaved and twisted as he worked quickly to tie them together and began wrapping the chain taut around the wooden step. That ridiculous men’s watch she wore poked out between the loops of the chain.

“Nn-no, no, NO don’t do that, don’t, please don’t!” she stammered amid her panicked gasps as he kept his body mashed up against hers to limit her squirming. He anchored the chain to itself with the
hook at the end, securing her hands high above her to keep her feet off the floor and her body angled slightly backward. Everything was tantalizingly offered to him in her position.

“I won’t- I’ll be good, just don’t- don’t tie me up, please don’t tie me up!”

He was used to his women being more docile for this part. The restraints, pinning, and intimidation were all to safely simulate a fantasy. His blood pumped fast and hot with an excitement that bordered on both terror and elation at how real this was. There was no acting or exaggeration in how her movements were jerky and uncoordinated; that was raw fear. Her begging for him to stop was purely sincere. She resisted him with the authentic intention to at least hinder him if she couldn’t stop him. This was no simulation. The reality of what he was doing to her carried a weight that his fantasies had lacked. It was an exhilarating and terrible feeling.

“Please, take this off, take off this chain, I’ll give you anything, everything, just please, not like this!”

She was trembling. He was making her tremble and he hadn’t even truly begun. The first time he’d had her, she was too far gone in delirium to truly appreciate what was happening, and the other time, he was too limited by proximity to a plane full of witnesses to reveal it was him instead of her beloved Anders until afterward. This time, he had her fully awake, fully aware, and fully unwilling. This time, there was no denying what this was. He fit his hand around her neck over the fading outline of Leif’s fingers, the pad of his thumb pressing at the side of her larynx just below her stitches. It stopped her begging and thrashing with a telling immediacy; the only sound from her now was her fearful panting. So, this was part of how Leif had trained her. She responded to it beautifully. He looked up from where he gently held her neck, flitting over her lovely features until settling on her wide gray eyes. She wasn’t avoiding his gaze now. His cock throbbed impatiently in his pants, but this was far too interesting to rush; they had hours yet to play.

“He did tie you up when he fucked, yes?” he asked.

Her pupils dilated in answer to his question before her small voice could whisper, “Don’t do this, uncle.”

Vidar cringed at that title, the disgusting reminder of what they were to each other tipping his excitement into shame. He’d hoped to hold off on using this, having wanted to hear her screams ring out unimpeded, but he pulled the ball gag out from his pocket and her look of fearful confusion upon seeing it cleared out his disgust with astonishment. She really didn’t know what it was. He was going to be the first master to ball gag her.

“Open your mouth,” he said, applying more pressure to his hold on her neck to warn her against any more of that pathetic pleading. Her jugular drummed hard under his fingers as she obeyed, a startled whimper escaping her as she flinched when he pressed the ball past her teeth, but she forced herself to stay still as he fastened the buckle behind her head. “Good girl.”

She made a pretty picture with her big sad eyes glistening with unshed tears and her full lips stretched around the black rubber sphere stuffed in her mouth. Too pretty. That was half the trouble with this girl. The other half was more difficult to define, a force too elusive to see or resist, making him grasp at straws to know what it was that drove him to want her this way. He hated that he was no closer to knowing than he was before, only finding that the more he took from her, the more he wanted. With her bound and gagged, alone in a house with no one expected for hours, he could take as much as he hungered for. His head swam with the power of that thought, again finding the reality of this fantasy becoming actualized something far more pungent than he was prepared to expect.

There was no return from this. Everything before this moment, he could explain to himself as simply overeager opportunism to satisfy his libido using an attractive and at least somewhat willing woman,
but this was premeditated. No, premeditated implied that he had some level of control over the intrusive fantasies and desires that had come charging into his scrambled mind. It struck him, with a horrid clarity of wonder, that perhaps this was how it began with the criminally insane. Impulses so crude and cruel that there was no reason or excuse to follow through with them, but being haunted by them all the same until one day, one particularly bad day, the plausibility of denial that they could ever allow them to be real was torn away. Vidar had had his one particularly bad day and his mind had been careening into that pit of madness since. Leif had found that pit in each of them and, like any big brother would, he had assumed responsibility to influence them to fulfill their potential. For all he had accused Anders of being like Leif, he now couldn’t deny that it had all been a pathetic projection of what he was afraid of. Vidar was the one most like their violent, controlling, sadistic rapist brother.

He grabbed her chin, his long fingers hooking around her jaw to squeeze a bit of pain into her as he lifted her face and hissed, “You will be a good whore for me, yes? You will take it and you will not fight. Understand?”

Those full lips of hers pulled back to bare her teeth pressing into the ball and her nose and brow wrinkled in a snarl as she jerked to bring her knee up in the defense that every girl had been taught to ward off a rapist. He dodged the blow reflexively and, just as reflexively, returned it with his own. Her face snapped to the side and his palm stung with the force of his slap, the clap of his hand connecting solidly against her cheek loud in the hallway.

“Shit,” he spat. He hadn’t meant to hit her that hard. He hadn’t meant to hit her at all, not yet. The imprint of his hand was already darkening on her cheek, likely to bruise. This loss of self-control was as aggravating as it was genuinely troubling and he turned that aggravation to the cause of it all, grabbing her hair by the roots at the front of her head and pulling her up to face him again. “Look what you made me do! Bad girl! There’s only one way to train a naughty bitch who growls and snaps at her master. Stay.”

He gave her hair a brief yank for good measure as he moved off her, assured by her cowering that she wouldn’t take this opportunity to kick at him without his body pinning her still. She was wise enough not to now. He tried to calm down as he knelt and rooted through his bag, his delight at already seeing the results of his training in her swelling his impatience to fuck her hard. She wasn’t broken yet. When he pulled out the thick leather cuffs, the short lengths of chain clinking from the pair, her fearful whimper came high and muffeled around the ball gag. God, he loved that sound from her. He grabbed her legs by her calves and pulled them apart as wide as the step allowed, buckling the leather around each ankle before looping the chain tight around the side rails. The ladder was working out even better than he had envisioned; they would definitely be using it again in the future. There was all manner of interesting ways he could tie her to it and knowing she would have to climb it to get to the little room Anders had set her up in made him smile. She would think of him every night when she made her way to her bed and every morning when she came down for breakfast. Except for the nights she would spend in Anders’ bed, but that was fine. He was sure they would make some lasting memories there too, preferably with his brother’s participation. Anders had done so well, his gentle way of dominating her not quite what Vidar would have gone for, but it suited his little brother’s sick love for Simone. He turned his attention away from that line of thought before it got any closer to the aspect of all this he needed to ignore.

“Alright, little bitch,” he said, dragging the soft fur of the foxtail up her body as he rose. He grinned at her uncertainty as he caressed the gleaming chrome end of it on her face. “Do you understand what this is?”

She glanced at him skittishly, dancing between the fur tail, the smooth steel it was attached to, and his smirk as she struggled to figure it out. Fresh tears welled in her wet eyes and fell down her face as
she shut them tightly and shook her head, but he was not going to punish her for her ignorance. Not directly. That she didn’t even know what a butt plug was amused him.

“This is your tail,” he answered for her. “Your fluffy bitch tail. Do you understand where your fluffy bitch tail belongs?”

Her eyes widened as he dragged the rounded steel side of the plug down her torso and he could see the exact moment it clicked in her mind. Her protests were muffled to completely unintelligible groans through the gag while he pulled her shorts down, the elastic making a tearing noise when he yanked them to her spread knees. She was bare beneath them, her cunt already glistening with a bit of moisture at the delicate fold of her labia.

“Such a sweet submissive…” he muttered to himself, dragging the tip of the plug teasingly along her slit. Her breath came in fast and hard through her nose, her panic clear in each slight whine and whimper blunted by the gag. “He trained your body to react even to this kind of treatment. What a miserable life you have had.”

He took out the small bottle of lube from his pocket and thumbed the cap open before drizzling a generous amount on the tip. Her leg muscles were straining to shut against the ankle cuffs that kept her spread for him and she tried to twist away from him as he knelt down and pressed the tip to the underside of her ass. The slimy, cold steel made her flinch and yelp like a real dog might.

“Relax, little bitch, or this will make injury,” he chided, pressing through her clenched cleft.

He loved watching this part, the sight of the plug sinking into flesh until it was nestled firmly inside making his cock weep precum in anticipation of doing the same. She grunted as it worked past the soft gates of her round, gorgeous cheeks and pressed against her hole. It didn’t take much teasing to convince her to just relax and accept it, the pain of resistance not worth the fruitlessness of the effort. He rewarded her with a kiss to her clit when her muscles relaxed and she forcefully evened her breathing, the condescending token of his approval sparking a glare from her that he caught before wiping it off her face with a push of the toy. Those calming, even breaths began to shake as he fucked the plug into her, interspersed with uncomfortable grunts that made him throb with want.

“There we go…” he breathed, awed at the sight of the shiny steel being swallowed up by her tight hole until only the fur poked out.

She was panting and sweating by the time her sphincter closed over the neck. He gave it a tug, making her groan in discomfort as the bulb pressed against the ring of muscle that held it in snug and secure, and watched in fascination as she shuddered when he wriggled it inside her. She was so pleasingly responsive to every touch and sensation. He reached back into his bag, feeling for the long slender stem of the riding crop and rose to tower above her again.

“Now you are looking like a dog, it is time to begin obedience training,” he announced, testing the leather tongue of the crop against his palm.

Fear and helplessness really were appealing on her, especially with how the pink of her flush rose up under the light golden brown of her skin as he pressed the tip of the crop to her cunt. The whistle of the shaft rushing through the air ended in a satisfying snap against her inner thigh and her shout muffled into the gag in a high keen. Her tail swayed with how she writhed as much as she could manage in her restraints to contain the sharp pain, the red imprint of the impact marking her pretty skin.

“You should not have fought me, little bitch,” he said.
She cringed, turning her head away from him and tensing when he drew the crop back, whining and cowering just like a beaten dog. He tried not to chuckle as he brought the crop down on her again, marking the inside of her other thigh to match. Now terrorized with the knowledge of how badly it hurt, she cried out louder, a stream of saliva running down her chin from around the ball.

“You need this. You need pain. That is the only way an animal like you learns.”

The crop sang through the air and slapped higher on her thigh, the supple flesh rippling with the impact and making her wail. This was not how he would treat his subs unless they were adamantly communicative that this was what they desired. But she wasn’t his sub. She was different. This was different. This wasn’t what he was, not anywhere but with her. Watching her tremble out of her cringing tension, preparing herself for the next strike without even needing to be ordered, he could see where Leif had taught her. He could almost feel his presence in her learned obedience.

“You should not have hid all he did to you.”

He struck her across her breasts and her back arched as she howled in the stinging agony lighting up the nerves of that sensitive flesh. This time, as she shook off her immediate reaction to the pain, her body trembling in the fear and endorphins flooding her system, she looked up at him. Her irises were a thin ring of silver around the wide obsidian depths of her blown pupils and her placid expression was one of patient expectation. There she was. There was her madness. It was the same quiet intensity as when she leveled the barrel of the gun between Edward Kyun’s eyes and pulled the trigger without hesitation. When he brought the crop down across her breasts again, she threw her head back and moaned.

“Fuck…” he breathed.

He couldn’t wait any longer. The crop clattered to the floor as he quickly undid his fly, his cock an angry red at the head from how engorged it was with want to fuck her this long. He grabbed her neck and pushed her brutally against the ladder as he stepped between her spread legs and thrust into her sopping cunt. She grunted in those high, excited animal noises against the gag as he forced his way into her, jerking her body with his motions.

“Fucking whore,” he sneered down at her, baring his teeth from how heavenly soft and snug she enveloped him. “You love this, yes? Being forced, used, that is what you are good for. Mmf! To be a good little bitch for your masters. Fucking and killing, that is what you know. Animal!”

She was rolling her hips for him, her cunt sucking him deeper as she moaned and sweated, her scent driving him to fuck her harder until he was slamming into her. All the while, she watched him, that predatory leer gleaming with madness and lust. He had beaten back her humanity until this primal core of her was exposed, but there wasn’t hatred waiting there for him as he had expected. This was something deeper, more ancient and powerful than anything as superfluous as hatred. This was the thing that had called to his savageness until it had surfaced in him. A resonant force within them both that hummed in the same pitch when struck. They were a matching madness. They were kin and kindred, tied by the same poisonous blood.

He barked out a short laugh at where his addled mind had gone. Her pussy was good enough to throw him into such delirium. He was overexcited, that was all. Just aftereffects of the drug Leif had poisoned his mind with, agitated by this intense event. She wanted to kill him for what he was doing to her and he was getting off on it.

“Do you see what you did to me?” he asked, ragged and husky, unable to speak in anything but his native tongue. She was dripping wet and taking his punishing thrusts with a feverish need, moaning and drooling mindlessly around the gag. “What you make us want?”
She lunged at him, heedless of the hand at her throat that held her down, pushing against it and
leading with her jaw. He jerked back reflexively, sensing that if she wasn’t chained down and
gagged, she would have bitten him viciously. She strained for his neck, her cunt clenching tight
around him, her narrowed eyes blazing. He groaned at how exquisitely her pelvic muscles milked
him, his thrusts rapid and deep as she came with a high, quivering cry. That did it. He shouldn’t
ejaculate in her, he had no idea if she was even on the pill, but he couldn’t think of doing anything
else when that wave of overwhelming pleasure rushed over him. He sunk his throbbing length into
her as deep as she could take it and spilled surge after surge of his semen inside of her, growling out
ragged sighs with each release. He had no self-control and no want for it either in this moment of
perfect bliss. The tension melted out of both of them as they came down from the high of that savage
fucking, sobriety leaking into his clouded mind as he panted to recover.

There was no return from this. There was no amount of guilt or repentance that could undo what he
had now done. Lifting his head from where it had rested on a rung of the ladder above her, near her
chained wrists, he knew he didn’t want there to be any going back despite the crushing guilt that
waited for him. He wanted so much more.
Chapter 49

Anders should have texted Simone’s phone to test it before he left for work, but he didn’t think to do that until hours after she hadn’t replied. If he’d known that she wasn’t receiving his texts, he could have brought the faulty phone back to the mall with him and saved himself the trip later. But, as usual, he didn’t think things through and that was how he ended up at the clothing boutique with three different sizes of each outfit the clerk had to select for him based on the embarrassingly approximate height and weight he could guess of his Simone. Words like “tiny” and “like a grown woman but smaller” only made the clerk look at him with pity. Of course, that also may have been because the entire staff seemed to recognize him from the news. At least they were subtle enough to keep their recognition of him down to just staring and whispering amongst themselves.

He had been not so subtly pulled into his supervisor’s office and asked to leave just a few hours into working because his appearance was such a distraction. Actually, the term his boss had used was “distressing”. His bruises were distressing his coworkers because they knew where he had gotten them. He had pressed Anders to take the time off, to go spend the grieving time legally allowed to him, but Anders had managed to argue him down to working short shifts should he feel able - so long as he kept to his office. Couldn’t have his famous bruises disrupting the project any more than it had. Anders had walked out of the office angry. Now he walked out of the clothing boutique bewildered and frustrated. This was just not his day.

“Anders?”

He froze mid-step, pivoting on his good leg before he could think better of it, and confirmed it was who he had been afraid it was. “Elin! What a coincidence! How are you?”

He glanced down at her belly after looking at her face. He couldn’t help it. It was an automatic action, one that she evidently saw in the stiffening of her already nervous smile. It seemed neither of them were prepared for this, which was at least somewhat reassuring, if a little bitter.

“I’m good. We’re good,” she answered, sliding her hand over her rounded belly.

His eyes followed the shape it traced, that bitter feeling expanding. “How’s your husband?”

“Louis is part of that ‘we’,” she answered, not facetiously, her silver tongue merely always ahead of the conversation. He glanced away, ashamed at his behavior, at all of it. “I’d ask how you are, but…”

“I’m fine,” he said, then tapped his cane on the asphalt of the parking lot. “Well, I’m approaching fine.”

She smiled politely. An awkward silence carried on the breeze between them until she broke it with an equally awkward, “Do you want to go grab a coffee, since we’re both here?”

A few weeks ago, he would have been daydreaming about this scenario, praying for any opportunity to convince her to let him back into her life. It was startling how quickly things could completely change. He’d never given any real consideration to becoming a father, having taken it for granted that he’d settle down with some decent girl once he got comfortably in his thirties and it would just sort of happen. Then Elin got pregnant, but she did not want to be that girl for him. She was already that girl for her husband. She’d made it clear there was no room for Anders in her neat little life and that had devastated him in a way he hadn’t expected. Now faced with this invitation that was more than just coffee, he realized that there was no longer any room for Elin in his messy little life.
“I have to get back to my… to Simone, my, um…” he trailed off.

“Your niece,” she finished for him, then looked away embarrassedly. “It’s hard to avoid reading about it.”

“You don’t have to avoid it.”

“I tried calling you while you were there,” she said, trying to change the subject and only bulldozing her way into a less pleasant one. “I just had a bad feeling.”

He bit his lip, not sure what he was supposed to do with this. He had an annoying sense that he would have known how to handle this before, but his social graces had been eaten away in the acid of all that had happened. So much of him had been changed. He’d hoped that, once he got back home and resumed his life, he could go back to the way he was. It was just a hope. His life now had a sharp divide: before and after. Elin, the fetus that was decidedly entirely hers and in no way his, all his desperation to plead his way into involvement in their lives – that was all before. He stood on the other side now, able to see but not able to feel anything beyond that divide.

“I didn’t get your call,” he said. He considered whether to voice his next thought. Perhaps he shouldn’t, but it came anyway. “He had my phone. He knows that I got a woman pregnant and that I cared about her. What I’m saying is… I would recommend looking into better home security.”

Elin paled alarmingly and, for a moment, Anders was ready to run and catch her in concern that she was going to faint. She blinked and nodded absently, her voice distant and thin as she said, “I will.”

He wondered if he should attempt to comfort her. He was sure that, before, he would not have even wondered if he should. He would have barged in to placate and soothe her worry, trying to help in any way he could, overstepping the boundaries of her personal responsibility for her own reactions because he knew he could save her from them. Now, in the after, he knew how much his help could hurt. His deliberation was brief.

“Good luck, Elin,” he said, attempting a smile before turning away.

“He’s dead.”

Mrs. Marceau’s voice betrayed nothing of what she thought or felt of that statement of fact. Nothing she said ever did. Whether she was remarking on the weather conditions, divulging plans to usurp the government of a developing country, or announcing the passing of her husband, she always spoke with the same severe, exact tone.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Leif responded politely, falling short of sincerity.

“You killed him.”

“Belatedly,” he added.

He was not surprised when she slapped him. It was the first time she made physical contact with him and he was pleased that she made it a good one. Full palm, solid connection, plenty of weight into it without disrupting her center of gravity. She knew how to fight but she was still a lady about it. The two men standing in his peripheral, each holding a taser gun aimed at him and standing just out of reach, both tensed as he brought his hand up and smoothed his hair back into place.
“It’s a terrible thing,” he continued, unaffected, “to be separated from the one you love.”

Her hazel eyes narrowed and her lip curled in disgust. “I would suggest against negotiating your terms at this precise moment, Mr. Valstad.”

“It’s never been a negotiation. You will bring me my daughter and I will do as I please. I would suggest composing conditions in a way to make it more likely that what I would please to do might also please you.”

“You have been doing as you’ve pleased since you’ve arrived as a guest to the estate,” she all but seethed. “The conditions will not change until participation is met.”

Leif turned his face toward the window and smirked at the dark sky beyond the bars. He had nothing but the time he had stolen back from death while she had a rapidly crumbling empire rife with dissent. They both knew it and he basked in her hatred for him as that fact rang in the silence between them. It was another beautiful night to be alive.

Simone flexed and stretched her aching jaw, rubbing at her masseter muscle with her fingertips and stretching her lateral pterygoid by moving her mandible side to side. Every muscle and bone was where and how it was supposed to be, no harm sustained that was worse than taking a hazing at gymnastics camp. She was yet again the new kid in town, noteworthy enough to attract the curiosity of those who wanted to test her mettle and threatening enough to attract the malice of those who wanted to crush it. Every few years, a new town, a new city, a new state, a new set of peers. What she didn’t learn in permanence and stability, she excelled in adaptability.

Her relief at being able to finally close her mouth after having it jammed open for so long was equal to the soreness it brought to do so, but she compulsively pushed through the pain. She rolled her shoulders and rotator cuffs as the bathtub filled with cold water, swinging her arms to try and loosen the tightness that had built up in them. At age eight, she had gotten past her mental block that had prevented her from doing the full splits by two girls, both improbably named Tiffany, forcing her legs apart in the gymnasium restroom. This was the same pain, meaning the sharp ache of her hip adductors from straining to close her thighs was a mild injury at worst. Looking at the leopard spot pattern of bruises around her wrists from struggling against the chain, she recalled what her father had told her when she’d complained about what the Tiffanies had done.

“Pain is the most poignant reminder that you are still alive,” she whispered, her mouth still too clumsy to form the words as easily as she should. She wouldn’t learn what poignant meant until a fifth grade vocabulary lesson and she had only recently learned the full meaning of his advice. What eight-year-old Simone did learn that day was that her father often gave aggravating advice. There seemed countless aches and pains all over her body, both from what Vidar had wrought and from her own resistance. Too many areas to apply ice to directly, so she cracked the ice trays into the cold bath water before sinking into it with a wincing, flinching slowness. Adaptability was a function that required exposure. When she had taken her first ice bath after overextending herself to impress a new class, her mother had drawn it and had held her, kicking and screaming, against her own body in the burning cold. When she had taken her second ice bath, she had squealed with laughter and wrestled with her mother in the burning cold. Sometimes, she adapted easily, shifting pieces of herself in ways that best suited an optimal outcome with almost a seamless effort. Other times, she railed against change with the immutable force of a cliffside resisting the crashing ocean waves. Whether it was adaptation or something less external, she couldn’t determine, but she had been
changing over time in the jagged progress of human behavior to this point.

After only a moment in the startling cold, she couldn’t feel anything on her skin. Her eyes followed where her stiff hands ineptly touched her body, receiving no feedback from either flesh, as though she were watching someone else. When she had moaned and fucked for Vidar, she wished she could say it was like watching someone else. Her fingers felt like icicles as she scraped his semen out of her vagina. She wanted to take that entire memory and hold it under the frigid water until it grew lifelessly numb; a thing only able to be seen and not felt.

The shock that crawled along her scalp fizzled through the rest of her body as she shut her eyes and submerged her head, the sound of the ice cubes plinking against the porcelain sides of the tub loud under the water. To exist without the burden of identity was an appealing fantasy, but this muddled interim of only being aware enough to know she was changing without knowing in what manner or to what end was a slowly building nightmare. There was a sense of something rapidly forming within the chrysalis of her mind, but it wasn’t strong enough on its own to smash out of its cocoon. Her skull throbbed in the threat this cold posed to her delicate brain and she sunk further to lay her head on the bottom of the tub in rebellion to that ache.

She was completely numb, the barrier of sensation between herself and the water no longer detectable. She could believe herself to be the water, as malleable and unfeeling as she had to be. The stray thought to sink back down and welcome the heavy rush of cold into her lungs coalesced into an urge that grew in its appeal. To leave so quietly, to drift into the water until return was impossible, was an option open to her now. She had no control of her life, not even her body or mind, but she could control her death. All she had to do was sink.

“Kjære?”

Sound carried differently under the water, making the sounds of the dogs’ claws clicking on the floor and Anders’ voice seem closer. She didn’t remember dunking under again, shocking her when she opened her eyes to the blurry ceiling beyond the surface of the water. Simone gasped as she breached from the icy water, coughing and sputtering for the air her lungs ached for as the whoosh of blood roaring through her veins to circulate that renewed oxygen was deafening in her ears.

“Simone?” Anders called, now just beyond the door. “You are okay?”

“Hyeah…” she wheezed between coughs, her teeth chattering and body shaking in a belated reaction to the chill.

“Come soon, here is food!” he announced cheerfully. “And here is… Ah… Klære… Clothes.”

The door cracked open and he slipped a shopping bag into the room. Why he was speaking to her through the door bewildered her until she realized he was respecting her privacy, a bizarre concept to her since he’d spent hours fucking and tasting her completely nude body just yesterday afternoon. Rolf held no such incongruous convictions of propriety as he pushed his way through the cracked door and beelined for the tub. The lab propped his forepaws up on the edge and leaned over the water to lick her unfeeling face, his candid glee at simply seeing her bringing her far from where her mind had gone.

“Nice to see you too, Rolf,” she said, grimacing as she allowed him to get his fill of licking her face before he turned his tongue to lapping up the bath water.

She splashed his slobber off her, promptly smacking herself in her unfeeling clumsiness, and decided that she had probably achieved the maximum benefit of the cold’s healing effects. Walking on completely numb feet was a slow and difficult game as she stepped out of the tub and dried herself,
but feeling was already returning in the buzzing and stinging of her nerves recovering from the shock. With a good night’s rest and a regimen of ibuprofen, it would be as though the day’s violence had never happened. All she would be left with were bruises that would fade and memories that wouldn’t matter.

“Oh…” she murmured, pulling out a sumptuous red cashmere sweater dress from the bag Anders had left behind. She wished she could feel it.

For a day where no one had tried to murder, drug, or throttle Anders, it had been a very bad one. It seemed as though he shouldn’t care about the million odd little annoyances and grievances that had tallied up to what amounted to be a harrowing day after having experienced some of the worst life could offer, but there he was, just glad to finally be home again. Sitting across from Simone, her lithe little body wrapped in red like a Christmas present he hoped she would allow him to open later, he was quickly forgetting his bad day. She smiled down at Rolf when he laid his head in her lap, begging with his big brown eyes gazing sadly up at her while his tail wagged under the table hopefully. Anders smirked at his shamelessness, feeling as though he related to the dog too closely then.

“*How was work?*” she asked, glancing up from her meager plate of tikka masala.

“*Work is… work,*” he answered. His English was getting better the more they talked, but she was always so quiet. They couldn’t get by on body language all the time, as much as the idea seemed fine by him. *“How are your day?”*

He knew that wasn’t quite right, but she was sweet enough not to hint at it when she answered, “*I had a painful encounter on the steps to the attic.*”

Once he grasped what she’d said, he nearly dropped his fork. “*Hell! You are okay?*”

“I’m fine. I feel like I shouldn’t be, but I am. It would be pretty hilarious if a tumble on a ladder killed me at this point, wouldn’t it?” she said, ending with a wry grin.

He couldn’t find the humor in any of that. “*You sleep with me tonight.*”

Her smile vanished with a nervous purse of her lips. “*I, uh… I don’t know if I’d make a good bedmate. I was kind of hoping I could take the sofa.*”

“I sleep on the sofa, you sleep on the bed,” he offered.

“I’m not kicking you out of your bed, Anders,” she frowned, stirring the sauce into the rice just to distract her focus. He didn’t like how nervous she was. Maybe she wasn’t as fine as she had insisted.

“So, you sleep with me tonight,” he repeated more insistently. “*Together.*”

She stared into nothing, the shadow of some sort of trouble crossing her features before Rolf’s whine brought her back. She scratched him behind his ear and his tail resumed his hopeful wag as he licked his chops in expectation of a snack.

“*Thank you for the clothes,*” she said, breaking the silence with a shy and quiet tone. “*And the food and shelter. I really am grateful, I just hate always being such a burden, so… I’ll sleep with you whenever you want.*”
“Good,” he smiled.

He was glad that was settled so easily, given the language barrier. In truth, he only seemed to sleep soundly when she was there with him, so this wasn’t completely selfless of him. Not that he needed her to know that. Their circumstance was something he was trying to be careful with, but he was new at having someone so dependent and helpless to look after. He wondered if he was perhaps enjoying it too much. Every stitch of clothing, every bite of food, everything she needed would come from him and he wanted to be the only one she relied on. No, he was definitely enjoying it too much, but with how unique their relationship was, it was hard to gauge how harmful that really was. A father should want to provide for his daughter. Lovers should want to share a bed. An uncle should want to spoil his niece. He just didn’t want her to do anything out of obligation to please him, even if wielding this much power over her was admittedly appealing. He had to keep being careful not to fill that potential for abuse.

Anders had to remind himself of that, over and over again, as he watched her crawl into his bed later. The red dress had been replaced by one of his shirts that rode high enough on her thigh to let him know she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. She had to keep being the one to initiate. Until he’d fully earned back her trust and they’d established healthy boundaries within this uneven dynamic, he knew he had to resist any possibility of pressuring her into sex. It was the right thing to do. His mouth watered to taste her and feel her come apart under his tongue, but their situation was very, very delicate. Too delicate for him to slip under the blankets and lick up the inside of her thigh without at least asking permission first. Too delicate to even ask for permission in the first place. He shouldn’t pressure her.

“Papa…” she whispered, the mattress shifting as she turned toward him. “Do you ever want to hurt me when we’re fucking?”

This girl was going to be the death of him.

“You are wanting me to hurt you, dear?” he asked instead of answering. He’d been anticipating this subject, but not this soon and not so bluntly. In the silence that stretched after his question, he tried not to examine his own answer to it.

“I… think there’s something wrong with me…” she muttered, her small voice nearly inaudible.

“No, no, dear, you are good,” he quickly assured her. He reached out and touched her waist before he could stop himself, breaking the first contact rule already. “It is not wrong. Many people…”

“But I don’t want to be like this.”

She sounded so sad, he couldn’t help but pull her close. She stiffened in his hug before relaxing in a shudder, the telltale sign of her crying causing him to desperately want to comfort her. He wanted to reassure her that it wasn’t abnormal, that he wanted to help her explore those desires and that he even had been experiencing a similar confusion within himself he hadn’t expected, but he just didn’t have the English. Instead, he pulled her flush against him and stroked her back soothingly.

“It is okay, dearest,” he whispered.

She buried her face into his chest, her words coming out muffled against his nightclothes as she stammered, “I don’t want to be hurt or, or forced, but I… each time, I can’t… even if I don’t want it, it…”

“I know, I know…” he cooed.
He could show her that she didn’t have to be frightened of those urges. They could go slowly and, with trust and clear communication, find their way out of confusion together. But they had neither trust nor clear communication. There were correct methods of engagement here, just none he could think of aside from those they could not pursue. He needed advice from someone with more experience in these matters.

“I don’t want to be who I am,” she whimpered, burrowing further into his embrace.

“I want you to be you.”

“It hurts. I can’t do it... I don’t want to live with myself, I just... I want it all to stop.”

Anders’ hold on her tightened before his mind had worked out what she might have been implying, her words weighing heavily on his lungs and filling him with a deep worry. After everything they’d managed to escape, she couldn’t possibly have been considering suicide. It didn’t make sense. Her life was so much better and it was only going to continue improving. She wasn’t being beaten or raped, she’d never have to kill again, she was free to live a life without any of those horrors Leif had wrought. Mostly. Now wasn’t the time to consider the price they would later pay for her freedom. He knew he was probably misunderstanding her grief, but even the mistaken possibility that she was suicidal couldn’t go unchecked. He could protect her from Leif to an extent, but he couldn’t even guess at how to protect her from herself.

“Dearest,” he began, not knowing how to continue. “Do not speak that way. You are needing help, yes? Tell me.”

She let out another long, shuddering sigh, her small ribcage shaking in his arms and remaining still as her jagged breaths evened out. The constrictive worry wouldn’t lessen in him with her being so still and quiet.

“Dear?”

She had fallen asleep, leaving him alone in the dark with these thoughts spinning in his mind. He couldn’t do this on his own. He knew how much his help could hurt.
“Simone, come see me in the office.”

She looked up from unpacking to see her father’s broad back already walking down the hall. His steps were as silent in leaving as he was in his arrival, telling her nothing of how long he might have been watching her in that sneaky way he often did. She tried to mimic his silence as she stood and followed, but she was too sore to control her movements precisely enough. Her bare feet padded down the carpeted hall, her fingers dragging along the recently painted walls that stunk up the air with their sour chemical odors, until she stood just beyond the threshold of her father’s home office. The sleek black shelves that lined the walls were empty, their contents still packed in the boxes stacked next to the wide desk he leaned against. In the middle of these bare and gutted shelves she was so used to seeing meticulously arranged with books, geometric sculptures, and glossy decanters of beautiful amber and clear liquors, Leif stood as effortlessly composed as always, the solid center of this room that would soon follow suit. She walked toward him when he beckoned her over, her nervousness growing with each careful step under his piercing stare.

“Lay down on the desk,” he said.

Her brow furrowed and she pursed her lips, approaching the glass desk with the dread of climbing it equal to the dread of not being sure why he wanted her to, but she obeyed. Considering the sharp ache of her hip flexors, she lifted herself with her hands and slid onto it instead of lifting her knee to it as she would have done otherwise. She knew he knew before he even laid a hand on her, but every lie and explanation she’d had ready for this moment died on her paralyzed tongue when he lifted her skirt and began squeezing her inner thigh. His thumbs pressed into the pliant flesh of her relaxed muscles, kneading rhythmically from her knee all the way up to the crook of her groin where the pain emanated. She bit her lip shut in case she might cry out too suddenly to stop herself, breathing slowly to keep herself calm. He spread her legs far apart and she winced in expectation of pain, but it wasn’t as bad as she had thought.

Still holding her legs up and apart by her ankles, his body positioned between them, he said, “Squeeze them shut now.”

She obeyed, this time groaning in the pain that was delivered in the effort of resisting his hold. He lowered and then let go of her ankles, smoothing down her skirt before stepping out from between her legs.

“You don’t need to tell me all the details,” he said, that imperceptible calmness aggravating her paranoid guilt further. She hadn’t even lied to him except to omit the truth, and now he was removing the opportunity to lie at all. “However, I want you to tell me what happened.”

“Am I hurt?” she asked.

“You’ll be fine with rest by tomorrow if you ice it,” he answered, sitting at the desk and typing something at his computer.

“Then it doesn’t matter what happened. I don’t want to go back to gymnastics.”

His typing fingers abruptly stopped. She lied very still, clenching her fists anxiously as she kept her stare fixed to the ceiling to keep herself from looking at his reaction. Not that she would always be able to tell what he was thinking by his expression alone, anyway.
“Come sit on my lap, my child,” he said. “I have something I want to begin teaching you.”

She swallowed down her uneasiness at the request and slid off the desk, thinking only of ending this uncomfortable session sooner by being obedient as she walked over and sat across his thighs. She was far too old to be doing this and wondered bitterly if he was treating her like a little kid to mock her, but the image he gestured to on his monitor knocked that suspicion from her in shock. On the screen, there was a black and white image of a man sitting in front of a crowd, his body engulfed in flames as people looked on. She looked away in reflexive repulsion, but Leif turned her cheek to face it.

“That is a Buddhist monk named Thích Quảng Đức,” he explained. “He did this to himself and while he burned, he didn’t even make a sound.”

“That’s horrible!” Simone whimpered. “Why would he do that?!”

“I’ll explain his motivations another time. What I want you to learn is how he accomplished this. Look at him, Simone,” he said, his face close to hers, preventing her from moving away from the ghastly image. His stubble scraped her cheek. “Imagine the excruciating pain of being burned alive. His body becoming charred black and shriveled, the smell of his own burning flesh thick in the air, how did he do this and not scream and writhe in pain?”

“I don’t know!” she said, trying not to cry, rapidly failing.

She hated seeing others hurt. Their agony and sorrow touched her as though they were her own, compelling her to help them. There would be nothing she could have done for this burning monk and the thought of being there, watching him suffer and having no way to help made her feel sick with shame of her own ineptitude. Her father’s strong arms wrapped tight around her kept her from wiping away her tears as they fell for the long-dead monk.

“Because pain is only conditional. When we are ruled by conditional means, our lives and selves become conditional. When we overcome conditional and circumstantial influences, then we are free. Pain is not bad or good, it simply is. It is our perception of it that matters.”

His words were confusing her. She couldn’t understand what he was trying to tell her, but she was too frightened to say anything. She didn’t want to hear him, didn’t want to see this awful picture, but she couldn’t stop listening and she couldn’t look away. Her stomach twisted into knots as he went on.

“You fear pain, Simone. You let your fear control you. Fear is your crucible, but you don’t have to fear pain. Pain is the most poignant reminder that you are still alive.”

“Incorrect, but that’s a lesson for another time,” he responded, grinning. She couldn’t figure out why he was grinning. This was nothing to grin at. She shifted uncomfortably on his lap, that suspicion that he was mocking her returning beneath her terror. “You don’t have to be a Buddhist monk to overcome your body’s perception of pain, my child. Watch.”

Her eyes widened at the glint of the knife he held in front of her, so terrifyingly close.

“Papa?! Papa, what are you doing?!” she demanded, wriggling to try to escape his lap, but he held her fast to him as he brought his forearm under the blade before her face. “Are you- are you- Don’t, stop, STOP!”

“Don’t fret, darling girl. You’ll learn these tricks too one day, all in due time,” he said, never
breaking his calm as the tip of the blade sunk in and dragged down his flesh, parting the skin in a thick red line that immediately gushed blood. The warm trickle fell heavily into her lap, wafting up the pungent scent of rusted iron and something almost sweet with it. He smiled down at her as she screamed.

“PAPA!” Simone shrieked, her legs tangling in the white sheets she dragged along with her frantic stumbling. Her knees hit the rug, the skin burning from the friction as she scrambled to stand and pant through her bewilderment at finding herself in an unfamiliar bedroom. The sterile and stark surroundings of her father’s home office fell back into memory as she took in the whites and light-colored woods of this room. The sound of many paws scuffling around outside the door and the shadows of noses peeking in the space under it brought her back to Anders’ home. Dragging her fingers down her face, she tried to chase those fading images of the nightmare away, but they wouldn’t dissipate into the unreality of dreams. It stuck to her mind with the permanence of vivid memory, because that’s what it was. A terrifying memory of the darker side of Leif’s parenting to complete his aggravatingly vague advice she had recalled yesterday. It wasn’t vague at all; she just hadn’t remembered the full context until reliving it now. The image of his patient and loving smile as he cut into his flesh made her shiver, but as her mind rapidly ascended the foggy web of memories of that smile to the present, it took her further away from that powerfully strange sensation of having just been eight-years-old and so very frightened.

“How did I forget so much?” she muttered aloud, hugging herself to soothe that tangle of anxiety. “How much more is going to come back?”

Her words were met with a chorus of pleading whines and she opened the door to be swarmed by the pack of worried dogs. Their snouts scanned her for injury, their animal compassion to her distress melting away her dread, and she knelt to receive their full examination. Their acceptance of her into the pack was an unexpected wealth of comfort to her, but she supposed it scratched that fundamental itch of wanting to belong and to be loved. Laying down on her back to convey her submission as a new member, the first real smile she’d experienced in a while pulled at her mouth as she ruffled their fur and squirmed gleefully under their friendly licks and nuzzles.

As she went through her morning routine, carefully measuring the pain through her warm-up stretches to find herself as uninjured as she’d hoped, her thoughts led back to her father’s words and she wondered how far those lost lessons had gone. When she felt a flutter spring deep in her core at the aching reminder of the curated savagery Vidar had performed on her body, she felt as though she had half the answer. So much of what she was had been forged by Leif, it was hard to tell if there was anything that was ever really her.

In the attic room, while dressing herself in her fine new clothing, she found the cell phone still on her bed. Eight new text messages, three missed calls, one new voicemail. All from Anders, except one text from a private number that came through as she held the phone. “Only in the light is your shadow revealed”. Standing beneath the skylight, letting the bright sun warm the back of her neck, she was distracted from her bewilderment by a shadow moving over her. She looked up in time to see someone move away beyond the glass.

“Do you think, or do you have any reason to suspect, that these hallucinations might be tied to or
influenced by these urges?”

Vidar dug his fingers into the edge of his seat across from Dr. Fjeldstad, her purposefully slow and even tone belaying the horror he knew she detached herself from behind that question. She was a good psychiatrist, her transparency and forthrightness often an uncomfortable but effective match for his acerbic defensiveness. He couldn’t deceive her and she had never made any qualms about letting it be known that she was aware of when he tried. That was why her hedging the sexual aspect of his aggression towards Simone made him so nervous. In the two years he’d been coming to her to untangle the snags of what was once his everyday life, she’d managed to refrain from personally judging his unorthodox actions and hobbies. He’d gotten to a point of comfort with her where he could openly discuss his undeniably colorful sex life, but now, sitting across from her and seeing how she cautiously steered away from what he’d just admitted, he regretted having filled her with that knowledge.

“In as much as they are both related to a loss of control, they are tied,” he answered. “But not beyond that.”

Dr. Fjeldstad crossed her legs and tapped her tennis shoe at the air as she pursed her unpainted lips, her show of deep thought making him more nervous. He shouldn’t have come, but she’d cleared her entire morning for this extended session and had hounded him through his email and, almost immediately after acquiring a replacement, his cell phone. He’d declined on both invitations, but there he was, at her office at 7 AM sharp. She’d kept the time open for him even after his refusals. She knew him too well. She probably knew he’d already raped Simone, or at least had brought some level of actualization to those urges, and that was why she was avoiding it. There were some things that were not protected under doctor-patient confidentiality.

“It’s revenge,” he said, snapping her out of her thought process.

“Against Leif,” she finished, then brought her stony gaze to him. “That’s what you believe it to be. You’re angry and you’re grasping blindly for justice for what was done to you, but it doesn’t exist, and you won’t find it in hurting his daughter. What happened to you was out of your control. You can take that control back now, here, in therapy.”

He grinned, a rictus arrangement of his mouth devoid of humor or any pleasantness. “She was his and now she’s ours. It’s not right, but it feels right. Doing what he did to her feels right.”

He was pushing the plausible deniability to a dangerous edge if he hadn’t already. Maybe a part of him wanted her to report him before he did it again, but mostly, he just wanted to force her disgust to the surface. He wanted to see how unforgiveable just having these desires was.

“You’re in full control of your actions, Vidar,” she carefully reminded him. “You can stop yourself from pursuing those urges.”

A breathy bark of a dry laugh huffed out of him at that. “I haven’t had full control since I went to Hell and came back with these devils swimming around in my brain. I don’t care that it’s wrong, or misguided, or crazy. I want to put on his cologne and break into her bedroom when she’s sleeping, just to see if she would cry while I fucked her or beg for it. In your professional opinion, which do you think she would do, Dr. Fjeldstad?”

“You seek condemnation to relieve you of the possibility of being forgiven. You wish to cave in the exits of this path of destruction you’re on, so you feel no temptation or responsibility to leave it,” she said instead. “It’s a natural extension of your antisocial patterns. Provoke mutual antagonism to eliminate the risk of vulnerability that is an ineluctable outcome of true human connection. It begs the question: What is it about Simone that evokes this response so hostilely in you?”
Vidar inwardly recoiled from the unexpected validity of her assessment, her words resounding truths within him he wasn’t fully aware of. Outwardly, he said, “Proximity.”

“Proximity to the trauma?”

“Proximity to Leif.” He looked at the vase of feathers behind her, avoiding having to meet her stare. “She’s saturated in him and his influence. It’s not a far leap to judge that I would want to take her power from her as a proxy to taking my power back from him, is it?”

“It’s not a far leap because it’s low-hanging fruit. You are also fond of hiding behind convenient truths.”

“So, which is it? Am I salting the earth to prevent any seeds of connection from growing because I have a fear of intimacy, or am I preventing any sense of responsibility to my horrid actions by framing myself as fundamentally horrid?”

“Neither are exclusionary to the other. This is a longstanding complex issue compounded by an already traumatic event. You’re also mantling your abuser to reclaim your control, but that doesn’t exclude the other methods you’re utilizing to the same end. ‘Doing what he did to her feels right’, but you only have an idea of what he did. There’s no revenge available to you so you’re seeking to create an opportunity for revenge in her, but first you need to dehumanize both her and yourself to further your access to these acts you know to be deplorable. You won’t find revenge this way, Vidar. You will never find revenge because it is a concept of fantasy. You need to refrain from any contact with Simone until we resolve these urges. Will you do that?”

The black bag was in the trunk of his car, rife with options of further fear and humiliation for his little bitch. Once this appointment was over, he would drive past Anders’ house on his way home and, if his little brother wasn’t there, he would go inside and find her. When he did, he would do only exactly as he pleased. No need to consider why or to what end beyond the simple hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. The only sin he would need to punish her for was the fault of piquing his interest.

“Yes,” he lied.

Anders tapped the business card for the psychiatrist Maier had recommended to him before they left the US. A “guaranteed discreet” psychiatrist for whoever among them might find use of one. The implication was clear then that this Dr. Benjamin Wallis was involved with the network, but his level of involvement with the murderous organization responsible for holding Leif was purposefully dodged by Maier. He should have thrown out the card on that basis alone, but now he sat in his office actually considering trusting a potential murderer with his Simone’s mental wellbeing. However, with the many incriminating secrets she would need to divulge for therapy to be effective, there were no other options. And, technically, he himself was now involved with the network. In direct employ, to be exact. He glanced bitterly at the manila envelope that was waiting in the passenger seat of his car, the cash and simple note still tucked within. “Maintain her health and appearance”, it read. What level of maintenance that much money could possibly require was beyond him to guess. A knock at his door drove him to snatch the envelope and quickly stash it in a desk drawer.

“Come in,” he called. Trygve the intern entered balancing a tray of steaming coffee mugs in his hand and a stack of files in the cradle of his arm, the young man deliberating over which mug to hand off to Anders before he let him know, “It’s the one with the dogs on it.”
“Oh!” Trygve laughed a little too nervously, gingerly placing the dog-decorated mug on the edge of the desk. He then gestured to the large collection of framed pictures of all the dogs Anders had ever housed and remarked, “I should have guessed.”

“Yeah, I’m known as the local dog hoarder,” Anders said, then muttered, “Well, used to be known…”

“Ooh, a sheltie! I grew up with a sheltie!” the boy exclaimed in delight, leaning over the desk to look over more photographs. “Closest thing to a sibling I ever had, really. He even bossed me around like one, haha!”

Anders grinned at his excitable demeanor, that youthful energy a refreshing distraction from the dark turn of his thoughts in the lull of his workload. What he’d said snagged his interest, however.

“Trygve, how old are you?”

“20. Well, in a couple weeks.”

The same age as Simone, then, only a scant few months younger. He looked at him through that lens of comparison. Anders had always felt too young. Home owner, senior employee of a global nonprofit, member of a dog rescue group that mostly included retirees, youngest brother by a six-year difference and grace of an unwanted pregnancy at the end of a failing marriage, he had always been remarked on by his youth. Watching the shocking divide between himself and the near childishness of this intern made him feel the difference of what a ten-year gap could mean. With Simone, it was simply instinct to assume a fatherly role, their intrinsic differences more a matter of a cultural divide than age. With this intern, he felt every year between them and wondered how this reflected on his relationship with the girl. He could use his insight.

“What a coincidence. I’m turning thirty in a couple weeks. Taurus, then?” Anders smiled congenially, taking up his mug.

“Yup! Guess we have more than shelties in common, Mr. Valstad.”

“Call me Anders. Hey, Trygve, I have a girl your age, so if you don’t mind, can I get your opinion on something? Whenever you have a moment.”

“I have a moment, sir. What’s up?”

Anders swallowed the bitter coffee with a purse of his lips. He should debate whether to broach this so frankly, but he doubted his reputation would ever recover within this company anyway. Or this country, for that matter.

“Do you ever become so frustrated with yourself, with who you are, that you want to commit suicide?” he asked. The blank stare was enough to tell him that perhaps he should have refrained. He smiled sheepishly, turning back to his monitor to feign work as he muttered, “Sorry, forget I said anything.”

“Is Simone suicidal?”

Anders’ attention snapped back to the boy, his eyebrows raised in surprise. He hadn’t mentioned her by name, not to anyone here. Trygve made his realization of his misstep apparent without any attempt to disguise his regret in how he clapped his free hand over his mouth and cringed. Whether this was due to the probability of a gag order on the subject within the office or the boy’s own research into that latest gossip was equally aggravating. If his ex-girlfriend knew about Simone living with him, that just being common knowledge to everyone around him should not have surprised him.
like that. He had to get used to these details on his personal life being in the public domain.

“No need to be embarrassed, Trygve. It was my fault for bringing it up. But, I would appreciate if this was kept between us, understand?” Anders said, speaking with a softness to reinforce the emphasis on discretion.

“I’m sorry, she’s just really popular on boards and shit, and it’s, um, it’s so weird talking to you about this, sorry,” the boy babbled, then blurted, “She has a ton of supporters I can reach out to for her if she needs help!”

“No! No, I would prefer to keep this within my family. Please, forget I mentioned it,” Anders hurriedly insisted. “Thank you for the coffee refill. I’m sure they’re keeping you busy, so I’ll let you get on with your day.”

The young intern, apparently as lacking in social graces as himself, hovered near the door, his eagerness to find any reason to continue this conversation morbidly obvious. Unfortunately, the longer he stayed, the more Anders’ curiosity festered. His fingers typed nonsense into nothing on his computer as he restrained himself from asking just what he’d meant by “supporters” until, finally, Trygve left. Anders sighed in relief, knowing how much chaos his curiosity could incite.

Simone’s bare feet beat the ground as she ran around to the other side of the house, the kitchen knife pointed down and away from her body as it shook in her fist. She didn’t feel the sticks and rocks that nearly cut through the thick skin of her soles or even hear the dogs barking excitedly as they joined in the chase, her entire focus on finding the trespasser as she kept her wide eyes scanning the edge of the roof. She found him just as he was climbing off the ladder that was leaned against the south end of the house. Her breath came out of her in a rattling grunt, nearly a bark, when she saw him, drawing his attention to her like a deer suddenly scents a wolf. Short, portly, young, scared, frozen mid-step, this man obviously wasn’t part of whatever network had taken hold of her family’s life. That alone was enough to ignite the fury her adrenaline had primed to explode. This man was a non-threat with camera hanging around his neckless chin and his bovine stare wide with fear. This man was insignificant, unrelated, and irrelevant. She should ignore him and go on with her day holding only the anger of having been rudely intruded upon, but that text sent to her phone implied more than what she was seeing in him. She clutched the knife tight enough to feel as though it were a jutting extension of her arm as she ran at him, leaping over the fence he had barely managed to climb.

He ran wildly, shrieking, “I’M SORRY! I’M SORRY! PLEASE, LET ME GO, I’M SORRY!”

She could catch him, and so she would catch him. She didn’t know what she would do when she did. The knife told her to open him up where he could be made hollow, but that was madness speaking. She just wanted to scare him and everyone like him so no one would trespass again. Patterns could form quickly and having Anders’ home invaded by paparazzi and overzealous crime fanboys could not be allowed. An example had to be made. They were running through the wooded area Anders’ house backed up into and she was catching up quickly as he ineptly dodged through the trees.

She let the madness yell through her mouth as she panted behind him, “RUN for your LIFE, SWINE! Get that blood PUMPING! Lets you BLEED OUT FASTER!”

The screams he let out were shrill, nearly inhuman with terror, and she bellowed out her rage in a wordless and ragged cry as she tackled and shoved him to the dirt. She’d taken down bigger, heavier
men than him in Brooklyn when the bars let out their worst drunkards during the dark hours of early
morning. Entitled, intrusive men who thought they could trample all over her basic rights like this
insignificant worm squirming and screaming in the dirt now. She owed them nothing. Not her fear
and not her mercy. Her friends weren’t around her now to back her up, but no one was around to
watch her either. Just this frightened little male cowering beneath her knife as she crouched over him,
his breath moist on her hand as it heaved out of him.

“Toss the camera first, swine,” she demanded.

The low growl of her voice seemed to lose his tongue from his petrification as he babbled, “I’m
sorry! I’m sorry! I wasn’t doing anything- I just wanted some pictures! Please don’t kill me! Please!”

The tip of the blade pressed into his spongy, shiny cheek, eking out a bead of red and a shivering
gasp from him as she barked, “TAKE OFF the FUCKING camera and toss it!”

“Okay, okay!”

He scrambled to get the strap over his head and threw it in an awkward flailing motion only a few
feet away.

“Good job, swine,” she sneered. He sputtered out a whimper as she moved the tip of his blade over
his eye. The stink of his fear mingled with the urine his bladder had released at some point,
disgusting her at both the stench and his weakness. “Now, you’re going to slowly reach into your
pocket and show me your wallet. If you take out anything but your wallet or if you do anything I
might not like, you’re going to lose this eye. Say, ‘yes, Miss Valtad’ and reach for your wallet.”

“Y-Yes, Miss Va-alstad,” he whimpered, his shaking hand slow to reach behind and under him. He
held the canvas billfold next to his sweaty, pink face.

“Open it.”

She didn’t move her glare from him, checking in her peripheral to see that his identification was in
the wallet before snatching it. His breath wheezed out a fearful whine when the canvas scraped out
of his hand. When she and her friends would mug the drunkards who thought them harmless enough
to harass in New York, it was never met with such fear. Annoyance, anger, disbelief, some terror,
but never pure fear. It was a nearly transactional process and never led to any bloodshed. She
wondered if it was the cultural difference or this young man’s age, or perhaps it was her who was
different from the little part time punk kid she used to be. Well, even a part time punk could be
intimidating with an 8-inch kitchen knife.

“How did you get my cell number, swine?” she asked.

“What-”

“How did you get my cell number, swine?”

“I don’t know your cell number! I don’t have it! I never had your number! Please, just let me go!”

“Well then how did you send me that text, you little shit?!” she snarled, pressing the edge of the
blade along the wide curve of his cheek. He was weeping, turning his face away from the knife. She
growled in frustration. “Somebody sent me a text right when I saw you. Was it one of your buddies?
You got people I should meet, piggy?”

He was blubbering something in what she could guess was Norwegian as he sobbed and she
scoffed, having to accept that it wasn’t this man who had texted her. It didn’t seem like he was the
type to even tempt getting caught with leaving cryptic, poetic hints. If he didn’t have anything to do
with it, then someone who was able to get her number, see her roof, see where she was in the house,
and have the motivation to warn her of a trespasser did. That cool, righteous hostility left her in a
wave of uneasiness. Someone who could do all of that and with such aggravating methods was an
almost guaranteed threat. She should have known that the people Maier was taking orders from
would have been watching her there.

“Don’t move,” she ordered, rising away from the prone and sniveling man. As she walked over and
picked up the camera, she continued, “I have your name. I don’t care if you tell anyone, but if the
police come asking me or my family about this, I’ll find you and carve the bacon off your belly.
You’re going to lie there with your eyes closed and count to 100, loud so I can hear you, and then
you’re going to get the hell out of here and never come back. Start counting, swine.”

With the sound of him yelling numbers in the background to tell her where he was, she jogged
through the underbrush back home, her bare feet aching and her knees shaking. There was no peace
or safety, not even temporarily. There was only time between the madness her father had brought
upon them.
Chapter 51

Rolf leaned his body against her legs, their packmates stepping around her, watching her with expectation glittering in their dark eyes and pleading in their whines. She stood in the kitchen, the knife cleaned of the trespasser’s filth, the blade gleaming and bright as she looked at her reflection in the steel. The feel and weight of the knife was nothing like holding her father’s hand, but it brought that exact same comfort. There were some things she knew that she was never meant to find out and, in knowing, she wondered if it had caused her to lose some things she was supposed to know. It was a foul logic, but one that she was confident in nonetheless. Everything had a price, after all. Knowing her father’s love had cost her nearly everything she had, and she was still paying. The survival of herself and her uncles had cost Edward Kyun his life, but it had also taken something from her that was harder to define. There was a deceptive simplicity in having choice so thoroughly stripped from her in that moment she’d aimed the gun at Kyun. There was no gray haze of moral ambiguity to ponder or looming sense of miserable guilt that would visit her in sleepless nights, only the black and white yes or no of kill or be killed.

“The most basic law of nature condensed into one bullet between his jaundiced eyes,” she growled out in a whisper through clenched teeth, doing her best impression of Leif’s far deeper voice. She smiled at how awful it was.

Leif’s eyes stared back at her in the knife, those same storm gray irises he’d given her that shone in striking contrast to her skin instead of the ghostly way the color blended with his paleness. She was always the conspicuous one, always noticed and targeted while he had been able to blend in and hide himself so easily. No one knew what he was until he wanted them to know, and they always kept his secrets, one way or another. Now that the whole world knew what so many dead had briefly known, there seemed little meaning in trying to appear as anything other than what they were. That expectation of normalcy had been relieved of both of them and she could finally stop feigning it for the sake of other’s comfort. It finally didn’t matter. She could just be the creature she’d always been beneath her skin, his little monster he had created with his version of love.

Her gray eyes widened at seeing his sharp smirk reflected in the steel when she tipped it, her chest constricting in both hope and fear as she whirled around, but it was Vidar standing so close behind her. Her voice caught in her throat, clogged with wonder at how he’d crept up so silently and terror at his darkened expression, and his smooth voice cut her off before she could clear hers.

“What is the knife for, sweetheart?”

She nearly tripped over a dog as she stumbled backward, his wide step easily clearing the distance between them and she gasped when his hand snatched her wrist painfully. The knife clattered to the floor.

“What is the knife for?” he repeated, louder, angrier.

He was still walking, pushing her as she stumbled, and the dogs danced excitedly at their joined movement. The words were all jammed in her throat behind that thick wad of terror and anticipation. He was so close, his barely contained rage rolling off him in waves, his body brushing against her to keep her moving until her back hit the edge of the kitchen table. He boxed her in with one hand flat on the table at either side of her, making her lean back to try to avoid him as he loomed low and too close.

“You were wanting to stab me, little bitch?” he smirked.
“N-no!” she finally squeaked out.

“Do not lie,” he hissed, his breath hot and wet on her face, heavy with alcohol. She winced away from the memories it stirred, too many memories and all far too fresh to ignore. “I know you wish to kill me, yes? I did see it in your eyes, when we… when I fucked.”

“Please, uncle Vi-”

“Ikke- Do not call me that!” he snapped, grabbing her shoulders, his long fingers digging into her painfully. “I am not uncle, understand?! You are calling Anders ‘papa’, you call me ‘Sir’, yes? Speak, dog!”

“Yes, Sir!” she responded, breathless, cowering.

She hated that she was such a coward against these men that smelled and looked so much like Leif. It wasn’t right. They hadn’t earned or crafted this fear they so benefitted from, they only assumed her to naturally be so subservient and submissive. Even if she’d still gripped the knife in her fist, she doubted he would take her seriously. If only she’d still gripped the knife in her fist, she doubted he would take her seriously. If only they knew what she was. If only she could show them. But her legs were shaking from the strength this particular breed of fear had drained from her and a cold sweat shivered down every inch of her under his bullying. That drive to please and soothe the savagery in him warmed the cradle of her pelvis and made her blush in shame. That’s what he was here for, though. That’s what any of them were ever here for.

“You will be good for me this time,” he said, not a request or an order, but a warning as his hands slid along her neckline and began undoing the buttons of her blouse.

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered.

Simone hung her head low, but there was no hiding her deepening blush and breaths as she watched him unbutton her blouse and then slacks. These fine, sensible clothes fell away from her to reveal the sinful thing that hid beneath them. His pale hands slid along her darker skin as he pushed her blouse away from her shoulders and peeled her slacks down to her knees, baring the nothing she wore beneath them in absence of even owning any underwear but the one bra and panties Maier had gifted her. She resented her filthy existence as Vidar cupped her breasts, but his rough squeezing and pinching still stoked the pulsing heat that flared beneath his hands.

“You’re nothing but our little American whore,” he said, drawing a grunting whine out of her as he twisted her nipples cruelly. Her knees threatened to buckle at the exquisite pain that shot sparks of pleasure right to her cunt, but she resisted as much as she could. This wasn’t right. He wasn’t the one who should wield this power over her. “Get on the table, bitch.”

He didn’t give her time to comply, his hands hooking behind her thighs and hauling her up onto the table until she was lying on her back. He yanked her slacks the rest of the way off, leaving her naked but for the blouse that hung open. Her nipples were already raw and sore, reddened from his torment, and he grabbed her wrists and forced them away when she tried to cross her arms defensively over her chest.

“Stay,” he ordered, his cold glare broaching no argument even if it had occurred to her to verbalize her protests.

Any pleads for him to stop would only be met with further degradation, a pattern she was familiar with from the man who had taught her to be so submissive in the first place. So, she stared at the ceiling, just trying to focus on maintaining deep and calming breaths and allow whatever was to happen. Fighting would only make it worse. The rattling of metal muffled through leather made her
stomach flutter in unbearable anticipation of what pain was to come as he shuffled through that awful bag. She could see herself panicking in line at grocery stores while old ladies rifled through their purses, the sound of them jostling their car keys in their leather bags taking her back to these moments. So much of the sane world held danger for her insanity. The sound of cloth moving over skin, of a shovel scraping through dirt, the mechanical snap and whirring of an old film camera, so many sounds operated on the same frequency as her fear now. At this moment, it was the sound of Vidar’s voice, smooth over his jagged English, that fed her fear.

“You did not tell Anders about us. Why?”

She flinched when he grabbed her by her hair and pulled her to sit up, his hands not giving her time to recover before wrapping something cold around her neck and tightening it into a buckle. Her dreadful suspicion was confirmed when her eyes followed the chain leash leading from her neck to his fist and then his burning gaze as he took in the sight of her wearing the collar. Her stitches scraped against the leather as she swallowed thickly and gathered the will to speak. This man didn’t need any further motivation to punish her.

“I promised I wouldn’t,” she answered, her voice tight and small.

His brow furrowed and she braced herself for pain, but he only muttered bitterly, “You are truly mad.”

Still holding the end of the leash wrapped around his fist, he pulled up a chair and sat, just looking at her as she knelt nearly naked before him. His eyes, as cold and cobalt as the arctic sea, examined her with a gleam that made her tremble. She could run, leap from this table and maybe even make it out the door, but there was nowhere she could go. No one she could run to except the paparazzi waiting to sell her fear and shame to tabloids. She shuddered at the punishment he would enact on her if he caught her, now that she was familiar with the punishment he would give her without even needing a reason. No, he had plenty of reason. She bit her lip as that ache of guilt twisted sharply in her. She was the cause of all of this. It was only fitting that she should provide this meager restitution with the same sin that had led to all this chaos in his life.

“Are you crying so soon?” he asked, his grin stretching mirthlessly and only sharpening his features.

She didn’t know she was, but her cheeks were wet with tears and her neck and chest tensed in that tightening need to sob. She shouldn’t cry. This wasn’t even anywhere close to what she deserved.

“Please…” she whispered through that ache in her throat. “Punish me, Sir.”

The silence that answered her made her sick with mounting anxiety until her desperation gave her the courage to look at him directly, only to see him staring in shock. She couldn’t have misread what this was. He was there to do what he’d done to her yesterday, to continue taking the reparation she owed him through her pain and flesh. He snapped out of his thoughts when she met his wide blue eyes, his brow wrinkling in irritation as he looked away.

“You would do anything for a fuck, yes, little bitch?” he sneered, leaning over and grabbing up the heavy bag. His sneer morphed back into that cruel smile as he pulled out the tail, her dread gathering into that tight knot in her gut at the sight of the animal fur. “You are a needy, shameless whore, but we will take care of you. We will keep you fucked and used.”

“Thank you, Sir,” she forced herself to say, unable to raise her voice higher than a whisper as she grasped the shiny steel end of it when he handed it to her.

His grin grew colder as he said, “Good manners. Your papa did teach you well. Now, show me how
you put in your fluffy bitch tail.”

She flinched when he tossed her something, but reflexes had her catch it before it hit her face. She wondered briefly if she was supposed to let it hit her, but there were more pressing questions at hand.

“Um… I…” she muttered, looking at the tail and the tube of a thick clear goo in her hands. Her skin heated in mortification from her chest to her scalp. “I’ve never put anything… up there before. Not by myself.”

His brows shot up and his tongue swiped over his sharp teeth in delighted interest. “Well, well, you are a smart little bitch. Figure it out.”

She bit her lip again, hard enough to hurt, and squeezed out a swirl of the goop onto the narrowed tip of the steel. Whether it was enough or too much, she didn’t know, and squeezed more until it was coated fully in the slime. She’d always felt too embarrassed to watch porn on her own or even go into sex shops with her friends, earning her a reputation as a prudish slut for her aversion to sexuality while also preferring meaningless sex as opposed to romantic relationships. Now, pressing the cold tip of this strange thing to her sensitive hole, she regretted being so chicken before. It was hard to get her hands under her from behind, but when she shifted to lay on her side, Vidar stopped her.

“I want to watch you sit on it,” he smiled.

He was enjoying watching her struggle. His amusement at her ignorance stung, but she held the thing vertically beneath her as she returned to kneeling. That slimy, cold sensation of it rubbing ineffectively against her cleft was almost as uncomfortable as his intense stare and entertained grin. After failing to find a source of give while maintaining a sliver of dignity by leaning forward and pressing down on it, a wave of further mortification washed over her as she accepted that this angle wasn’t going to achieve anything but prolonging this task. Holding back her sob, she scrunched her eyes shut and leaned back, displaying everything to him and knowing he looked by his pleased hum. She’d never felt so exposed in her life.

“A-ah!” she gasped as the pointed tip parted her inner muscle, the awkward discomfort of invasion still something she doubted she could ever get used to.

“Ease onto it,” he directed her, his voice huskier than it was. She shivered at the touch of his hands sliding up her inner thighs, the fact that it felt nice and soothing was worse than if it had hurt. This was disgusting and humiliating, it was only meant to degrade, she shouldn’t even be capable of feeling pleasure. She wondered how she was even surprised anymore. “Relax, little bitch. Part your knees wider. Let me see you stuff your hole with your tail.”

“Yes, Sir…” she whimpered, hating how her voice cracked.

Forcing her muscles not to clench around the alien intrusion was more difficult when she was the one controlling how slowly it slid in. Sweat beaded and crawled down her bared skin and her controlled breaths soon huffed out of her in labored pants and hitched groans. No matter how far she tried to put her mind from this humiliation, she couldn’t get far from that slick spread into her ass or the burn of his stare. Each time she was sure it had slid in all the way, her steadying fingers at the flared base of the steel brushed up the inches she had to go.

“Fy faen…” he chuckled. “You are simply adorable, little bitch. Papa did not fuck your asshole enough to teach you, no?”

“I don’t know…” she whispered.
She had no idea what Leif had done with her body all those years, just that it had started when she was fourteen and he had waited until she was seventeen before engaging in full penetrative sex with her. Six years of being her own father’s unknowing rape victim, only to become his occasionally willing lover. She was truly vile. A broken grunt escaped her when she bared down on the toy, sliding it all the way in with a surprisingly painless but disturbing quickness. She opened her eyes, her head tilted back as she panted through this strange fullness. It wasn’t unpleasant, just so very odd, though she didn’t doubt that Vidar would make it unpleasant on her shortly. She hoped he would. The low hum of arousal that had steadily gained volume in her body was frightening to her.

“Look at me, bitch,” he ordered. That never-ending blush renewed with vigor as she forced herself to comply, tilting her head forward until she briefly met his burning gaze before shifting it lower to see him slowly palming his cock through his slacks and holding the riding crop across his lap. She settled for fixing her stare on his neck. “Show me how you touch yourself.”

“What?” she rasped, not wanting to understand the command.

“I want to watch you masturbate,” he clarified in a clipped tone. “Now, little bitch.”

“Yessir,” she hurriedly mumbled, the sight of that riding crop injecting an urgency into her.

She reached a shaking hand between her legs, pursing her lips as they traced the outside of her opening to find it wet. Strange. She didn’t think she’d gotten any of the goop up there. Her fingertips dipped into her heat, her curiosity giving way to further confusion and then horror at finding her cunt dripping wet.

“Oh, God…” she breathed, her lungs squeezing the whisper out of her in shock.

She’d gotten wet from this. Not just a little bit, but achingly drenched with such a volume that it ran down to join the mess she’d made with the goop at her ass. He knew. He’d literally had a front row seat to this depravity and he had watched her drip from it. Just the light brush of her fingertips had made her throb and ache for more contact even as she was sick with disgust at herself.

“Look at me, bitch, do not just look at my shirt,” he ordered.

With a shudder, she pulled her bleary eyes to his hungry expression. Not too long ago, she would have never expected this man to look at her with such dangerous lust written all over him. It was also not too long ago that she’d never thought she would participate in incest. The scent of his arousal was obvious to her sensitive nose even above the scent of her own, blending that similar quality she had come to identify among the brothers and within herself. The singular defining genetic pattern that determined them to be Valstads, carrying the same blood as those demented murderers who had transformed her father into one of them. Maybe it was hereditary that they should traumatize their following generation into becoming monsters. Vidar seemed to have a design for what shape of monster he would mold her to become, just as Leif had for her, just as Einar had for him.

His heavy gaze impatiently flicking to her face drew her back to this horrible moment. Dragging up some of that copious slick to circle her throbbing clit, that strange fullness in her ass suddenly transformed into something thrillingly pleasurable as she rubbed herself. In the blinding savagery of their frantic rutting yesterday, her mind was too far gone to perceive exactly what was happening to her, but now she was aware of everything. The gasp she made was embarrassingly loud, uncontrollable from the sudden shock of pleasure the two sensations brought. She didn’t want this. She was sure she didn’t want this, but she was already so close to coming, a heady pressure building in both her ass and her cunt as her legs parted wider and her fingers rubbed in tight circles at her clit. Another gasp, then a moan, an undeniable moan, and her pelvic muscles were tightening. This was happening too fast. Too much, too fast, but she was already past the point of needing it now.
Before she could hold it back, she growled in aggravation, the sound halting halfway out of her but too late to stop it as she dragged her hand away. His disapproving scowl made her wish she could suck that sound out of the air and hide it away. The unexpected crack and fiery sting of the crop erupting a flash of pure pain from the top of her left thigh made her gasp to keep from screaming. She gripped the long line of agony and hunched over it as though to smother the pain, huffing in the effort to contain it. Before she could begin to recover, the collar yanked at her stitches as he pulled her up by the leash and she followed his lead to lessen that choking pressure as he spoke.

“You cannot help yourself, yes? Pathetic little dog. Fucking yourself in front of your master. I should have you fixed.”

He dragged her, leading her by the leash until she was laying on her front halfway off the table, bent over the side at her hips. Panic gripped her when he slid her wrists into leather cuffs, but he struck the crop hard across her bared and raised buttocks in three quick successions, cancelling any attempts to struggle as she yelped and shivered in pain. Each blow of that deceptively thin and simple strip brought a lightening strike behind her eyes that blinded her with agony, reducing her actions to just trying to manage through it. She barely noticed he’d tightened the cuffs and had tied them to the table by their long leather straps until it was already done.

“So needy for cock…” he chided as he knelt behind her. She turned her head, but she couldn’t turn far enough to see what he was doing with her arms tied so tightly to the table. She didn’t give into the impulse to kick when she felt him buckle the cuffs at her ankles and spread them wider apart to tie them to the table legs. Just the thought of resisting made those throbbing lashes across her backside burn anew. “Your papa did not need to try hard, no?... Answer, bitch.”

“No, Sir,” she responded automatically. Sorrow curled in her chest at that. It was never hard for Leif to fuck her, one way or another. Nothing had deterred him. Not their relation, not her age, not her degree of willingness, nothing. Vidar had that quality in common with him, too. She was beginning to suspect Anders to be unique in his reluctance to hurt or force her. Reluctance, but not refusal. She had to remember that Anders was not so different when it came down to it.

Without warning, Vidar pushed the dangling tail aside and pushed his cock against her, the thick head slipping into her sopping cunt with more readiness than she was mentally prepared for. She strained against her bonds, the thick leather more pliant than steel chains but no less giving when she tried to twist out of them. She’d thought she was resigned to this fate, that her guilt would make accepting this rape something she could bare with some level of grace, but that instinct to flee from this brutal male was more powerful than her guilt or her knowledge of the riding crop.

“Wait, wait, please stop! I don’t want to- Ah!” she stammered, yelping as that crop cut across her already whipped back, igniting the raw welts and cuts her father had sliced into her with his belt.

As she gasped in gulping, shuddering sobs, she felt Vidar push into her, stretching her tensed cunt around his cock as he jeered, “It feels good, yes? Enjoy what you can, little bitch. You are for my pleasure.”
card was on his desk that morning, the card simply letting him know they were all sorry for his difficult time. He supposed there wasn’t really a market for “sorry your brother turned out to be a murderer and tried to kill you” cards. He peeled a banana from the arrangement, feeling guilty that he considered their concern an inconvenience but holding that opinion regardless. He should have been touched at the gesture and gracious at accepting their sappy platitudes, their pitying glances, their inane flaunting of how much they cared, but he just wanted to forget about it for a while and work. Another knock on his door nearly had him yell at whoever it was to stop interrupting his work before his supervisor came in.

“Jon, everything alright?” Anders asked, rising from his seat when he saw his vexed expression.

“Go home, Anders,” Jon ordered flatly.

“I’m telling you, I’m fine,” he insisted, easing back down into the chair. Getting up was always easier than going back down with his injury, especially after repacking the wound that morning.

“You can either go home or let me take you to lunch,” Jon threatened good-naturedly, his grin peeking out beneath his gray beard. “And the intern is already coming along. You and that niece of yours is about all he wants to talk about. I don’t know why you opened up to the kid, but I’m glad you’re finally talking about it to someone.”

“Oh, uh, I just really have a lot to do, so, I’ll have to skip out on lunch this time,” Anders winced.

“Okay. Go home, spend time with your folks, then. Call Stefan if you don’t want to come in tomorrow.”

“But I-”

“Drive safely,” Jon interrupted, a stern glint behind his grin. He pointed at Anders before he left, leaving the door open behind him.

Anders leaned over his desk and sighed out a groan. He could do the majority of this work at home, but when he was home, he was too distracted by his Simone to want to work. When he was at work, work didn’t want him to work. Packing up his briefcase, he contemplated just quitting and moving him and Simone to where his personal life wasn’t a national sensation.
Chapter 52

“Dr. Wallis’ office, how may I help you?”

“Yes, I was wondering if I could schedule an appointment for someone?” Anders asked, the phone tucked between his cheek and shoulder as he carried the two large bags of dog food down the street. All the load was bared under one arm while the other wrangled the cane to lessen the burden on his bad leg, a risky endeavor to begin with and steadily proving to lack the sustainability he’d hoped for.

“When was the patient last seen?”

“Never. We were recommended to Dr. Wallis by a, uh, a friend.”

“I’m sorry, but Dr. Wallis is not accepting any new patients at this time.”

“Fuck!” he grunted, one of the bags slipping out of his hold. “Sorry- not you! Um… look, we were told to contact him by a man named Maier. He works for the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

“I apologize, but again, we are not accepting new patients. If this is an emergency, call 113 or contact your GP.”

Anders registered the flat tone of disbelief in the question and nearly growled in frustration as he bent and picked up the heavy bag of kibble. “Would you just take my number down and tell him this is for Simone Valstad? You know, the daughter of that killer?”

“Your GP will refer you to services that can help you, sir. Goodbye.”

The line cut with a sharp click and this time Anders let out that growl, cursing heavily under his breath as he set the bags down next to his car. Henrik had set up an appointment for both him and Simone with an apparently discreet and sympathetic doctor tomorrow, but she couldn’t be referred to just any therapist with her issues. She needed someone who would both believe the things she’s gone through and not turn her- and certainly also him- over to the police for it. He leaned against the side of his car to take the pressure off his sore wounds and breathe an aggravated sigh as he pushed down all the stress. He had gotten what he wanted: his sweet Simone under his care and away from the madness of Leif, though he didn’t know that he would be so lost in how to care for her. Every move felt like a mistake.

As he drove toward home, he couldn’t stop that guilty line of thought. Anything was better than the life she’d had, but he wanted her life to be good, not just better. He wanted to be good for her. She wasn’t thriving; if anything, she seemed to only be retreating further into herself, reluctant to even seek comfort in him and skittish when she did. That brief moment she’d opened up to him last night had only shown him a glimpse of how dangerous her damage was. Anders had once reasoned to Vidar that she was only seeking the familiar, but really, he was the one who was lost and sticking to what was familiar instead of thinking about what was necessary. He had to accept that nothing he was familiar with could apply to her or their relationship.

The way Simone moaned when he pulled and wriggled her tail made Vidar change his mind on pulling it out to replace it with his cock quite yet, but her cunt felt a little too good to last as long as
he needed. Not that her ass was any less accommodating to his pleasure. He tugged harder on her tail, smirking at the way she clenched and nearly wailed in distress at the pressure against that ring of muscle keeping it locked in. He shouldn’t have started fucking her yet. It hadn’t even been a full day since their last session and he was still so impatient to fuck her; it was unlike him to have so little self-discipline. At least, it used to be unlike him, before Leif poured acid onto his brain and changed him.

He needed a distraction from the delightful pressure building in his groin, anything to prolong this special moment of bonding with their slave.

“Tell me how it did start with your father,” he said, pushing and holding his throbbing cock deep inside her. She was a bit too small to take all of him and made these delightful little panicked whimpers when he mashed against her limit. “How young were you?”

Simone cringed and shivered beneath him at the question, leaving him to assume the worst when she answered in a strained whisper, “I don’t… remember, Sir, I was… hnh… drugged a lot, I… Please, Sir, I don’t like being tied up, can you—”

“I don’t give a shit,” he sneered, stopping her complaint with a yank on her leash.

She made a yelp that was strangled by the collar as her back arched into his pull, that cut at her neck no doubt hurting a good amount, but her shackled wrists prevented her from bowing backward very far. Her muscles were tensed in pain, sweat glistening and causing her wavy mane to stick to her back in sprawling tendrils, doing well enough to cover up some of those cuts and mottled bruises.

Although an elegant sight, he couldn’t ignore that it seemed his irresponsible little brother didn’t even think to apply an ointment to those open cuts. If their pet was left with any more permanent marks not of their own making, there was going to be hell to pay. This distraction worked to stave off the risk of ending this session too soon and he eased slack into the leash, letting her recover her breath in shaking gasps as he bent to press her down against the table and fuck into her in short, sharp jerks of his pelvis.

“You whine that you don’t like this but- ah!- your little snatch is more and more wet,” he whispered into her ear, then bit the shell of it hard enough to mark. She flinched and hissed through the bite, her snug cunt cinching even tighter as she tensed until he had to release her ear with a groan. “Fuck… Your body does not lie to me. Mmm… This skin, this sweat, this little cunt… How can I decline? You do this to us, bitch. You make us do this to you and you want it. Tell me you want it, little bitch!”

“I don’t want to want this!” she moaned miserably.

He laughed at that, punishing her cheeky response with harder thrusts, knocking the end of the table against the wall and forcing pained grunts from her. Her resistance was still so endearing, he almost regretted needing to train it out of her, but she was adapting quickly to her new masters. Soon enough, he would have her to where she would respond to him with complete obedience. He would break her down to that most core part of her, the part that was made to serve them, and brush away the ruin of all that extra waste she had accumulated. No more of this coy denial of what she was, no more believing herself to be anything more than their pet. She would become perfect. The tension in his pelvis fed into a throb that travelled from his sac to his tip, making his rhythm stutter before that pleasure soared too high. With her bent and bound beneath him, brought low in humiliation and fear, trying not to cry and frequently failing whenever he would ram into her or tease the crop along her skin, it was all too lovely.

“Your father did not train you enough,” he said, kneading the soft flesh of her pronounced hips. “But you will learn.”

“Please, I don’t want to… I don’t want to…” she blubbered pathetically through her crying.
Every piece of her was soft, nothing but powdered silk over pliant feminine curves and taut slender plains. Her appearance had tempted touch even before he’d acknowledged the depth of his sexual attraction, when she was still his cute young niece instead of this lustful subhuman slave. He was no longer confused or conflicted by his desire, he would teach her to do the same. It was his responsibility as one of her masters to do so. He slid the tip of the riding crop along her flank, chuckling as her panting took on a more terrified edge, and pressed his thumb to her plush lips until she took it in. The feel of her slick tongue under his thumb and the moist suck of her mouth brought him to the edge of his plateau in the space of a gasp. He needed to decide where to fuck her next before he let it spill into her cunt, that looming ordeal of having to gamble an abortion with her so soon not something he wanted to deal with. However, the dogs suddenly barking excitedly and their blunt claws tapping loudly as they galloped towards the front of the house pulled him away from that edge with the immediate realization that his brother had come home early.

Anders leaned the cane against the wall as he thumbed for his house key on the ring, grumbling when the cane slid and fell with a clatter. The gang was barking with increasing excitement, eager for their bowls to be filled despite knowing full well it was hours yet until feeding time, but there was a higher pitch to their yipping and yapping. Last time they’d made this type of ruckus, they’d wanted to show him a monstrously huge rat they had cornered under the wood burning stove. Before he could fit his key into the lock, a different species of intruder opened the door for him.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Anders asked loudly above the barking.

Vidar grabbed the bag of kibble from him and answered with a rigidly calm, “Keeping our girl company while you’re away.”

Anders followed, his surprise at seeing him falling away into anger as he frowned, “I don’t recall giving you permission to enter my damned house whenever you please.”

“I didn’t need your permission. I’m here as Simone’s guest,” Vidar answered breezily, opening the dog supply closet and setting the heavy bag down behind the opened one as though he knew the entire routine. The dogs’ barking redirected from the closet to Anders, their whining bays trying to get his attention down the hall. In the handful of times Anders had invited his brother over and he’d actually come, he shouldn’t have gathered that much on the inner workings of his home. Anders’ glare hardened in suspicion at just how much time his brother had been spending here without his knowledge.

“Where is she?” he asked, his annoyance rising to cover that creeping anxiety sliding into his thoughts. He wanted to trust his brother. Seeing how Vidar and Simone had interacted almost normally during the dinner at the farm, having a full conversation between them even, had given him hope that they could be a real family at least sometimes. Alone and behind closed doors were not conditions he could trust his brother to behave like a real family with their niece, however.

Vidar shut the closet before the dogs could crowd inside, turning slowly to regard him with an odd smirk that made Anders tense. “She was feeling a bit unsure of where her life is right now, understandably, so I was helping her learn her place.”

“That didn’t answer my question,” Anders tried not to sneer.

“Could you send the dogs out? It’s hard to hear you.”
Anders pursed his lips in aggravation, but pivoted on his good leg and trudged back to the door. Why his brother had frequently refused to give him a direct answer to anything asked of him was an old annoyance, one that still rankled him no matter how many years went by with the same irritating patterns. If Vidar had any idea that Simone was possibly suicidal, perhaps he wouldn’t be so flippant when asked about her.

“Go on! Out!” he ordered the gang as he pulled open the front door.

They rushed out, needing no further prompting except for Rolf. The yellow lab only whined at him when Anders whistled for him to go, his head and tail low as he trotted down the hallway instead of following the pack outside. Anders watched in bewilderment, worried that maybe he was hurt, then saw that Vidar had vanished.

“Vid?” he called as he followed the dog.

No answer came. He wasn’t surprised, only further irritated at his older brother’s puerile little power games. He was going to have a talk with him; it was far past time they gave up these sibling annoyances and started treating each other like polite adults. It was funny sometimes, but not right now, not when things had become so strange. Rolf turned into the kitchen and Anders rolled his eyes at the dog’s incessant ploys for human food. Rounding the corner, his uneven stride stopped in the doorway, at first confused at what he saw, and then worried. Strewn on the floor were some of Simone’s new clothes, some lengths of chain, and his largest kitchen knife. Rolf sniffed at the clothes and looked at him with a distressed whine and a half-yip.

“What has that strange girl been up to…” he mumbled, then called into the house, “Vid! Simone?”

Only a heavy thump from the other side of the house responded. With another aggravated sigh, he headed towards it, soon hearing the muted sounds of quiet conversation coming from his bedroom. Or, not so much a conversation as just Vidar’s muted murmurs with Simone’s breathy little grunts of acknowledgement. Anders hesitated in the hall, that anxiety welling inside him. He was going to have to see and deal with whatever was behind that teasingly ajar door. His hand rested on the knob, his stomach twisting into knots as he tried to prepare himself for what he might see. He wanted to trust his brother, but he knew him too well. He gripped the cane at its center of gravity, readying himself for the possibility of committing violence against Vidar, and pushed the door open. With a deep breath to press down the brief impulse to yell, he looked into the dimly lit bedroom to see Vidar holding Simone tucked into a hug against his side as they sat at the foot of the bed.

Vidar stroked her hair and gently whispered, “Your papa is here. Will you not say hello?”

She shook her head and mumbled something Anders couldn’t hear, her voice small and quivering as it got when she cried, a fact confirmed to him when he saw her shiver in a quiet sob from under the bundle of flannel she had wrapped around her. That heart-wrenching need to soothe her drained the terror and violence from him, making him walk toward them to sit on the other side of her and brush her hair away from her face. She felt feverish again, damp with sweat, and she shivered at his touch.

“Is it the withdrawal?” he asked, that nightmarish memory of her seizing on the motel floor coating his brain in worry. “We’re going to see a doctor tomorrow, but should I take her in tonight?”

“That’s not the kind of attention she needs right now,” Vidar said, speaking with an uncharacteristic softness. Anders watched as his brother’s long fingers tipped her chin up to show them her tear-stained face. With her reddened eyelids screwed shut, her wet cheeks flushed, thick eyelashes matted and glistening, and lips swollen and raw from biting to keep from sobbing, the old shame at finding all this so morbidly appealing shocked through him. He knew if he kissed her now, he would find her rosy lips hot and plump with the blood she’d teased near the skin’s surface. Apparently, his
brother thought something of the same as he pressed the pad of his thumb to the plush pout of her lower lip, whispering, “She needs relief and comfort, Anders. We can provide her what she needs.”

Anders watched, confused but mesmerized as her eyes opened into glittering slivers, the tears welling in them feeding into the trails of the others when she parted her soft lips to take in that probing thumb. Her expression was so sad and pleading, nearly in agony. Relief and comfort; he could give her that much, at least. Vidar’s fingers hooked to grasp her jaw as he pushed his thumb deeper into her mouth, her eyes closing with a slight moan of protest stifled behind the round seal of her lips. Anders tensed, snapping out of that brief stupor at the small sound of her distress.

“Stop this,” he said to both his brother and that terrible thrill building in himself.

Vidar did not, instead leaning down to whisper to her as he slowly pumped his thumb deep in her mouth, “Tell us what you need, sweetheart, say it as we did talk about.”

Anders couldn’t look away even if he wanted to as that thumb slid out of her mouth, wet with her saliva and pushing against her lips to show off how pillowy soft they were, leaving the darkened skin glistening like ripe fruit. That unstoppable pressure in his groin signaled the truth of his desire as his cock began to fatten, that sight reminding him of just how skillfully that mouth and throat could work him.

“I n-need…” she stammered, so quavering and quiet that he found himself leaning lower to hear her, drawn to the motion of those tempting lips. “I need my m-masters to… take… their pleasure.”

“Good girl,” Vidar grinned, his long fingers trailing down her neck and pulling aside the blanket to reveal the thick black collar.

The glinting metal ring dangling from the center of that leather and chain leading from it caught Anders’ eye and he could feel the physical sweep of blood draining from his face in a heated flash. He knew what his brother had been doing here while he was gone and as much as he didn’t want to believe it, all the proof was there in the leather and metal around her neck. The proof was also in her flushed cheeks and, as Vidar continued to slowly pull the blanket from her, her heaving chest. The scents of both her fear and arousal hit him then, that heady combination turning the horror of his realization sideways and making his mouth water with want to taste their presence in the salt of her sweat and the slick of her cunt. He swallowed thickly, tearing his eyes away from the widening part in the blanket that revealed only more and more of her bare skin, and focused on what was more important than his greedy lust. His glare latched onto that wolfish grin of his brother’s, his sharp teeth far too close to the fragile girl between them. The urge to see those teeth drag up her inner thigh as they held her squirming limbs down and splayed on the bed played in his mind before he could dispel it.

“I told you to keep this shit away from her,” he nearly growled.

“I couldn’t let your state of denial deny her of what she needs,” Vidar responded coolly. “You’d let her destroy herself in confusion and repression for your puritan peace of mind. This needs to happen for both of your sake.”

Anders’ hand lashed out and snatched his brother’s wrist, but not before he could pull the blanket off her shoulders entirely. She winced, turning her face downward again to hide her shame as her breasts were exposed, her nipples hardening in the cool air with a shiver. Vidar twisted out of his grip, his surprisingly quick movements turning to grasp Anders’ wrist instead and force his hand to her chest. The gasp she made as her sensitive breast filled his palm short-circuited his attempt to pull away, neither retreating nor indulging in the impulse to squeeze that softness.
“We can’t do this,” he said. He wasn’t sure if he was speaking more to his brother or himself. “We can’t… I can’t do this to her again. She could barely even look at me after last time.”

“This is different from last time,” Vidar assured him, pressing Anders’ hand more firmly against her breast. The hard little pebble of her nipple scraped the toughened skin of his palm and drew a breathy whimper from her that melted Anders’ resolve alarmingly. His brother’s words sunk into his mind like a sweet poison. “She wants to give it another try. We can show her how well we will take care of her, that there’s nothing to be so afraid or ashamed of in what she wants. She’s so afraid of herself, Anders. She needs our guidance and direction to help her accept these urges as natural.”

“Stop this,” Anders growled.

His head was pounding in rhythm to her heart beating under his hand, fast and strong. She was so small; they could tear her apart without even meaning to, force her to do whatever they wanted, and he couldn’t deny that there were strange parts inside them both that would be fulfilled in doing exactly that. His hand slid away from her heart and grabbed her chain leash, pulling it until she stood off the bed, the blanket falling to reveal her complete nudity but for a few striking accessories. He should have been enraged at the violation his brother had committed, or at least disgusted at the depravity of it, but wanting to feel those things was not enough to produce them. The collar, the leash, the tail, the staggering vulnerability of her arms being bound behind her were all so morosely appealing. His mind seemed suspended in that thick arousal, unable to think past all the flitting images of fucking her into the mattress with her unable to even attempt fighting him.

“She wants this,” Vidar whispered, his hand stroking of the side of her thigh to trace the shape of her hip, his nails dragging to leave faint lines on her skin. She let out a shaking sigh that made Anders ache, his cock straining against his slacks already. “Tell your papa how much you are wanting us to use you, sweetheart.”

She didn’t turn to face him, her head still bowed low and trying to hide her face behind her hair as she said in a thin whisper, “I want you to use me… however you want to. Please, just… just do it… papa.”

Her words barely translated through the thick barrier of his thoughts. I want you to and please dripped through his ears and tingled down his spine as his eyes trailed down the leash to see it still gripped in his hand. This wasn’t how this was supposed to happen, but things never did go as they were supposed to with this strange girl. None of this was supposed to have happened. She was his niece, his lover, his daughter, and now she was something he didn’t want to acknowledge. Maybe, like those other roles, it would be alright if she was this one only in these moments. Nothing outside of this room had to change. This could lead to healthier things; they could get all these strange urges out here, in a safely contained space, so they would stop bleeding into those other roles.

“You are needing this, dearest?” he asked as he pulled at her leash and she followed automatically, facing him and stepping between his knees.

“Yes, papa,” she whispered, her breath hitching at the edge of a sob before she added in a mumble, “I need you to dissolve these barriers I’ve built to protect myself, Papa.”

He could see that her cunt and the tops of her inner thighs were glistening wet, her cute little labia raw pink and swollen with need, and he gave into the desire to touch without any further thought beyond his own want to feel it. She flinched and whimpered at the slide of his fingertips grazing along her slit and pressing against her labia and he stared at her face as she tried to contain her reaction. Just this slight touch seemed nearly unbearable to her in the way she bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut, her breasts quivering from her shaking chest as she restrained her cries when he sunk two fingers into her soaked heat.
“She’s going to cry if you keep teasing her, littlest brother,” Vidar smirked in a low, husky drawl as he slid his hand around to her ass and she whined in the back of her throat as he tugged her tail, her cunt sucking on Anders’ fingers in response. “She’s so pretty when she cries.”

Anders nodded absently, his focus almost entirely on the white of her teeth sunk into her lower lip. She’d bit his neck the first time he’d made love to her and left him with a bruise that had sparked his memory of that drunken mistake the following morning. He’d felt so much worse at that moment than any guilt he’d felt recently, but that night seemed so innocent in comparison to everything they’d done since. He’d promised her then, in the definitive sincerity of the very drunk, to take her home with him. He’d promised he would make her happy. So far, he’d upheld half of his promise. She bent easily when he pulled her leash, the tail sliding out of Vidar’s hand as she knelt, and he leaned forward to keep his fingers hooked inside her and finally kiss her mouth. She parted for him obediently, allowing him to slide his tongue inside and devour her moan as he started to pump his fingers. Vidar moved silently to stand behind her, the slight sounds of him undressing seeming to make her tense and breathe quicker. Anders smiled and chuckled against their kiss at her rising excitement. He pumped his fingers into her faster and she broke away from the kiss in a gasp, her cunt grinding against his motions desperately.

“You like this?” he asked, gripping her hair and forcing her to look at him. She panted through that pain and gazed at him pleadingly through half-lidded eyes, shame and arousal written into her every feature. His cock throbbed to replace his fingers. “Say it, dear.”

“I like it, papa,” she whispered, voice high and breaking. She blinked the tears out of her eyes, the crystalline drops crawling down the paths of the many others only to be immediately replaced by fresh ones.

His hand moved from her hair to wrap around her neck above the collar, the fear widening her watery eyes beckoning his darker desires as he repeated lower, “Say it, dear.”

“I… I like it, pap-”

He cut her words off manually with a firm squeeze, his breath easing out of him in a slow sigh as he watched in fascination at how she grimaced in pain and panic and jerked in his hands. The thin amount of air she managed to wheeze past his hold squeaked in what he knew was meant to be a scream and her arms strained against the binds holding them behind her back. Her cunt was squeezing his fingers as she twitched and bucked spasmodically. The first time he’d choked her, he had no idea what he was doing or what it’d meant. She was trying to tell him, in the only way she could back then, that her father had been abusing her, but she’d also wanted it. That paradoxical repulsion and desire boiled in his own mind, building to this moment where he finally had her elegant neck in his grasp and he watched her struggle for the breath he denied her. The power was even more intoxicating than he’d imagined in his guilt-ridden fantasies, though there was more than this he’d yearned to do to her from that shadowed corner of his desire. Vidar’s hands snaked around her front to squeeze her breasts, his nails digging into the pillowy flesh and leaving red lines in their wake, but she didn’t seem to actively be aware of much aside from her increasing desperation to breathe. When her knees began to buckle, Anders let go of her neck and pussy to toss her by her shoulders onto the bed, yanking her away from Vidar’s cruel touch.

Anders watched her cough and gasp to recover her oxygen as he undressed, fingers yanking buttons loose and stretching fabric in his breathless anticipation of fulfillment. As he laid down next to her, he was struck by just how quickly this had all happened. Not even a week into having her, and they were already indulging in these awful fantasies. She startled out of her coughing fit when he grabbed her by the back of her collar and dragged her over his naked lap, her gasps now rapid more from fear than from need. The inability to take the future for granted anymore had stolen much patience and
reason for him to deny himself of any opportunity that was presented. Now or never had a very
different sentiment since never had become such a real possibility. She struggled, making panicked
little grunts as she tried to resist his hands prying her legs open, but without the use of her arms and
with his brother coming up behind her, she was so deliciously helpless.

“Wait, wait, I can’t do this- Please, don’t make me do this again, Sir!” she whimpered as Vidar
grabbed her up and pulled her to him.

Anders watched in thrilling astonishment at how she froze when Vidar tapped the tip of a riding crop
to her bare cunt and curled his hand around her abused neck as he commanded into her ear, “Be a
good girl and fuck your papa’s cock, little bitch.”

“Christ, Vid…” he breathed, his eyes darting between the crop and her terrified expression, his
uncertainty warring in him. She was truly frightened, the pretense of this just being rough play gone
when he saw how she trembled in Vidar’s arms. They were pushing her too far. He hated how it
excited him.

“It’s just the adrenaline making her flighty,” Vidar said dismissively. He angled her head back,
fingers gripping her jaw, and smiled down at her face as he sawed the long stem of the crop against
her pussy and gently cooed, “You still love your papa, right, sweetheart?”

She shuddered, but gave a short nod in response, as much as his gripping fingers allowed. Still
holding her head back, he pushed her forward as he walked on his knees toward Anders, and this
time, she straddled his lap automatically as he pulled her hips over him. Vidar whispered something
into her ear as he dragged the crop up her middle and Anders watched, freezing this moment in his
mind to remember every detail. His sweet Simone poised over his cock as he laid beneath her, the
sheen of sweat glowing golden on her skin in the shaded sunlight filtered through the blinds, her
head submissively tilted back to expose the bruises that he had made along her throat, her back
arched and arms bound; he wanted to be able to recall everything, even his shame. Gripping his cock
and her hip, he eased her onto it before he let himself examine that shame. This was what she’d
admitted to wanting. This was what they were there for.

“Ah! Papa!” she gasped, her voice high and tight as though in pain as his tip sank into her.

“Good girl…” he breathed. She was still too tight even after working her with his fingers, her every
muscle seeming to be rigid in tension, and she whimpered pathetically as he fucked into her. He
knew he should slow down, that this was painful for her, but she was more than wet enough and he
knew she loved the pain. She had to. She’d said she did, even if she didn’t want to admit it even to
herself. Vidar released her chin and pushed her to bend forward, the motion forcing her to take his
cock suddenly to the hilt and she cried out in a jagged yelp that was pure pain, the sound and the
pleasure of being enveloped in her heavenly cunt drawing a deep groan from Anders. He held her
down on him in a firm embrace, that sweet friction driving him to grind into her deeply, forcing
breathy little moans from her that were thick with sobs.

“Papa… please, it hurts…” she moaned against his neck.

“I know,” was all he could think to say.

That seemed to drain the will to resist out of her, her body going limp on him and making it easier for
him to move inside her. She laid crying on top of him as he started fucking her harder and he held
her tightly, stroking her hair and shushing her as she sobbed and gasped with each thrust. He
reminded himself that this wasn’t rape, that this was all just a game no matter how enthrallingly
convincing. He had to get out all those urges to force and to hurt her here and now. He felt her flinch
and shudder and looked to see Vidar pulling the tail out, the metal plug hitting the floor with a
thump. He paused his thrusts as Vidar gripped her hips and pushed his cock into her ass, his glare focused intensely on where he sunk into her. Watching her take his brother’s dick into her ass, the tight little pucker stretching taut around the shaft as he rocked it deeper and deeper inside, was a captivating image.

“Ah… ahh, ple-ease stop…” she sobbed against him.

“Bear it, little bitch,” Vidar sneered, making her cry out when he snapped his hips into her harshly.

“Hell…” Anders grunted, feeling the movement of the other cock rubbing against the flesh between her vagina and rectum. That it was his brother’s penis probably should have bothered him more, but the hypocrisy of the circumstance and the haze of arousal made it more acceptable than it should have been. It was hard to care about much of anything past how her clenching cunt made him moan and buck into her. The added weight of Vidar pressing down on her as he leaned over them made it more difficult to fuck into her, but his brother’s harder thrusts and rapid pace moved her on him well enough to build the throbbing pressure of an imminent and powerful orgasm. She was moaning high and loud with each slap of Vidar’s hips against her ass and thighs, her wordless cries of distress rising above the concerned whining and scratching of Rolf on the other side of the shut door. He laid his head back, his eyes screwing shut as he focused on the overwhelming stimulation and sighed, “Fuck, dearest, I love you …”

She buried her face into the crook of his neck and he caressed her sides and back soothingly, enjoying the feel of her skin on his hands and against his body as she moaned and mumbled through her sobs, “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry… ah, AH! Oh, god… I deserve this… I’m so sorry…”

“Yes, you deserve this, little bitch,” Vidar grinned, huffing out the words as he fucked into her harder.

Anders hissed when this made her wail and constrict around his cock, his nails digging into her delicate and sensitive skin to push down that need to spill into her. She was shaking on him to endure the cock slamming into her ass, each thrust knocking a quavering grunt out of her and rubbing against him. He rocked into the brutal pace Vidar set, feeling her body tense and writhing uselessly between them as her moaning shifted higher. She was going to come. The realization made him dizzy, but this feeling of her beginning to bare down and the contraction of her deeper muscles was an unmistakable signal. Vidar pressed down hard into her with a low, drawn out groan and he could feel him twitching and throbbing deep in her ass, undoubtedly filling her hole with semen. Anders fucked up into her harder without Vidar’s added thrusting.

“OH, ohh… papa… papaa…!” she moaned, her hips bucking erratically, her wetness dribbling down his tensing sac. His thrusts were driving him rapidly towards his limit, but he could last just a bit longer.

“Come for me, dearest,” he whispered.

She obeyed, her cunt pulsing around him as she cried out, allowing him to let go of his control and fall off that edge with her. He crushed her to him as he mashed his flexing cock deep, spilling against that thin barrier to her womb as she milked his seed from him. The ragged sighs wracked from his heaving growled out of him in the euphoric ecstasy of release in his sweet girl until those waves of pleasure rolled back, leaving him panting and holding her sobbing little body in the calm of the afterglow.
Chapter 53

The deeply pungent smoke was harsh in Leif’s lungs, thick and heavy as he held it, nearly giving the sensation of it weighing down on his chest. With practiced control, he eased it up to billow in twin streams out of his nostrils, but the notion of ash remained heavy in his lungs. Almost in tandem with his exhalation, the hashish and tobacco stirred a familiar high that he leaned into as he passed the jade chillum to his right. Gnarled fingers gingerly plucked the ancient pipe from his unsteady grip. The sour chemical scent of the darkroom hung as heavy as the sense of his uncle’s presence.

“Feel better, Leif?”

He opened his eyes to the early afternoon sunlight casting down its warm rays on his face, but when he turned to look at the man sitting against the fence with him, he was alone. The pipe dangled from his outstretched fingers, waiting for the ghost to take his turn at the blend. He could wait forever. In a way, he had always been waiting for the vengeful spirits of the lives he had ended to come for him or the love he felt for his fallen comrades to beckon them back to him, but even after crossing over and back, the only ghosts that followed him were memories and debts. He lined up the pipe, cupping his hand around the base and pulling the flame of the lighter into it with a long, slow drag. The sun’s warmth was pleasant on his face, the breeze tickling through the start of his beard. He couldn’t blame them for denying him a razor; they knew what he would do with it once he’d finished shaving. He ran a hand through the rapidly growing hairs along his sharp jawline, considering the staggering amount of gray with a chuckle. Soon enough, if this trend of waking up alive every day continued, all his hair would be as silver as his daughter’s eyes.

“Good afternoon, Valstad,” a man greeted him, the familiar whispery voice taking him more by surprise than the boldness of this guest addressing him directly.

Of memories and debts, the voice from the phone call that had warned him shortly before the network had collected his fresh corpse was a debt with no memory. They’re coming for you. They’re all coming for you now. Move.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he responded, the smoke puffing along with his words as he squinted up at the old man. He held the pipe up to him in offering and, also to his surprise, the old man accepted it. When he offered the lighter, he waved him off, producing a magnifying glass from under his dusty suit jacket. Leif watched in mild amusement as the man held the small circle of glass up to the sun, angling the collection of rays into the pipe until, after just a moment, smoke puffed out from the seal between his mouth and fist at the base of the chillum. Taking the pipe back, he asked, “Are you here for the funeral?”

“Ultimately, yes,” the man answered, smoke crawling out from beneath his dreadlocked beard and between his yellowed teeth. Leif tried to place where he knew him, but the memory was just teasingly out of reach. It occurred to him that this was probably how his daughter must have felt much of the time. “But presently, also yes. Terrible way to go for that Marceau. They took him out of the oven too soon.”

Each word this man spoke grated some deeply buried part of his memories with an almost physical sensation of sparks flying along long-inactive synapses. He knew him, he no longer doubted that, but there was nothing he could recall beyond that basic fact. Considering that they were both here, with Leif held captive and this man having warned him in attempt to prevent that, he could gather that this meeting was not by arbitrary chance. It would be a simple task to stand up and snap this gentleman’s arthritic neck, as easy as twisting an apple from a branch. In fact, he wondered why the guards had allowed this man to get this close to him.
“He never could be satisfied with what he got,” Leif said, then turned his eyes once more to the weathered umber face of his mysterious benefactor. His eyes had the milky film of cataracts, making him wonder if this man was blind even as he peered directly down at him from those ghostly whites nestled deep in their gaunt sockets.

“We all get the same prize at the end of this game no matter how we play it,” he said, then rasped out a creaking wheeze that must have been a laugh. “Except for you. Your petit monstre dangled you like a fish on a hook and reeled you up before the Devil could bite. Men don’t come back from the dead often, but a Valstad? That’s easy to believe.”

“As regretful as I am to refute the faith of my forefathers, a lifetime of crafting death did not impart any influence over my own,” Leif said as he repacked the pipe with a pinch more of a crumbly hashish, then smiled fondly. “All credit for both my death and resurrection goes to my petit monstre and medical science.”

“And how does the proud papa intend to repay his darling girl for her feat?”

His wording seized any further patience for Leif to continue this polite pretense. He stood, the wrathful energy coursing through him giving a fluidity to his movements that his seasoned joints were normally unmotivated to present. The opportunity to indulge in a bit of bloodsport tantalized the beast in him.

“Tell me, how long were you listening through the cell phones the organization issued?”

“Oh, long enough to know enough. And not just listening, Mr. Valstad,” the old man grinned, removing his worn and faded bowler hat as he gave a deep bow. His head was shaved bald, displaying the intricate mandala tattooed in black on the crown of his scalp, the unmistakable ouroboros coiling in the design. “Dr. Francis Aguiyi, at your service.”

“And what service might that be, doctor?”

Francis flipped his hat back onto his head in a flourishing twirl and rose with a grace that belied his own age as well, grinning wide enough to disfigure his features in innumerable lines and wrinkles as he answered, “Service toward a common goal. You disagreed with the Marceaus and they have punished you for it, so agree to a deal with me and I will help you bury their influence along with them.”

Leif tucked the pipe into his breast pocket and began unbuttoning his cuffs as he shook his head and said, “The Marceaus’ influence does not concern me as I am no longer a part of the network and the madame has treated me well since my arrival at her estate; why should I want to bury any more than I already have?”

“Because vengefulness is in your nature,” Francis answered easily. Leif glanced at him from his task of rolling up his sleeves as he went on. “Ruthlessness is a pleasure you were born to where most men must adapt to it against their humanity. The network has facilitated that nature for your family for generations, lifted your people from savagery and into prestige, and your bloodlust has served the network well through those centuries. You are a Valstad. You will never be exiled from the network because you are a fixture of it.”

Leif flexed his hands, examining the sinewy muscles as they bulged at his wrists and forearms while he spoke, “In other words, I will be no freer out there than as I am imprisoned in this fortress, so why not serve the warden that serves me better?”

“So why not?” the doctor echoed, still grinning. He folded his hands behind him and rocked on his
heels. “Mrs. Marceau needs the appearance of your support to prevent mutiny among the ranks. She has prepared a eulogy for you to deliver to provide that appearance, but you will not read it.”

“I won’t?” Leif mused.

“You won’t,” Francis nodded, his matter of fact answers amusing Leif. “She’ll tempt you with the paltry privilege of bringing your petit monster here to dangle in front of you like a carrot on a string, but you won’t do it. You’d rather risk death than indignity; that’s just who you are. You’ll provide the declaration of support Mrs. Marceau needs from you, just not the way she wants it.”

Leif stepped closer to this not-quite-stranger, close enough to catch the scents of the open sea woven into the storm cloud of his coarse beard. Francis, to his credit and to Leif’s curiosity, did not give any reaction to the danger of this proximity beyond a friendly crinkle to the edges of his milky eyes. Leif returned that fond expression as he clapped his hands upon his shoulders, the dust puffing out from the worn fabric giving him the fanciful impression that the old man had exhumed this suit from a grave.

“I’m retired from these games, Dr. Aguiyi,” Leif said softly. “I see no reason to embroil myself in them further.”

“You’re a good liar. Better than Bjørn ever was, at least. He never had the skill for deception as your father did, but he possessed his own set of unique talents.”

Those sparking synapses dredged up a single faded memory from the colorless depths of Leif’s childhood, before his father and uncle had transformed him into a true Valstad. All the way back to a time before America, still at the family farm in Norway, a place he had once come to believe he’d only dreamed up as an escape from the hell that had become of his life during that transitory period. A very long-distance phone call came through and, after young Leif agreed to the charges, a distinctly raspy and whispery voice asked to speak to Bjørn. That night, Bjørn left for Liberia and Leif didn’t see him again until they met once more in the US, three years later. Leif hid the disorientation of stitching a moment across decades to the present behind a blink. The call to violence became suspended under Leif’s ready hands, held at bay by this revelation.

“What prize are you aiming to win from this game?” he asked.

Francis looked past him, his cloudy gaze drifting up to the open blue sky as he answered, “I only seek to repay a debt to the demon in your blood, Valstad.”

Vidar slid his softening cock out of their slave, her tight little tail hole treating his oversensitive organ to a last constricting spasm from the aftershocks of her climax before he rolled onto his back. He was panting and damp with sweat from the considerable effort he had put into each thrust, his body and mind both pleasantly exhausted and delightfully fulfilled. Floating in the euphoria of that thrilling fuck, he longed for a cigarette but couldn’t will himself to move just yet, settling for turning onto his side and watching his younger brother try to coax their inconsolable slave to cease her cowering and trembling.

“… sshh, ssshhh, dearest, look to me,” Anders cooed softly in whispers in sighs, carding his fingers through her hair gently and tipping her chin up with his other hand.

She whimpered, but her reluctance didn’t deter Anders from forcing her to turn her face up to him,
and he smiled at her with such warmth and adoration that Vidar fought the urge to look away in
discomfort at witnessing something so personal and twisted. Anders’ delusions toward what they did
were convenient and simple to manipulate, but seeing him handle her with such raw emotion and
tenderness after they’d fucked her together for the second time struck him as somehow more
deprecated than the act itself. Vidar held no such illusions. This had been rape from the beginning and,
watching the way she twitched and struggled to turn away from Anders’ doting grasp, he doubted it
would ever be anything but rape with her. But she was adapting, learning to obey and please them
regardless of what she wanted or didn’t want, and soon she would learn that her wants were
insignificant. There was no place for tenderness between him and Simone, there never had been, not
since that night in the motel when he’d witnessed her devotion to her master and had to face the
monster inside him that had coveted it. Their dynamic was one of control and power, where he held
all of it and both punished and rewarded her allowing him to take it.

Anders nuzzled her wet cheek, a gesture that held such a bounty of affection that it nearly seemed
motherly if not for his spent cock still nestled in her cunt. “You did so good, dear, so good… You are
okay, yes? Hm? Oh… I love you, my darling…”

Vidar stared as his brother kissed her mouth, the pink of his tongue sliding over the abused and
inflamed flesh before he pressed his lips to hers, and was momentarily shocked at how she leaned up
into the contact. A trace of jealousy irritated him. Anders had no true appreciation for the power he
held over her through her appetite for emotional connection, handling it with the irresponsibility and
artlessness of a man in love. And it was love, or at least a mad perversion of it, that shone in his eyes
for her each time Vidar had caught him gazing at the girl. It made him as disgusted to see it now as it
did in that short period when she was their niece, but he was impressed by how easily and
completely love swayed her. Love had only ever brought her ruin and pain, but she still sought it
even from her tormenter. She was a pathetic, sad little creature.

Love was never anything he’d sought or accepted for himself after coming to recognize its greedy
and capricious nature, but seeing how she responded to it made him curious. He’d been careful to
prevent emotional intimacy and attachment with those he fucked, maintaining strict boundaries on
that front to the point of having to sever quite a few many ties with otherwise compatible people,
possessing no desire to hurt another person in that manner. But Simone wasn’t exactly a person
anymore. If she loved him as she loved Anders, he could have her devote herself as their slave with
the unthinking acceptance of the genuinely pious. The cruelty of such a tactic enthralled him, but he
wanted more than what he had planned to obtain from her. Her life in servitude to them wasn’t
enough anymore.

As Anders turned to slide her into the space between them, Vidar hooked his arm firmly across her
waist and pulled her to him to prevent her from running away. He watched for that feral glint in her
eye as she startled at his touch, the savage heat that he’d glimpsed in the tight and fleeting cracks of
her patchwork sanity flashed before retreating behind recognition. That switch in her mind that
flicked off her murderous hatred and replaced it with docile fear was one place she carried Leif
within her. Whatever he’d done to design that in her worked delightfully to suit Vidar’s tastes, but
there were other, much less delightful spaces she carried her father within her. He wanted to find
wherever Leif lived in her and carve him out of her. Taking her away from Leif physically was not
enough. The fire of righteousness in that revenge against the maniac warmed Vidar’s blood.

“Are you not happy, sweetheart?” he smiled, fondling her breast gently as his brother caressed her
hip. She remained stiffly still but for her trembling in rabbit fear, tucked snugly between their bodies
as she endured their affections. “You belong to us.”
“Pain is conditional. Overcome conditional influences and be free,” Simone whispered to the mirror, the blurred splotches of browns and blacks forming a Monet portrait of herself in the fogged glass as she combed the snarls out of her wet hair. It was much easier to look at a mirror when she couldn’t see her reflection clearly. Knowing that, she dragged her hand across the condensation until she could see the girl, her face still flushed from the scalding shower and eyes red from weeping. She might have wept in the shower. She didn’t remember waking up that morning, but she remembered her uncle Anders’ hands caressing her sleepily as she rose from his bed. She didn’t remember taking a shower, but she was scrubbed clean, her skin tingling and smelling of soap. She forced herself to look at the girl, watching the lips move as she said to her, “Stop running, don’t hide. This is real, this is reality. Bare it, little bitch. Overcome the fear. Pain simply is. It’s the perception that matters.”

_He did this to himself and while he burned…_

“He didn’t even make a sound,” she hissed between clenched teeth, dragging her nails across the stitches at her throat. The sting and burn was pleasantly distant beyond the haze of her anger, but not nearly muted enough. A sob sputtered out of her mouth before she could stop it, a spasmodic contraction she couldn’t control, and she dug her nails in harder in aggravation with herself. “God damn it, get your shit together!”

She stared at the blood that began to bead along the lines she’d dug into her skin and raked her nails across them again, focusing on the pain, deconstructing it. The monk calmly burned to death in the street in her mind, the flames licking up his body, eating away at his clothes to blacken the flesh underneath. Pain and fear didn’t shackle him as it did her and it was that attainability of freedom that drove her to press harder into her flesh. She swallowed the groan building in her throat and pushed through the instinct to stop her fingers from tearing away the sutures. Deep, calm breaths were all that she allowed to pass through her lips. It was only flesh. She would live and flesh would heal. Hesitation, inability to act, uncontrolled and thoughtless reaction were the things she might not survive in what little she knew of her father’s world. Still, she screamed in her mind and tears blurred her vision. Frustration coupled to the anger roared inside her, sweeping despair and bitterness up in their rising current. No matter how hard she tried to change her perception of pain, she couldn’t capture that disregard of it that had occasionally blessed her in her most desperate moments. She couldn’t understand how to overcome the pain, the fear, or anything of her circumstances that trapped her in suffering. Her father knew. He was supposed to teach her how to find freedom from conditional suffering, all in due time, but that time had been stolen from them. They had been stolen from each other.

_“Hva i helvete, Simone! What… What did you do?!“_

Rough hands turned her from the mirror and Anders’ distress pulled her from the river coursing through her fury, the din of its rage calming in the worry and alarm widening his eyes as they took in her self-inflicted injury. That was how he would see this; the mad work of a mad woman. She tried to explain herself anyway.

“Don’t… Don’t freak out, okay? I have to do this. I need to figure this out, so I need to feel it,” she said, hysterically stilted, unable to even fake calm.

Something wet dripped on her foot and she glanced down reflexively at the thin streams of blood oozing down her chest from the flesh she’d torn out of the stitches, the red creeping down her sternum to her navel. Her stare lifted to stop at the scar over his heart, unable to bear all that his eyes might tell her as he pressed a towel to her neck and muttered Norwegian in harsh and cutting tones. Terror, disgust, disappointment, bewilderment, desperation, anger; she couldn’t fault him for not
understanding. It was futile to try to explain this to him when she could only halfway explain it to herself. She had little idea of what she was doing, but she understood that she had to do something. She had to prepare for what was ahead any way she could. Pressing her bloodied hand to the towel, she tried to turn away from Anders, only for him to pull her forcibly to him.

“You can’t do this!” he snapped, hugging her tightly, ignoring her blood smearing on his skin. “You can’t, understand?! No!”

The shape of his body pressed against her spiked panic into her heart where it had once provided shelter, that invasive terror worsening the frantic urgency of her need to control it. She shut her eyes and wrapped her arms around him, leaning into the fear that quickened her pulse. Her fear was the root so much suffering, but not just for her. Guilt swallowed up the last of her manic desperation, weighing that acidic energy down as she sighed in defeat and stroked his back. She had brought so much suffering to her family with her cowardice and lack of self-control.

“I won’t, then,” she said, the lie laying flat and bitter on her tongue. “I’m sorry… papa.”

“Hvorfor… Why you did…” he muttered. “Why you did do this?”

His arms constricted around her too tight, crushing her to his torso, her blood and his sweat filling her senses. Beyond the fear and the pain, that treacherous pulse of arousal thumbed low in her, altering those feelings into further fuel for her shameful perversion. Her debauchery disgusted her and she winced in the effort it took to ignore the warmth growing in response to his possessive hold, but a shocking realization stopped her breath. She was going about this all wrong. The focus was never meant to be on the pain itself, but beyond it. The monk did not immolate himself to demonstrate his willpower; pain was an obstacle and distraction, not a goal. Survival, protection, love, guilt, there were many motivations that had driven her to act regardless of the pain or fear, but lust was always the most consistent. This perversion these men wrought within her with their forceful and painful brand of lust was a powerful alchemy that transmuted her entire perception. If she could isolate that effect, distill it into a resource she could use at will, then maybe it was not so hopeless. The ability to surpass suffering had been in her the entire time.

“Papa…” she whispered.

Her throat was dry and her palms were sweating, her movements unsteady as she rose on tiptoe. Every muscle hummed with the want to flee even as every nerve seemed attuned to welcome both pleasure and pain to feed her sexual response. It was a thrillingly precarious balance, one that might never make sense to her, but her body always seemed to know what it wanted even if she wanted anything else. Anders bent to devour her mouth in a violent kiss before she could work past her reluctance to ask for it, but there it was. The rapid burn of arousal, the flames licking up both fear and reason alike, eating away at her pain to blacken it into something darker. The monk, self-immolating in the street, not destroying himself but transforming himself. Anders’ teeth scraped her tongue as she sought his, the pain of his sharp incisor nearly piercing her sensitive flesh making her burn for him. He was rougher than he’s been, even rougher than the previous night when they made her hurt and scream for them. He was angry at her. Good. She needed this to hurt.

“Fuck me,” she forced herself to say, the words coming out in a ragged breath through her hesitance.

“Not now.”

She jerked in shock at the unexpected sound of Vidar, Anders’ strong hold on her naked and bloody body not allowing her to skid away. Her chest constricted in the terror that now accompanied the older man’s presence and evaporated that hope for control over her fear as it commanded her to freeze if she couldn’t flee. The sting of failure was harsh.
Vidar’s air of cool composure faltered when his stare latched onto the smear of blood and the red-splotched towel at her throat. There was something dangerous in his tone as he asked, “Who did this?”

“I did,” she answered quickly.

He pursed his lips in a frown before turning to Anders and tersely asking, “Du tillot dette?”

Sensing Anders’ anger shifting towards his brother, Simone cut off whatever response he was about to make, risking both of their irritation to focus on her as she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I am here to make sure you don’t say anything stupid at the hospital,” Vidar answered. “Speaking of… get dressed. We are to be late at this rate.”

Once again, the reek of life interrupted the halls of the dead to induct another reveler. Leif reclined in a shadowed niche where some future Marceau’s corpse was to be detained among the several others that lined the winding catacombs beneath the estate, watching from this raised and hidden space as Mrs. Marceau provided eulogy over the sarcophagus containing the late Mr. Marceau. Her words echoed through the stone passageways, bouncing off the living that resounded with a similar dispassion and indifference as the twisted and desiccated corpses they stood among. To attempt profound meaning into a singular death among these merchants of death was to try to sell ice cubes to an Eskimo. Only he seemed to find the entire event laughable, but that didn’t stop him from chuckling. A man he recognized as a high ranking general from the zenith of civil unrest in Liberia glanced at him sidelong, only the white of his sclera obvious in the shadow. That white around the pinpoint black of his iris widened when the general noticed him, Leif’s sharp and pointed teeth glinting through his rumbling laughter from his pale and predatory face. The general looked away hurriedly, shaken by his presence, fearful of his attention. Leif would remember him by his fear.

Silence stiffened the heavy air of the underground at the draw of the widow’s eulogy, cut by an uneasiness in the murmuring that rippled through the crowds as Leif descended from the shadows within the shadowed hall. He made no sound as he stepped through the throng that parted for him and, though his posture was relaxed and his expression merry, those nearest as he passed drew back from him as though he might reach out and draw their lives with a touch. He contemplated doing just that with a select few of them, but he still had patience.

Ruminating on that point, he ascended the pulpit and faced the crowds, casting a hush over their whispers. Looking over them, these wealthy men of influence and power, seeking not to pull the strings behind the curtain but to create them, he understood. This wasn’t a funeral, this was a business conference, where men of their trade waited to be done with the ceremonials and presentations to network and assert themselves among competitors. There was no passion in their ambition, no art in the effect they imposed on the world, no animal in their humanity. These merchants had made his father’s house a house of trade, a den of thieves. The statement of surrender Mrs. Marceau had prepared for him remained in his pocket, folded into an origami crane. As ambivalent as he had ever remained to the order, Dr. Aguiyi was correct in that he could not simply hand over its remains to these vultures. He owed it to them to poison it first.

“Mr. Marceau is my dearest friend,” he began, smiling fondly down at the grotesque corpse in the stone casket.

There were large chunks cut out of him, exposing the red meat and yellowed fat that was beneath the
charred skin, likely to relieve the pressure that his stiffened skin pulled at him in one of those grisly last-ditch lifesaving efforts. He looked like the luau pig his ex-wife’s family had served at their last family reunion and Leif briefly regretted not being able to experience another one of those charming events. He caught how Mrs. Marceau visible stiffened at his deviation as he turned his mask back to the audience.

“Mr. Marceau possessed an enthralling ambition to bear the immortal duty and carry on the everlasting life imbued in his role. And so, he did, and he’s served the title well. Obviously. Such… conspicuous acquisition. This order has never been more influential in the world than it is today, thanks to his leadership. For over 400 years, we have met in these catacombs, again and again to pass on the title, and for 400 years, we have operated in the shadows. Now we operate in opium fields, textile sweatshops, board rooms, and governments. These catacombs were not known to anyone who had not been indicted into the brotherhood, but now you stand among us, united through the network. You who stand here, where blood has been shed to maintain the shadow, have infiltrated beyond the veil. And we also stand among you! In your opium fields, in your textile sweatshops, in your board rooms, in your governments, we also stand among you! United, as one! Welcome!”

His smile sharpened at their collective tension, allowing the implication of threat to bloom and breathe, but he kept his eyes locked with Francis Aguiyi standing among his sect. The doctor, his clouded eyes now crinkled at the edges and glimmering mirthfully, grinned up at him. The young men flanking him glanced to his smile, then turned their bleary stares to Leif as though they now saw something truly horrifying where he stood.

“Marceau is my friend because he is able to stay a step ahead of me. I’d died believing I had killed him, only to be revived and find him clinging to life just long enough to outlive me. Dead man walking; I, literally, he, figuratively. Even now, he is still stepping ahead and I, as his loyal friend, will continue to follow.”

Leif turned to Mrs. Marceau, seeing her face wooden with barely concealed rage and mortal terror as she stood among those who sought to betray her at the slightest provocation. With the correct implications, he could have her sealed in the sarcophagus with her late husband, dismantle all the couple had built to achieve, allow the network to be torn apart by the vultures. With a simple gesture, she could have his brains splattered over the stones right where he stood, and end the coup she could see teetering on the edge of his words. He beckoned her forward and she hesitated before taking five stiff paces toward the pulpit.

He grinned widely to the crowd, throwing his arms wide with his palms raised to the vaulted ceilings as he announced, “Friends, brothers! Marceau is dead! Long live Marceau!”

Francis stood, the bells of his cuffs jangling as he clapped and let out a whooping laugh, immediately joined by a clamor of bells and applause from the followers of his blood cult scattered throughout the passageways. The polite applause of those unaware of the full meaning to this changeover followed. Mrs. Marceau startled out of her wide-eyed astonishment when Leif grasped her hand and shook it; their second physical contact, one meant with just as much malice as the first.

He had to commend her nerve not to flinch away as he leaned in and spoke into her ear to be heard above the din, “Congratulations, Mrs. Marceau. You have inherited a great legacy.”
“You are so pathetic,” Vidar smiled as he smoothed the paper tape over the gauze covering Simone’s reopened wound. She wilted in that endearing way she did when verbally degraded, her eyes casting low and to the side as her shoulders sagged with an expression that made him want to degrade her further by kissing those downturned lips. Or maybe it was just a stray curiosity to see how their mouths might fit together. Neither were motivation enough to break that taboo of intimacy, no matter how tempting it was to feel her whimper against his teeth. Such tender gestures as kissing was to remain strictly off-limits.

“Be nice to her!” Anders snapped from the shower.

“Shove it up your dick, Anders,” Vidar quipped back. “You don’t even know what ‘pathetic’ means.”

“I know when you’re being an asshole,” his younger brother growled.

Vidar shrugged, not doubting that, and returned his attention to their nervous pet sitting on the edge of the countertop in nothing but a towel. His stare immediately latched back onto those full, soft, shapely lips. It really was too bad he didn’t kiss, but there were plenty of other things for that lovely mouth to do.

“Come, sweetheart, let’s go upstairs to get dressed,” he said, smiling kindly at her as he gathered her up in his arms. She weighed nothing as he pulled her off the counter, tempting him to just carry her up to the attic and ravage her on her bed, but it was always more satisfying to have her follow commands. Setting her on her feet, he tugged the towel loose and chuckled at how quickly she reacted to grab and hold it tight to her body. She needed more practice in subservience.

“You want to wear a towel all day?” he asked, thumbing the hem of the stained terrycloth. “Don’t be a child.”

The metallic odor of blood clung to the material and mingled organically with her scent in a way the perfumed soap and shampoo didn’t, reminding him of how their scents all blended in a bouquet of sweat and sex both on and inside her. There was a deeply carnal satisfaction in having her bear their scents; an animalistic ownership that went deeper than his humanity. He was finding that their pet frequently connected him to those ancient, primal pieces of himself in surprising and bewildering ways. It was as unsettling as it was exhilarating, but he was aware enough to know that he shouldn’t enjoy it as much as he did – another effect he found she inspired in him. It would have been more difficult to accept if all of this wasn’t already so outside his scope of normal, enabling him to ignore the disagreeable aspects of this lack of self-control or awareness in favor of embracing these thrilling impulses. Presently, his impulses told him to yank the towel out of her hold and shove her into the hallway naked, so he did. She didn’t stumble as he’d hoped, adjusting to the sudden and awkward trajectory with a grace that reminded him that she was once a promising gymnast before she’d lost her mind. Apparently, she’d never quite given up the hobby.

“So much… ambition and… ah, potential you had,” he said mockingly as he walked closely behind her. She wasn’t even trying to hide how uncomfortable and nervous she was and he grinned as she kept glancing back at him. “Now look at you. Not even a person.”

She didn’t glance back at him after that, instead keeping her arms wrapped tightly around her bare
torso as she ascended the slatted steps with the grim resolve of a prisoner walking death row. He sat on her bed and, in the guise of leering as she began to wind her wristwatch before digging around in the shopping bags on the floor, he examined her body for how fresh her newer bruises would seem to the hospital staff. The marks of the riding crop were light and tame compared to the deep bruises both Leif and Edward Kyun had left her with, but the friction burns where her collar and cuffs had dug into her skin were raw and damningly new. His gaze traveled down, catching the suck bruises on her inner thighs as she quickly stepped into leggings. Anders was an idiot to take her in for a check-up now, but Vidar was confident he could explain these things away if anyone asked her about them.

“Do I have time to eat?” she asked, her twitchy fingers fumbling with the buttons on her shirt.

He beckoned her to him and she clutched the shirt closed as she stepped obediently before him. As he began buttoning her shirt, he explained, “No food for you. They are to do blood tests to check organs and know what you are withdrawing from.”

“I don’t do those kinds of drugs,” she muttered, shaking her head.

He heard the depth of sincerity in that denial and felt a stray dash of pity for her that almost, but not quite, prevented him from saying, “It is not so much what you did. It is what was done to you.”

Her fidgeting with the overhanging sleeves of her blouse stilled and he glanced up from his task at her buttons to her widened eyes, the devastation there snagging his attention. He hated looking at their slave and seeing the same shattered silver eyes as that murderous psychopath, but the terrible realizations stampeding through her mind were reflected so fascinatingly clear in them. That clarity of emotion constantly spilling from her was so refreshing in this dishonest and callous world. He could see why Anders had been so bewitched into protectiveness of the girl. To Vidar, however, seeing something so delicate and vulnerable made him itch with the compulsion to torment it for those same reasons.

“What?” he smirked, huffing out a brief and incredulous laugh. She grimaced slightly as though the sound stung. He was sure it did, and rewarded her pain with a soothing caress of his fingers cupping the sides of her face. That raw vulnerability in this fragile state was so enticing. “Did you never question what your father did give you?”

“He told me medicine wouldn’t work with my… It was just a sedative, not that often, just when I… when he wanted to… to…” she stammered, mostly to herself. Her desperate attempts to rationalize what he was telling her were adorable. “It isn’t withdrawals, I have a lingering flu. It’s stress. I- I don’t do those kinds of drugs.”

He pulled her closer, his fingers anchored in the roots of her damp hair, bringing her face within centimeters of his as he whispered, “He did poison your brain, little bitch, the same way he did poison mine. Don’t hide from the truth. He did this to you, understand?”

Her eyes shut and she shuddered as her tears finally crawled down her cheeks, those crystal droplets sparkling in the late morning sun from the skylight. She was trying so hard to overcome the horror in the horrible thing that had been done to her; he wanted to witness every part of her suffering.

“The ashes of… my mind,” she muttered under her breath, sniffling.

“What was that, sweetheart?”

She opened her wet eyes as she said in a breathless and anxious whisper, “He was transforming my mind, and, uh… I don’t know how far he got. I don’t know how much further I need to go to get
there.”

Vidar smiled again at her madness and closed the distance between them to lick away her salty tears, saying as she tried weakly to turn away under his grasp, “You are so cute when you say crazy shit.”

“Why are you- agh!” she started to sneer, but he cut off her words by shoving his thumb into her mouth.

“Be careful, sweetheart, it was sounding like you might question me,” he grinned, gripping that slippery, spongy flesh between his thumb and forefinger. The immediate acquiescence of this sad little creature as he pulled her down by her tongue to kneel between his spread knees was so gratifying, filling those screaming holes in his mind with a silencing warmth. “Did he not teach you to respect your master? You’re too smart to be so stupid, so you are wanting to be taught a lesson again, yes?”

“Aheen hah-ee,” she tried to speak, her tongue flexing uselessly under his hold, and he shut her mumbling up with a jab of his thumbnail into that squirming muscle.

“Do not misunderstand, little bitch,” he said, her pained and cowering wince under his nail making his cock fatten up uncomfortably against his slacks despite knowing they had no time to relieve that need. That greedy drive to dominate her even at his inconvenience wasn’t entirely without its own beneficial affect beyond the thrill of it, however. “I am not Anders. When you misbehave, I will not show you mercy. You are not a person, remember? You are a thing to use and to fuck. Remember your place, little bitch, or I will remind you. Now, what do you say to your master?”

He released her tongue with a final tug and she tucked it back into her mouth to swallow the excess saliva that had pooled under it before saying, “Thank you, Sir.”

Her glittering, terrifying eyes looked up with an unwelcome ease in meeting his stare, as instinctively alarming as a hint of fur moving behind shadows of branches. Dehumanizing her was a necessary step in the process, one that he was enjoying thoroughly, but he was becoming more aware of the dire purpose to all of it beyond his own fulfillment. The creature he had glimpsed between the breathing cracks of her sanity was an inhuman thing for certain, but the exact nature of it was something he did not entirely know. Whatever it was that gave her that impenetrable core of savagery was nothing like the sweet, sad girl who leaned so pathetically into his touch even as he hurt and humiliated her. There was a notion that all that she outwardly was had been crafted to conceal something necessary to hide from the world, a notion too similar to how Leif had operated towards the end with his layers of disguise falling away to show the monster beneath. Vidar related to that aspect of them with a resonance that still shook him, but the nature of his beast had been released and he relished in unleashing it upon their slave. He was coming to know what he now was, but he still didn’t have a way of identifying what she might be. Whatever Simone was becoming, he would tame it and own it so that when her control failed, he could control her. He wouldn’t let her become like her father.

Leif felt the satisfying pop and give of the young man’s arm dislocating from his shoulder joint as he bent it slowly backwards, his knee anchored in the center of his back to keep him from squirming away. Sweat dripped from the ridge of his brow, his bared back shiny and bronzed from the sun of the courtyard, indulgent in this primitive pursuit of life through the death of another. The ground was smudged in places with blood that shown black on the dark gray stones; black, except where red could cling to the bits of flesh and here and there. Teeth were common litter in these events, but Leif
had always tried to contribute more rarified debris to decorate the ring. Seeing an eyeball half-crushed and smeared like a stray grape put more fear into the opponents, made for a more impassioned performance even before the first tussle.

Leif waited for the young man to stop screaming, his shrill cries withering into moaning, before he jerked the arm back into its socket and shouted over the din of the crowd for him to get back up. The border of the circle was a wall of brown fists tightened in anticipation and mouths gaping pink flesh and white teeth to bellow until the air was alive with sound and fury. Francis observed the match, a still spectator in the shivering fence of bodies, his deeply wrinkled bloodhound face focused in concentration where the others writhed in excitement and anticipation. Leif caught his clouded eye and the doctor’s wooly beard separated to show his yellow-toothed grin and shrugged as though this pathetic situation simply could not be helped. Leif could not accept victory so easily, especially for his final match. The young man laid sprawled on the flat stone bricks, prone and gasping like a fish exhausted from thrashing under the heavy press of gravity outside of water. He shouted again for the young man to get up, even providing him an encouraging kick to his ribs, but he only curled in agony.

“Listen to what the pain tells you,” Leif shouted, the way his father had recited it to him from his father, and from his father’s father on through each notch in his genetic memory. The hollow ache in his heart wished it was his Simone lying broken and open to this lesson instead of this defeated man. He stalked around him in a circle within the circle of men, wishing to fill that ache by imagining it was her he spoke to. “What is your pain saying?”

The young man didn’t answer. His Simone would have had some insightful response, some innermost truth to offer once he’d broken her through her fear and pain, but this young man was not his daughter. He was too lacking in compassion and savagery, utterly deficient in conviction and imagination, just a diluted husk of a man searching for meaning and holding none of his own. The wall of bodies swayed tighter, but Leif still paced around him, warding them back. He wasn’t done yet.

“Is it telling you to die?” he asked, squatting next to him. “Are you so easily convinced?”

Dirt was glued by the coagulating blood onto the pulverized face of the young man, his breath puffing out of the swollen hole of his mouth through the gaps where his teeth once were. The skin of Leif’s knuckles was mostly worn away, left raw and wetly oozing, and there was a split at the bridge of his nose from someone’s elbow being faster than his grapple, but he could keep going for hours. This was his favorite part of the ceremonies following the funeral. Mr. Marceau had been prideful of his rank and this was a more magnificent event for it, though Leif did not care for the splendid displays of ritual or the ostentatious feastings as he once did in his youth. Age and his own brief death had brought focus to matters of more meaning than the implied values of tradition and he now found a powerful freedom in just how few things truly mattered anymore. He gathered the young man’s red hair in his fist. He couldn’t recall if his opponent was a redhead or if this was blood streaking through the sweat along his scalp, but it wouldn’t matter shortly. Everything this young man was or would be would soon cease; the narrative of his life leading up to this point and not extending beyond it.

“Are you certain you’ve heard it correctly?” Leif asked into the misshapen cauliflower of his ear. He gripped the underside of his chin he bent the young man further backwards, feeling his sputtering breath against his wrist. A wordless gurgle spat out of him, but that was the only response he provided. Leif wanted to punish him for not being Simone. He considered his options, favoring the idea of driving his heel into the bend of the neck, giving this young man a quick blow to the brainstem, but he’d taken him this far along the path of brutality. It would be in poor taste to depart from the path at this point. He drove his chest into the stones, confident the force would snap his
clavicle, and began writing the story of his ending with the ink of pain.

Afterward, as Leif rinsed the blood and bits of skull and brain from between his fingers in the koi fountain, he let the savage thrum leave his body in a heavy sigh. His hands throbbed, unable to entirely unfold from the curl of fists, and he looked forward to filling a bathtub with ice. Just like he’d told his wife to do for his daughter during those first years he had begun Simone’s confirmation into the religion of pain. He watched the beautiful fish approach the scents of gore and weave their elegant bodies around his still feet in the water, their maws gaping wide in search of the food. That young man’s agonized death was delicious to these decorative fish. The roar of the crowd on the other side of the courtyard swelled in response to the violence within the circle as another two participants brawled. A delicate fin, as thin and ethereal as a dancer’s veil, brushed his ankle as a great mottled koi hurried away.

“That was magnificent, Valstad.”

“Thank you, doctor. Shame about that last one,” Leif said, stepping out of the water to accept the cup Francis handed him.

The old man sat along the edge of the fountain in that slow way a bad back demanded to be eased into the motion as he groaned out, “What- your grand finale? You made a Jackson Pollock painting out of that ring!”

Leif sat down next to him, a wistful smile stretching his wide mouth. “My daughter would like you.”

“Not too much, I hope,” Francis grinned, wagging his gnarled and thick finger knowingly. Leif hid his chuckle behind his cup, drinking the cold palm wine in thick gulps to avoid the cloying flavor. His new old friend gestured with a tilt of his chin toward the tall wall of the mansion, leading Leif’s eyes to find Mrs. Marceau watching from a balcony among the rest of the fully-dressed and clean businesspeople. “What do you think they thought of it, up there in the vulture’s nest?”

“I try my best not to consider the thoughts of the complacent,” Leif said, his lip curling in mild disgust. “Whatever infects such apathy and avarice into the hearts of men is a contagion too volatile to handle with something as vulnerable as thought. I only seek to understand enough of the mechanical workings of their tinman hearts to know where to throw the wrench into them.”

Francis looked at him as he tipped the copper cup into the pocket of his beard where his mouth was hidden, his brown skin a slice of starless night with the sun shining behind him, and said in his whispery rasp, “We should probably kill them while they’re all here.”

“No. This is systemic, not something you can isolate to a roomful of individuals. Attacking them directly would only divide your cause from the order as it currently stands. Killing the other players won’t assure you a victory by default.”

“Then what do you suppose we should do?”

Leif moved his hard glare from the balcony of thieves to the writhing mob of revelers as their cheers once more swelled to announce another champion. “If you don’t like how the game is played, then change the rules.”

“Simone, I need you to relax, okay?” Dr. Brun repeated, his even smile well-practiced and obviously fake. “You’re safe. No one here is going to hurt you.”
The touch through the nitrile glove on her arm made Simone flinch away and she managed to murmur, “For the last time, doc. Don’t. Touch. Me.”

The room was too small, the walls seeming to inch in closer when she wasn’t looking, and she was far too naked for Vidar to be standing this close. He couldn’t do anything with the doctor there. She was safe for the moment, but they were going to hurt her when they knew for certain they could get away with it. Each second she was alone with them, the likelihood of her polite pretending at normalcy felt closer to crumbling. She didn’t know this doctor, but she didn’t need to. The awful thinness of the hospital gown, which was really more of an apron, and her nudity beneath it eradicated any benefit of doubt she might have been able to retain for this stranger. Vulnerability made everyone a potential threat.

“When did these symptoms start?” Dr. Brun asked again.

“Um… uh…”

She cringed when Vidar gently brushed her hair behind her shoulder, the thick locks sliding over her bare skin in a slither that his fingertips trailed with a wave of goosebumps. Whatever he’d said to convince both Henrik and the doctor to allow him to sit in on the examination had shifted their awkward uncertainty to understanding and even gratitude with a shockingly brief conversation. Or perhaps it was not so shocking as it was just distressingly expected. Her mental status had long since stripped her of autonomy and privacy in these clinical settings with her father taking the reigns in every appointment and evaluation; it should not be surprising that Vidar would easily slip into that preestablished routine.

“Sweetheart,” Vidar said. The quality of his voice held a warmth and affection that was blatantly false to her ears, but seemed to charm the doctor into believing he held the right amount of familial love that assured him his presence here was proper and right. “Do you remember when these symptoms started?”

His lingering fingers on her upper back burned against the bruises. She pursed her lips, gathering her resolve before saying, “It’s not a concussion. I’ll be fine. You have my blood samples. Can I go back to the waiting room now?”

“Well, we need to be sure. I want you to follow my finger with your eyes,” Dr. Brun said.

Anger flashed hot up the back of her neck as she bristled from being so blatantly ignored, snapping before she could stop herself, “It’s not a fucking concussion, shit stack! Fuck off already!”

“Simone! Mind your manners!” Vidar scolded.

His hand was still pressed to her back, hidden under her hair, the pinpoints of his nails resting in a threat over an open welt her father had sliced into her skin.

She clenched her jaw and willed herself to calm, the presence of his touch enough to ground her in consequence if she didn’t, and sighed, “Sorry… I don’t… Can Henrik to do this? I’d feel more comfortable if it’s someone I trust.”

“Well, you don’t mince words, do you?” Dr. Brun chuckled tightly. “Let’s just get back to the examination. There are a lot of other patients who want to see me today.”

She could feel how offended her outburst had made him, his resentment of her now free to be open. It crackled along the edges, abrasive and annoying, like a shirt tag that begs to be cut off. Henrik had to excuse himself from the room once the gown had left her back exposed, his voice gone thick and
froggy, and she wasn’t upset with him for trading patients with Dr. Brun to attend Anders instead. She didn’t want to deal with her problems either. However, she knew, from the moment this doctor had sat down on his little stool and opened by asking her which recreational drugs she’d used, that this was going to happen. One look at her and he’d decided to skip the if and go straight for the which, because being young and brown had answered that first question for him, because being a victim of abuse had roped her into that likely statistic, because he was simply unforgivably rude. He did not need rudeness to tip her into hostility when his mere presence was enough to warrant that within her.

It took all her willpower not to wrap her hands around his pencil neck as she leaned forward and said, “If you don’t move your pus-oozing inferiority complex out of my sight, you’re going to find out what I do mince.”

Dr. Brun’s face was shrink-wrapped in pale appall and rage, his bug eyes bulging and thin lips vanished into the small line of his mouth, and she could have lunged at him to knock him off his stool and slam that face into the hard edge of the little sink behind him. The idea of having to touch him to accomplish that was what kept her seated on the end of the exam table, the paper sticking on the bottom of her thighs and ass to crinkle and tear with any slight movement. She hated him and his entire existence with a vehemence that had her breathing hard through her nostrils as she imagined what his awful little pointed head would look like without that soured buttermilk skin. Seconds fell like hot wax dripping down her neck before she heard Vidar say something in their mutual Norwegian behind her that made Dr. Brun nod in agreement as he quietly left the room, eyes downcast, brow knit, shoulders slumped. Her haunches tensed to bound after him and her nailbeds and teeth itched to rip into him when the door politely clicked shut, but all that hostility in her scattered like flies into the air when her uncle stepped around the exam table to stand in front of her. She couldn’t move her eyes up from where it had glared at the doorknob, now fixed to the weave pattern of Vidar’s shirt.

“What was that?” he asked. Calm, composed, collected, direct. He didn’t give her anything to tailor her answer to, so very much like her father. She tried not to let how that twisted her guts show.

“What was what?” she asked, slow and low with how heavy her tongue now seemed.

His arm extended beyond her peripheral and she felt his hand crawl under her hair to cup the base of her skull- not pulling or tugging, just cupping. It was what he could choose to do to her that terrified her the most. His touch spread vines through her nerves, stretching like immaterial tendrils and bursting spore pods of tingling fear as they grew down her spine. She shivered, tried not to pant, and squeezed her thighs together unconsciously before she caught that she wasn’t doing it out of nervousness. Shame more than sexual desire bloomed warmth from her breastbone to her brow, though the emotions seemed a package deal these days. Fear, shame, and self-loathing were the staple spices of her sex life after leaving Brooklyn. After leaving the US, sex had become her life. There was no escaping these emotions. His breath was a ghost brushing over her forehead as he leaned close, his scent now strong over the antiseptic stench of the room. There was another emotion that wove it all together in her, something she couldn’t trust to be real in how ridiculously mismatched it seemed from everything else.

“You never did act this way before,” he said, the air undulating against her face. She was very still.

“What has gotten into you?”

Confusion creased her brow. “I’m… I don’t like talking to strangers. I hate them. I just wanted him to leave me alone.”

His thumb massaged the dip where her skull met her vertebrae, the gentle pressure seeming to
squeeze out a poison that loosened her tensed muscles involuntarily. His voice was a silk shroud wrapping her mind as he softly asked, “Why do you hate them?”

His other hand descended gently on her knee and her breath shook out of her as it slowly slid up, bunching the thin cloth along its path. She couldn’t speak above a whisper as she answered, “I’m jealous of them. They can shape themselves to fit into a world that doesn’t want me to exist, no matter how much I’ve tried to… to change my shape.”

“You think you do not belong in the world?”

“I’m scared that I might never belong,” she whispered, her throat closing around the admission. “So many people, they don’t even try, they are just so… so arrogantly complacent to accept that things are the way they should be, but nothing really works. There’s so much wrong with the way things are and these people that don’t care are just making it worse.”

“You want to change the world?” he asked. She could hear his smirk. “Such noble ideal.”

That photograph of her father, so young and so scared among the hunted, stained the walls of her thoughts. Acid tears stung her eyes and she squeezed them shut as she admitted, “No, no, I’m worse than any of them! I want to kill them all! I want to burn the world just to destroy them with it. I want to make myself a monster so that I can never, ever even try to be the kind of human that lets this happen. That’s what I want! That’s how fucking spiteful and hateful I am. I’m inhuman in a human world and I hate them for it.”

The long span of his thumb slid along the underside of her jawline and tipped her head back, but she kept her eyes screwed shut. She couldn’t stand to be looked at in this moment. Her thoughts had been dragged out into the light and they hung in the air to bare the worst of her. She hated herself with a burning passion that she wanted to immolate her body like a monk in the street.

“Then don’t be.”

His soft tone cut through her thrumming hatred. Bewilderment opened her eyes to see him, her father’s wide mouth and sharp features painted by a different artist, nearly close enough to blur his face into any of the brothers.

“Don’t be human,” he said. His words caressed her aching mind as he spoke in such dulcet, soothing tones. “I feel the same. You and I, there is nowhere we fit. I can tell you, this never is better. Never. You will always be locked outside, never part of them. You will always be alone. But here…” Her breath caught in a hitch at the spread of his hand over her racing heart, the touch spreading those living tendrils down through her chest cavity and curling around each organ until she was full of him. The blue of his irises was darkened to cobalt under his half-shut lids as they drifted lower on her face. “… You don’t have to be alone with us. You don’t have to be anything but what you really are. That is our gift for you.”

Before she could react to the insurmountable terror that crashed over her like a towering wave in the deep ocean blue from his gaze, his lips descended upon hers. The press of his cruel mouth and the slide of his sharp tongue opened her to his taste, the familiar element so dreadfully present among each of these brothers immediately striking her but carrying a piece of something between them that shocked her. She didn’t want to know him this way, not ever, but the instinctive response was undeniable. They opened to each other like a secret never meant to be overheard, something unable to unlearn once known no matter how terrible it was to think of. Beyond her self-loathing, fear, and desire, that emotion that wove between it all wrapped painfully along the invisible threads of connection between them. He recoiled from the kiss still staring down at her, his eyes caught in the wide stillness of recognizing a mistake too late to correct.
She could see he knew, and that caved in the exit of deniability for her that this could possibly exist between them. They were trapped in this knowledge now with no way back. The kiss had plucked that strand of kinship between them and it sang clear above the lies they needed to protect themselves from that truth. Despite the cruelties and obstacles they’d both erected between them, that connection was rooted in something more savage and ancient, something permanent in an otherwise impermanent world. Whatever sweet platitudes he’d meant with what he’d said were more correct than he could have known or wanted. They were family, and they belonged together in a way they didn’t belong to anyone or anything else. They always would, and the truth of this terrified them both.
Chapter 55

Vidar had a long and clear memory. He remembered every summer he’d spent in the US, from the excitement and fulfillment of the first long flight when he was seven until the last flight back home when he was sixteen. The stuffy suppers with their strict and rigid father had since blurred together in their monotony, but there were many moments that he could reconstruct in near perfect clarity. His first time hunting rabbit with their uncle Bjørn, that powerful and strange feeling when he looked into its glassy eye and saw what he had taken from it. The warm static of his first kiss in the cool dark under the patio, the thrill of discovery and magic of a girl’s touch. There were also a myriad of small vibrant memories that seemed to have no importance or impact attached to them at all. Waking up before dawn and watching his father meticulously clean his guns in the yellow lamplight at the parlor coffee table. The slow gathering and crawl of condensation down the side of a green beer bottle while Leif talked with the grocer about the high school basketball team he played power forward on. Memories with no purpose or meaning but the mind latched onto and etched in permanence on its own.

One such meaningless memory bubbled to the surface as he looked down at Simone. She was petting the side of a nanny goat at the farm, her eyes wide with wonder and reverence for the creature, and when she reached for a temptingly long ear with her chubby little hand, he warned her to be gentle. The feather touch she used to stroke the goat’s ear must have been barely even felt by the animal, but little toddler Simone turned her head to look to him – a twenty-year-old boy of a man she’d barely known- for reassurance, her eyes shining like silver mirrors and brow wrinkled in uncertainty. He recalled the awkward discomfort of so suddenly being this little person’s source of guidance and protection, but beyond that, there was no meaning to this pocket of time that had been preserved in him. Fifteen years or so later, as he tasted the strange heat of her mouth still lingering on his tongue and his heart raced with the terrible sentiments his lizard brain communicated to his irrational mind, she wore that exact same helpless expression. Now, he couldn’t stop the convergence of those two beings no matter how he railed against it.

“No,” he breathed. His hands were numb as he gripped the sides of her face. The same face, the same little girl looking to him for reassurance, the same blood that pushed and pulled through their pounding hearts. “No, no, no, you’re not…”

He knew, logically, that wanting something was not enough to make it true. He was intellectually aware that no matter how twisted and abnormal her life had made her, it could never justify what they’d been doing. She was technically human, technically his niece, technically innocent of the crimes her father had committed. Technically, as in the sense that it was true, but a truth so irrelevant that it was to be regarded as false. Breathing in her scent and her taste, he could no longer base those denials on technicalities. Facts attached themselves to opinions, tearing apart the walls of denial and illogical reasoning he had carefully constructed around them and transforming them into terrible truths, and he could not change them back any more than he could erase the sins he had committed under their influence. As his hands lowered to tremble around her torn and elegant neck, the thought that poured over the riot of his mind like boiling oil was that, despite all of this, he was still going to do it.

“It’s okay,” she said, her voice vibrating under his hands. She gently touched his wrists. Anders had trimmed her nails down to the pink lines of their beds, leaving her unable to injure herself further through scratching, and Vidar swallowed against the urge to vomit at the gratitude he felt for him having stripped her of that defense. “You don’t have to pretend anymore. You can just be what you
“Don’t…” he shuddered, his grip tightening until he could feel her the rapid drum of her pulse against his palms. “You do not understand.”

Her throat strained under that bit of pressure his panic supplied to her neck as she rasped and whispered, “No, I don’t… I don’t understand anything. I don’t get it at all. I thought I knew what I was, but I had no idea. For the longest time, I thought I would get better, or at least get used to it. I had a few friends. I had my paintings; I was selling in galleries. I was even going to apply for some community college courses, maybe get back on the university track after that. I had hobbies and routines and… and then we went to Vermont…”

He cut off her words with a firm squeeze, the warm gush under his hands spilling blood from her reopened cut as he hissed, “I don’t want to know this!

“I ran from it,” she choked out. Her grip at his wrists was still gentle, not struggling to push him away or clawing uselessly at him as he thought she would. As he wished she would. “I’m tired of… ah-h… run-ning…”

The sound of her wheezing to squeeze enough breath through her narrowed throat was a slow metronome to his thoughts. He had thought he had known himself too. He had thought he had known himself too. He was once so sure of his nature, comfortable with what that had been, for better or for worse. With his hands tightening around his niece’s slender neck, her wheezing became faint and stuttering and his cock hardened eagerly within the tight confines of his pants. All those times he had halfheartedly sought condemnation for his desires, he was just seeking anyone or anything else to blame this sickness on for not stopping him. He had blamed her father for changing him; poisoning him to insanity and altering his nature until he could no longer control what he had become. He had blamed her for tempting him; a fruit too ripe not to bite with the fangs Leif had given him. He had blamed Anders for opening that option to him; his love for Simone seemingly made to be corrupted and manipulated. He had blamed his own hedonistic pursuit of pleasure in another’s pain and submission, his own weakness to ignore his better judgement, his own deluded cowardice to rationalize these wicked acts. It had taken an impulsive taste of her kiss and all the terrible confirmation that came with it for his condemnation to finally arrive. She was a human being that had been taken advantage of in the worst ways and a member of his family he was instinctively drawn to protect. He couldn’t deny any of that now, having tasted their connection both physically and emotionally, and that made it all the more devastating that he couldn’t stop this. He had never thought he would be so aware of his own insanity.

“I will ruin you,” he whispered low and sharp, squeezing until her wheezes stopped altogether and she grimaced in pain, “until you are perfect.”

Her mouth gaped to draw in the breath he had locked out of her lungs, her desperation growing in little involuntary twitches and tugs, but her dedication to let him continue to choke her was heartwarming. He bent down and kissed her open mouth, that mysterious sensation of something in her taste conveying such disturbing sentiments of family and emotion, making him shiver. He had never considered himself a good man by anyone’s measure, thinking such ideals as good or evil far too subjective and flawed in their logic to be taken seriously, but he recognized evil in him now as clearly as he had seen it in Leif. It was an uncomfortable realization among many. When her hands slid down from their gentle hold and her body began to sag, he loosened his grip and allowed her to briefly gasp for breath before shutting her airway again abruptly. The startled, cutoff yelp she sputtered made his cock throb and his distress swell.

“You fucking bitch,” he sneered. He kissed her harder, grinding his lips against hers as he twisted his
tongue into her mouth, greedy for that strange jolt. Her stilted, weak attempts to return his kiss would have made him laugh if it wasn’t so pitiful with loneliness and desperation. He leaned in closer to her as he whispered between rough, jagged kisses, “You like this, yes? You like me to do as I please with you… mmm… Sweet little bitch… I can hurt you… fuck you… kill you… That is what you want? You want me to kill you?”

His chest constricted in mounting panic at how easily he could end her life. Even as empty as the threat was, it was real, and she still didn’t try to fight him. If anything, she relaxed under his hold, though that was almost undoubtedly her skirting unconsciousness again. It had to be. She couldn’t leave them, not so soon, not ever, not when she was partially responsible for turning him into this demon. She had to pay with her life, not her death. Anger tightened his grip until his fingers trembled and her head lolled back, the lack of both blood and oxygen to her brain taking her swiftly. Just by keeping this grip for a few more seconds, he could see to it that she never wakes up.

The power to end her life and her suffering made him dizzy. He wondered if it would cure him of this madness or if he would be forever haunted with dissatisfaction, unable to enact these compulsions upon his beloved slave. His mouth was dry and his palms were slick with his sweat and her blood, the bright cherry red of it smeared everywhere on her neck and oozing down her chest. **Beloved.** This wasn’t anything that could make a place for that tenderness, but there it was, the greedy thread of connection wrapped painfully around his heart. She was his niece and he loved her as such. She was his slave and he loved her sexual servitude. Who he once was and who he had come to be was warred within him as she slipped further down into death with each breath untaken. If his humanity had any remaining effective bearing over him, he would end their misery there before these desires and impulses tore them apart. Hold her blood from her brain until she died and then find his way up to the roof of this building and jump. It would save them so much suffering. But he wasn’t human enough for that mercy; the demon in him finally had what he wanted.

A small click of the door closing was the only warning he had before he was hauled backward, a heavy arm crushed around his neck. He dragged Simone down with him, her limp body falling to the floor and out of his grip in an awful tumble, and his panic at her not hacking and coughing to catch her breath overrode the panic at his own being attacked. His shoes skid and his knees buckled as the blood choke quickly worked to make his head swim, that arm like a steel beam bent to pinch those arteries. He jabbed his elbow into the solid torso behind him but whoever it was didn’t even flinch or grunt, their thickly muscled body taking the blows like a brick wall. The realization that he could not get out of this was quickly followed by an insistent acceptance that perhaps this was for the best. Glancing down through the blurring edges of his darkening vision to see Simone crumpled, unmoving, the hospital sheet twisted under her, he wished he could have been someone who had wanted to save her. In the end, it just wasn’t in his nature. The world was shut off to him behind a veil of darkness, the roar of pressure building in his skull the only thing left to his awareness before that too was snuffed out.

“What was he like in his death?” Leif asked, his stare fixed to the fire casting shadows that danced to the rhythm of the flame.

Francis tapped the thick nail of his index finger against his copper cup as he weighed his thoughts. He always took his time to think about what to say when he could, a habit that Leif found he appreciated after a lifetime of conversations where people only waited to have their turn to speak or calculated their pauses for effect. Members of the doctor’s entourage, a motley crew of mercenaries, talented derelicts, and outgrown child soldiers from all reaches of the living nightmare smears in the
world, crowded around the prison that was the guest quarters Leif had been restricted to. None of
them spoke or barely even made a sound, their presence that of stalwart stone sentries more than
human men, their bleary stares the exhausted gratitude of a still and peaceful moment. There was an
itchiness to them, though, a slow simmer of waiting that would eventually boil into restlessness. They
could not sustain themselves on peace and that was why they followed the doctor. Leif knew these
men like he knew that same part of himself and he could meet their empty eyes with equal
understanding and appreciation of the ghosts they carried. They had transcended humanity in their
own ways to become warriors and they could not live without the violence that both tormented and
sustained them. It operated similarly to what Leif was and, though they knew him to be a different
species of predator, they had accepted him readily after seeing his savagery in the ring. Camaraderie
was an aching absence within him, but he would not find it within their fold. Half of his heart beat in
his daughter and he could not be complete without her returned to his side.

“Bjørn Valstad died with his eyes open, searching for something that I believe he may have found in
his final moment,” Francis answered. He drank deeply from his cup, the fire glinting off the
hammered copper brightly, and sighed. “I think you and I are the last still alive who knew him.
When we go, that will truly be the end of Bjørn.”

“Not entirely,” Leif muttered into his cup, the bitter tea spilling over his tongue swiftly as he drank.
He grimaced as he swallowed, but the brew was doing nice things to his perception. The flames in
the gilded fireplace licked up the sides of the logs in the shapes of frantically grabbing hands, their
nails scraping the blackened bark. “When we are done here, will you go back to Liberia?”

Francis chuckled, a dry, raspy sound that rattled through the smoke-damaged strings of his vocal
chords. “You’re confident that there will be an end to this.”

“There will be for me. I have to get back to my family. They need me, now that they have been
awakened.”

“The organization needs you,” the doctor corrected him with a point of his gnarled finger. “We need
you. Centuries of tradition and legacy needs you.”

“I renounced my duties when I cooked a Marceau.”

“Killing him was the beginning of your greatest service to the order. You have to keep being the
hero they will look to.”

“I will not remain to be the leader they will follow once it’s done,” Leif said firmly. “That is not my
legacy.”

Francis slumped back in his chair with a shake of his head, a yellow grin splitting his beard as he
said, “You Valstads are all as stubborn as you are crazy.”

Leif grinned back and shrugged. “Some genetic consistencies are undeniable. We are no more able
to resist them than a wolf can resist a limping lamb.”

“Even the domesticated Valstads?” Francis joked.

Leif stared into the swirl of his tea as he stirred more sugar into it, the motion kicking up colors he
knew weren’t present anywhere outside of his mind as he responded, “A collie who has never seen a
sheep still dreams of herding. A collie who has worked its whole life herding and protecting sheep
still dreams of hunting them.”
The throbbing, burning pain in Anders’ stab wounds seemed worse now than they’d been since Leif had sunken the knives into him, but the staff here was not quite so generous with prescribing narcotics as they had been in the US. He limped back to the waiting room from the hospital pharmacy with a higher strength anti-inflammatory that was guaranteed to tear up his gut and not do too much else. Henrik had called him lucky that he had somehow avoided infection despite his seemingly best efforts to neglect cleaning his wounds properly. Lucky that he could recover with physical therapy. Lucky that the knife hadn’t sliced an artery. He would have thought he was the luckiest guy on Earth by how often medical staff had pointed out his talent for getting stabbed in ways that avoided these many, many worse scenarios. When he sat down to wait for Simone and Vidar in the barely comfortable laminate benches that lined the neutral taupe walls, he nearly groaned when the receptionist behind the glass divider beckoned him over. He leaned heavily on the cane to prop himself back on his good foot.

He had to lean in close to hear her say in a low and private tone, “Mr. Valstad, your brother has been taken to the Accident and Emergency Department.”

“What?! What the hell happened?!” Anders exclaimed. “Where’s Simone?!”

“Henrik’s with him,” she said instead. “He wants to be the one to tell you everything, but don’t worry. The police are on their way.”

“The police?!” he yelled. He didn’t care that everyone was staring now. His pain, his aggravation, everything else was forgotten in the face of this fresh fear.

“Please, sir, the A&E is located on the western end of the complex. Henrik can explain more than I can.”

He pivoted and limped quickly back the way he came, realizing halfway through the sprawling halls that he had left his prescription bag at the desk and not even coming close to giving a damn. His mind paraded a hundred possible scenarios, each one worse than the last, but the worst was simply not knowing. There was nothing he could do but swing his bad leg faster, his lurching gallop earning him stares and offers for help that he disregarded as he tried his best to run. By the time he had found the department, he was panting through the agony throbbing and cramping his entire thigh and sweating from the effort.

“I’m here to see Henrik Valstad,” he said to the nurse behind the counter, the words tumbling out quickly between breaths. “He’s a nurse, works here with Dr. Brun, third floor. He’s with our brother.”

“I know. Let me get you in,” the nurse interrupted him as she rose from her seat.

He rushed through the door immediately upon her propping it open for him and followed her hurried steps through the sharp turns of the crowded corridors until he saw the two uniformed police officers looming in an open doorway. Henrik stood inside the small room speaking with them, stopping when he caught his eye.

“Anders! Jesus, it’s about time!” he grumbled, pulling him by his arm between the policemen. “Thanks for escorting him, Bev.”

Nurse Bev left with a curt nod, walking back in as much of a hurry as she’d come, and Anders stumbled into the room to see Vidar laid out on a bed with the heel of his hand pressed to his forehead.
“What the hell is going on?!” Anders growled, shaking his biggest brother’s hand off his arm.
“Where the fuck is Simone?!”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” the shorter, mustachioed officer interjected. “I’m Officer Bergesen and this is Officer Reistad. When was the last time you saw Simone Valstad?”

His stomach felt as though it dropped out of him. “Is this about her? Did something happen to Simone?”

“We don’t know,” Reistad answered. “Can you answer the question?”

“Can you?!” Anders snapped before he could stop himself. “Last I saw, she went in to get examined by Dr. Brun and this asshole—” He shoved a finger in Vidar’s direction, who glared at him with a sneer. “— insisted on being in there with her! Now, can anyone tell me what the hell happened?!”

“Whoa, littlest bro, you gotta calm the fuck down,” Henrik cautioned him, glancing nervously at the cops.

“And quit fucking shouting so goddamn loud,” Vidar added.

“I’ll calm the fuck down when I know she’s okay!” Anders shouted at them both.

“You can either calm down here or we could calm you down at the station, sir,” Reistad frowned, squaring his shoulders and placing his hands at the sides of his belt.

Anders pushed down the urge to deck him, surprised at the sudden and intense impulse, and forced himself to quietly and calmly say, “I’m sorry, I just need to know where she is.”

“Again, so do we,” Bergesen said.

“Can I just tell him?” Henrik sighed. “He’s going to be like this until he knows what’s going on.”

Bergesen glanced at his partner, sharing a skeptical shrug with him before nodding to Henrik.

He pulled Anders further into the room, gesturing for him to sit in the singular plastic chair in the corner before saying, “First, I’m going to need you to not freak out, alright?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Anders responded. His panic had only risen, those worse scenarios gaining traction in convincing him as each second passed. “What’s happening?”

“Simone’s missing.”

“Missing? What do you mean ‘missing’?”

“I mean, she wasn’t where she was supposed to be and no one knows where she is now,” Henrik clarified. He pursed his lips, a terrible sign that always gave away when he had to break bad news, and Anders could feel his throat and chest tightening in anxiety. “Someone attacked Vidar in the room. Got him in a chokehold from behind and Vid went under quick. He couldn’t see who it was, doesn’t know what happened after that, nothing. Vid’s fine, but we think, maybe, whoever knocked him out might have… taken Simone.”

A wave of nausea made Anders bend forward and hold his face in his hands. The sweat that had beaded on his skin chilled to an uncomfortable cold. This couldn’t be happening. Everything was falling apart so quickly but this was absurd. He knew he wasn’t doing a good job with her, but he was going to do better. She was going to start getting the medicine she needed instead of just
remaining sick from the drugs she’d been poisoned with. They were going to heal together, figure all
this out together, learn to be better together. Now that chance had been taken from him. From them.

He lifted his head, frustration calcifying over his distress and panic as he growled to Vidar, “You let
her get kidnapped?!”

“Well, I was a little distracted at the time, but yes, that’s essentially correct,” Vidar answered flatly.

Anders shot up from the chair, his rage forgetting his injury and making him stumble towards the
bed. Henrik’s strong hands held him back from advancing on the prone man as he cursed and
writhed against him. This wasn’t supposed to happen. They were in a hospital, there were people,
witnesses, everywhere. There was no word or warning, no clue that something like this could
happen. It wasn’t fair. His knees buckled as the weight of his grief pressed down on him and he sank
to the floor, lowered slowly by Henrik’s hands.

“It’s one of those murdering freaks, isn’t it?” Anders asked, his voice tight as hot tears streaked down
his face. He didn’t try to hide his crying; the sharp edges of his shattered pride cutting deep. He had
failed her so thoroughly and now he would likely never be able to make it up to her. “She’s gone.
She’s gone!”

Henrik slipped on his jacket over his scrubs and slung the strap of his bag over his shoulder, sighing
as his shift had finally come to a close. His niece might have been kidnapped and his brother might
have been attacked in his own office, but patients still had appointments and paperwork still needed
to be filled out. At least everyone had been sympathetic and even Dr. Brun had displayed an
appropriate level of shame and humiliation for losing a patient in possibly the least expected way any
doctor could. Once it had been established that this had been an isolated incident, the day had
resumed almost as it normally could, though with the added police intrusions in and out of room four.
There was nothing in room four for them to find. A few drops and smears of Simone’s blood, but
that was all the signs of foul play they could gather outside of what had happened to Vidar. It was as
though she had simply vanished. Henrik checked with the front desk to make sure that her blood and
urine samples had been sent to the lab regardless of her disappearance and figured he’d go ahead and
get Dr. Brun to prescribe her whatever she needed for her withdrawals tomorrow. The grouchy
doctor would likely do just about anything for him now, including writing his possibly dead niece
prescriptions.

“I’m heading out, Martha,” he waved to the receptionist.

Martha rose from her chair, her brow wrinkled and eyes glittering with true concern as she said,
“We’re all so sorry, Henrik. We’ll be praying that the police find her soon and safe.”

“You be careful, alright? Have security walk you to your car,” he said firmly. “We can’t take any
risks with the freak who did this still out there.”


He took the staff exit to the stairs, his steps echoing in the stairwell, his footfalls the only sound all
the way down to the garage. No one took this stairwell outside of fire drills on account of needing a
key to access it and its general creepiness with the lighting in the garage around it flickering on only
half the time. He was the only one who had even seemed to recall its existence, none of the staff
pointing it out as a possible route the kidnapper could have taken. He hadn’t mentioned it to the
police either. A simple oversight, one they might catch later, but the security cameras had long been nonfunctional and no one would have seen anything anyway.

He set his bag on the lid of his car’s trunk, relying on the thin ambient light from the working halogen bulbs on the other side of the garage to measure the proper dose into the syringe. Better too little than too much was his general rule in most cases with sedatives, but in this situation, he leaned toward perhaps a pinch too much just in case. Setting his bag on the concrete floor, he held the syringe ready and popped open the trunk. When the lid didn’t come flying up and nothing came out from the trunk but the sliver of illumination from the light within it, he eased it open. A smile grew on his face at the sight of his adorable niece, curled on her side, looking absolutely angelic and at peace in a deeply drugged sleep. He’d worried all day that she might choke on her gag or come out of unconsciousness in a panic over being trapped in this tight little space, but she was perfect. He brushed a stray curl away from her face, his thumb lingering on her smooth cheek as he touched her with more boldness than he had ever dared while she was awake. Before he risked this dallying any further, he sank the needle into her battered neck and fed more sedative into her bloodstream. He wished there was a better way, but this was the best way he could think to keep them all safe. Her especially, but his brothers too. His smile faded as he pulled the needle out, those bruises around her blood-smeared neck having darkened significantly since he’d picked her up off the floor of room four. No one would hurt her like that again; he would always be able to keep her safe now.
Chapter 56

Leif could feel Mrs. Marceau glaring at him as he addressed the soft old men in their dated tailored suits, which made him only speak on for longer just to bask in the irritation of her gaze. Discussing projected timelines, potential contingency implementations, aggregate planning, process modeling, critical chain project management, and event chain diagrams with a room full of dusty representatives worth billions of dollars between them was as dull and droll in organizing architecture projects as it was in the unofficial buying and selling of underdeveloped countries. Whatever China wanted to do with the resources in the Congo was not his business, but apparently it had been the main business of the organization for quite some time, including his own uncle’s involvement in their ongoing political sabotage nearly thirty years ago. Leif was unsurprised at the monetary interest in keeping these impoverished countries vulnerable for the picking of interested buyers, but he was amused that the old cult his family had been so pious toward had taken up competition with such organizations as the CIA. Although, in certain perspectives, he supposed the order had created a sort of primordial business model for some of the more taciturn tactics those entities employed.

As the meeting suspended for a brief repose and the representatives took to the halls to update their parties over rapidly-spoken phone calls and furiously typed emails, Leif sat on the edge of the long lacquered wood table and looked out the wide windows to the line of trees blocking the view of the street. The temptation to break through the glass and lose his pursuers in the streets was present only in how attainable it was, but they knew as well as he did that his imprisonment was not enforced by physical means. It was the same means that enabled Mrs. Marceau to step toward him with a relative reassurance that he would not rip out her throat despite that same attainability and temptation.

“Your participation has not gone without notice,” she said, with all the same cold clinical regard in her deep voice that betrayed nothing of her sincerity or intention, “nor without gratitude. I am open to discuss the terms of your punishment with the council in light of your cooperation.”

“The terms of my punishment clearly call for my execution,” he notified her unhelpfully. He turned to her then, showing his long eyeteeth in a wide grin. “I took the oath and broke it when I tied and roasted your husband like a Christmas ham, remember? It’s the ax for dissenters like me.”

He was glad he didn’t miss the disgusted curl of her lip as she said, “I assure you, I am doing everything in my power to prevent that outcome.”

“So long as I remain cooperative toward your goals, you mean,” Leif grinned. He tilted his head, giving a little show of thought before continuing. “I hate to say it, madame, but I am simply unsatisfied with what you’re offering me.”

Her hazel glare hardened under her furrowing brow as she nearly exclaimed, “What I am offering you is your life!”

“I wouldn’t mind dying again as much as I mind what it is you’re trying to accomplish here,” he shrugged. “Frankly, I require more motivation. Make me a better offer and I might consider furthering your agenda instead of destroying it.”

“What are you asking, Valstad?” she asked.

He hummed, pleased at her directness and lack of tact to try to even question his ability to destroy her plan. It saved them both so much time by avoiding these little games of polite abstraction and coy diversion her late husband had so aggravatingly favored. Mrs. Marceau was proving to be no pale imitation of Mr. Marceau, but a businesswoman of her own fashion and method. Leif would almost
admire her steel if he didn’t so easily see where she could be made to bend.

“The trick to making a lackluster offer have value is to make your buyer see the value in it, whether it is there or not,” he said, sliding off the edge of the conference table and walking toward that view out the window as he spoke. “You offer my survival, but I do not value my survival. What is it that do I value, Mrs. Marceau?”

“I can bring your daughter here,” she answered. “You may see her, unsupervised and unmonitored to do as you please with her, for one 24-hour period per month.”

“You must think me an easy man to please with such crass measures.”

“Are you not?”

He laughed at that, genuinely amused by her brash rudeness wrapped in a passionless package. “Madame, you think you are tempting a starving man with a morsel, and though I do hunger for my darling girl, I can’t accept anything but the full meal.”

“Then you will have her,” Mrs. Marceau responded, in as much of a huff as her sterile manner allowed. “Confined to your quarters, full time, no restrictions.”

He licked his teeth, the thrill of such a consideration exciting the beast in him, but he was playing a longer game than that now and with more players than just the two of them. “You’re still not appealing to what I truly value. Think, madame. What is it about my daughter that I most value?”

“According to the rumors?”

“Don’t be simple,” he scolded. The long pause afterward drew him to glance at her, seeing nothing revealed in her stony expression. He could smell her increased perspiration even at this distance, see the slight fidgeting in her usually controlled stillness. He knew if she didn’t need him, she would have gladly gunned him down where he stood. “Are you so surprised to find that the rumors are true?”

“I’m thinking,” she said stiffly.

“Then I’ll leave you to think,” he said as he turned, the heels of his shoes clicking on the marble floor as he walked toward the door. “Tell your merchants whatever you wish to excuse my withdrawal from their schemes.”

“Wait!”

He paused, hiding his satisfied smirk by not turning to her as she spoke.

“It’s your family’s legacy. That’s what you value more than anything, isn’t it? You need to do whatever it is you were doing to ensure that legacy continues, right? You could do that here with her. Train her, develop her skills, whatever you need, I can facilitate.”

He sighed, long and exasperatedly, running his hand over his short beard. “You still don’t get it. I’m feeling generous, though. Bring my girl to me and I will entertain your little plot briefly to give you time to get the offer right.”
The slow crawl of a tear falling away from the wetness that had pooled behind her eyelids was what woke Simone with the ache of a nightmare still pressing on her chest. Echoes of saltwater filling her lungs weighed heavily in her body, but it was just her weight sunk into the soft mattress beneath her and the heavy comforters and quilts stacked above her. She shivered from the cold that chilled her bone-deep despite the thick blankets and, when she tried to curl her body to collect the warmth this supine position eked out, dread splashed over her at the familiar sluggishness to her motions. Years of experience had told her she’d been medically sedated and recent experience told her this was cause enough to panic. She sat up too quickly, her shadowy surroundings splotching with holes of pure blackness before she sank back down, her head and heart pounding as the drug threatened to pull her under again. She clung to consciousness like a man caught in a river clings to anything to keep him from drowning, her eyes squeezed shut in concentration and fear until she forced them to stare out into the darkness when she began to slip into the sweeping current her half-dream conjured. She had to keep awake, keep herself out of those inky rapids. Unable trust her body to move, she moved her mind to stave off the forceful persuasion of sleep.

She dredged into her most recent memories, pulling up sterile soothing off-whites and fluorescent lights reflected off waxed linoleum. The acrid stench of antiseptics and anxiety that had soaked into the walls. The hospital. She touched a clumsy hand up her stiff arm and felt the tape and tube at her inner elbow, the presence of an IV calming that panic. Maybe Dr. Brun had found something they needed to knock her out to fix and the anesthesia had taken her memory of it. Her mind walked her into the small room, onto the crinkle of paper covering the vinyl cushion of the exam table, through the wave of anger and then despair that had led to Vidar overtaking it all. His scent, his piercing stare, his coaxing and condescending lilt, and then his taste and the consequences that had begun to fall in line after it. She could not detect him in the dryness of her mouth now. She didn’t know how much time had passed since that kiss, or the ones he had devoured from her mouth after it, but the only presence of him that still lingered was the ache wrapped around her throat and his scent rubbed into her hair. That clean, woody aroma with a spice somewhere between juniper and oakmoss was the base that each Valstad’s scent grew from; a scent she had thought unique to her and her father until meeting her uncles. What Vidar had tried to deny in her scent, he could not deny in the chemistry of her taste.

She turned her face into the spread of her hair beside her head, seeking out the odd comfort in their shared scent. It shouldn’t soothe her. Everything that had come with that scent had brought her so much misery and pain, but the instinctive stirrings of love and attachment settled over her like a pleasant drug coating her synapses. But she was alone. The hollow ache of lonesomeness expanded in her chest and, like she had done in her childhood before embarrassment of the habit had trained it out of her, she hugged and sang to herself to ease that ache.

“ʻO kou aloha nō … Aia i ka lani…” she sang in a thin whisper, a song she didn’t even know the meaning of now her only link to that half of her family.

She tried to listen for her mother’s voice in the words as she nuzzled the scent of the last man who had touched her. It didn’t have to matter that he had hurt her. Her throat was sore and the bruised muscles of her neck protested to her turning to bury her nose further into the cascade of her hair, but the loneliness that had marked her life now spiked to an overbearing pitch. She tried to imagine her grandmother’s backyard in Aiea. The deep and lush greens, the salt of the ocean carried in the gentle breeze, everything had seemed sweeter where her mother Lisa had been raised. Since that last phone call with Lisa had lamenting not having divorced her father years prior, a fantasy had been growing in Simone of an alternate reality where her mother had taken her to live with Puna in their island home. In the quiet moments when the isolation in Anders’ house could not be fulfilled with the dogs’ companionship, she had often wondered what that alternate version of herself would be doing. Listening to her mother badger her to slather on sunblock and stay out of the sun, probably. The thought made her smile despite the fresh tears that stung at the corners of her eyes.
Leif would not have gotten the chance to poison her. She wouldn’t have become infected with his lust, wouldn’t have been confronted with the evil that had germinated in her genes, wouldn’t have been stuck halfway through this transformation, too human to withstand the pain and shame of what she was and too inhuman to stop any of it. It hurt too much to imagine all the things that would not have happened. She turned back to the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean feeding into Aiea Bay lapping up her calves, the wavering voice of Puna calling her to shore. Puna would call out for her, call and call while the water rose up Simone’s body until she couldn’t hear her beneath the ocean’s roar, just like in her nightmare. She wondered if it was still considered a nightmare if part of her yearned for her lungs to grow heavy with brine until it washed out her life.

Ko’u noho mih-""

She froze mid-verse at the sound of the door slowly creaking open, a wedge of light spilling into the room too bright for her dark-adjusted vision. Her previous panic scratched just beneath the surface of her control as that light spread and the silhouette of a very, very large and muscular man stood in the doorway. His size, coupled with his stillness, made the hairs on the back of her neck raise.

"Sorry- was I too loud?” she whispered, trying to stall for time as though an extra few seconds would mean anything to the drugs that had crippled her movement.

A thick arm parted from the massive bulk of shadow and light flooded the room from above, prompting Simone to wince and shut her eyes against the aching glare. She couldn’t move, she doubted her sore throat would allow her to scream beyond a rasping bray. Panic began to claw through the cracks of her resolve.

"Jeg håper du liker iskrem.”

Relief washed away that mounting terror, the relaxing of her tensed muscles dragging a sigh out of her smiling mouth as she whispered, “Jesus, Uncle Henrik, you scared me!”

Shielding her eyes with her hand, she peeked through her fingers to see him carrying a small bowl. He wasn’t in his scrubs. He wasn’t even fully dressed. A ratty pair of sweatpants hung low on his hips and a sleeveless shirt worn to near translucency displayed an uncomfortable amount of him as he approached. She glanced away from the overbearing masculinity of his build, the heat of a flush rushing up from her chest to her scalp at being caught so off guard. How the male form could still trigger this ingrained modesty in her was beyond her to know when she considered all the very personal experience she’d had lately. But that wasn’t with Henrik; the gentle giant was still so mysterious beyond his general good will to her, she felt as though seeing this much of him was an intrusion. In glancing away, her flustered thoughts became distracted by her surroundings. Or, rather, lack of surroundings. The full-sized bed and the IV pole beside it that held the bag of clear fluid feeding into the tube in her arm were the items in the small white-walled room. She noticed then that there was no stench of antiseptics there either, the lingering sharp and sour tang of that medical odor clinging only to where the IV pierced her. Instead, all she could smell was the stale air of a room shut up for too long. Her oldest uncle walking around in his pajamas, the barren room, the IV drip, it was all so strange.

“This isn’t the hospital, is it?” she asked, bewilderment clogging her thoughts. The soft bed dipped almost comically where Henrik sat at the end of it and placed the bowl next to her. She shifted onto her back and slowly sat up, her head swimming with the effort, to see that he had brought her ice cream. “Where… am I? What happened?”

“Ah…” Henrik started, drawing her wandering gaze to his bearded chin. Old habits dictated that she
couldn’t look him in the eye yet and she didn’t dare look any lower, knowing she lacked the self-restraint not to blatantly examine the black of his tattoos bleeding through his thin shirt. “Dette er... my house.”

“Young house…” she muttered. The walls slowly closed in around them as she tried to recall anything that might have led her here. She couldn’t remember what had happened after Vidar had choked her. “Why am I here and not with Anders?”

Henrik’s mouth thinned in a frown. “Eat.”

“I’m too cold for ice cream,” she said, shaking her head absently. “Can you tell me what happened? Why am I here?”

“Eat… før det smelter,” he said, poking the bowl with his thick finger and jostling the spoon to clink around inside it. “Eat now. Make strength.”

She pulled the bowl into her lap, the two scoops of white ice cream in the white bowl in the white nest of blankets seeming too surreal for her drugged mind to quite believe as real. She offered up a muttered excuse, “My throat is too sore to eat right now. Please, can you tell me what happened at the hospital?”

“It is good this way,” he insisted, pointing to his throat, letting her know he understood her words even if he could not communicate them back to her. “Eat now. Come.”

Frustration and a nagging fear clenched her teeth and soured her already nauseous gut. “I don’t care about the ice cream, Uncle Henrik. Can you please just tell me what happened? Is Anders going to come get me soon?”

His silence in response verified some unspoken and unknown fear in her, cracking her already shaky composure even though she couldn’t identify to herself why it distressed her so. This had to be some sort of strange nightmare. Nothing was happening, there shouldn’t be any reason for her to start crying, but the tears came hot and fast from that unknown terror in her. Something was horribly wrong, she just couldn’t tell what it was. The room, it was the room, every windowless wall and bare inch of it was wrong. This man wasn’t the same jovial Henrik who had shuffled her off to show her old photo albums and laugh about times he had thought were innocent. But it was just a room and it was just Henrik. She was the one who wasn’t making any sense.

“I’m sor-ry,” she murmured, her words hitching as she tried to reign in her sobs. She rubbed her wet face with the sleeve of the shirt she was wearing, the billowing fabric hanging so loose on her that it must have belonged to him. “I’m sorry, I-I don’t know why I’m crying, I… I’m just confused. Why am I here? Where’s Anders? How long have I been asleep? Why… why won’t you say anything? Please, please, just say anything…”

The clink and drag of the spoon in the bowl brought her to open her eyes, the flow of tears quickly blurring her vision as she saw him holding a spoonful of the ice cream to her mouth.

“Eat,” he commanded.

“Why won’t you-” she started to ask, her pleading cut off by him forcing the spoon to her lips.

Reflexively, she jerked back, but he grabbed her chin and squeezed her cheeks to encourage her to open her mouth. The cold cream smeared on her lips and chin as she tried to resist him, but when darkness once more encroached at the edges of her vision and the vertigo threatened to tip the world completely, she parted for him. The sweet vanilla was thick on her tongue, cloying and unwelcome,
making her swallow immediately and the cold burned as it passed her sore throat. The slide of the metal spoon leaving her mouth was a relief until she heard it scrape the bowl again.

“Please, stop,” she said, calmly, trying not to antagonize this very large, very strong, very willful man. She couldn’t bring herself to open her eyes, too afraid to see what he might think of what he was doing to her. She couldn’t bear the thought that he might enjoy forcing and humiliating her like his brothers had. Before she could plead again, the cold spoon pressed against her lips and she obediently parted for it again.

“It’s good, yes?” he said. When she didn’t respond, only swallowing the freezing cold morsel down with a wince, he asked, “You do not like?”

“I’m c-cold…” she answered, a stray sob shaking her small voice.

He released his hold on her chin and she risked looking at him, finding no real relief in seeing his clinical detachment to his actions and her distress. She knew with certainty that she was not the first patient he had force fed, both by the practiced ease with which he’d handled her and his unaffected attitude toward it. Compartmentalizing was a necessary skill in much of the medical field, something that she was once able to do, but for years now her thoughts and emotions ran and bled together in the unruly chaos of her mad mind. He was not her uncle in this moment; he was her caretaker, and he would do whatever was necessary to take care of her. She shivered under the iron in his stare.

“Eat,” he commanded, holding the spoon out to her again.

Licking some of the mess from around her mouth, she leaned forward and took the spoonful of ice cream into her mouth, leaving the metal clean when she pulled away. There was no use fighting him. There was no use fighting any of them.

Having worked in healthcare fields since he was eighteen, from wrangling the committed insane in mental health facilities to easing the descent into death in hospice care, Henrik could accurately assess a patient’s health within the first five seconds of meeting them. He knew what to look for in the various lusters and textures of skin and hair, he could read nail beds and vein distention like a palm reader, and whatever he couldn’t see, he could smell. When he’d first entered room four, fully primed to use these gifts of perception, he’d failed to protect himself from the emotional effect of what he perceived of his only niece. Her skin had the look of sustained dehydration that he would have attributed to her drug withdrawal if not for the myriad of other things he immediately noticed. He could see in the hollowness around her eyes and pick up in a peculiar pungency in her breath that she had been severely underfed beyond the required fasting for blood tests. There was bleeding somewhere in her body other than at the injury she supposedly had reopened at her neck; judging by how tenderly she sat and her posture, he intuited rectally by trauma. There were friction burns and the unmistakable pattern of chains bruised into her wrists and ankles and neck. The reddened bruise of capillaries burst close to the surface on the side of her face told him she’d been slapped, the deeper discoloration beneath it told him it had been done with a brutal force.

He’d seen this kind of abuse in bits and pieces in vulnerable patients before, sad cases of sexual assault victims and one or two severe instances of child neglect and endangerment, but not clustered together like this. He couldn’t logic it. She was in the care of Anders, his littlest brother, who worked for a nonprofit trying to get clean water to communities in third world countries and rescued stray dogs as a hobby, and he couldn’t have done this. But there she sat, battered and broken, starved and raped, enough evidence on her body to finally break that perception he had of his littlest brother.
Trauma did funny things to the mind and they had all gotten quite funny.

Watching how she responded to just a little physical force, how obedient and submissive she became under a firm hand, he hated how well it worked. She needed the calories, though. This was more merciful than the funnel and tube he had begun to worry he’d have to fetch, so he tried not to hate having to bully her. Mercy was seldom ever pleasant.

“Uncle Henrik…” she whimpered after swallowing another bite. He tensed, dreading that she would start that awful pleading and sobbing again, worried that he did not possess the resolve to resist it. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

It took him a moment to reconstruct what she’d said, recognizing the word for bathroom and reworking the odd grammatical structure before it to understand her meaning. He sighed, grabbed up the bowl from her lap and placed it on the floor before pulling the blankets from her. It had been a while since he’d worked with inpatient care, but reaching to grab her by her narrow ribcage and pull her up came automatically. The flinch and defensive fold of her arms over her chest drew him out of his professional mentality and he paused. She was not a patient. Even if she was, he wouldn’t have treated her this forcefully. His heavy brow furrowed in confusion at his behavior. Perhaps it was the language barrier preventing him from delivering the common courtesies of communication, or maybe it was the stress of the day wearing down his manners, but he recognized now that he had been unnecessarily brutish toward her. Seeing how fear shined in her red-rimmed eyes, regret broke through that barrier of duty towards his task and he withdrew his hands from her.

“Come,” he said, rising from the bed and rolling the IV pole to her side.

She leaned heavily on it for support as she slid out of the bed, disregarding his offered arm for help as she limped forward. The rejection stung as clearly as her new fear of him, but both were well-deserved. Leading her into the small bathroom across the hall, he tried not to watch how she struggled just to move. She’d been conscious for less than twenty minutes and he had messed this up so badly already. Or maybe he hadn’t. She was bound to go through a period of fear until she understood this was for her own good, after all. Listening to the sound of the faucet running behind the bathroom door, he ran his hand over his beard and tried to fully recommit to this plan. He had to be stronger than his selfish desire for her to be happy with him. Even if she hated and feared him forever, she would at least be safe this way.

“Oh, God, don’t let me fuck this up,” he muttered into his hand, leaning his head back against the wood of the door.

His siblings would forget her in time. She would never have to worry about them hurting her again and he would never have to think of what they’d done once her bruises healed. He had left room four weeping for them all and when he went back and had walked in on Vidar strangling her as he said those filthy, awful things, he couldn’t let that madness continue. He had to protect them from it, even if it meant going a little mad himself. That’s what this plan was: mostly madness and barely a plan at all. There was no sane way to handle this insanity, though. He lifted his head from the door, the length of time the faucet had been running striking him as strange. When no response came after knocking, he opened it, worried that she had lost consciousness inside.

“Simone?” he called through the small gap of the open door. “You are okay, baby?”

Still no response. He pushed the door open all the way, shocked to find the bathroom empty. The window was open to the cold night air, the screen missing from it and gaping out into the pure darkness. His heart skipped a beat when he registered that Simone had escaped after less than half a day in his care.
Chapter 57

“He was right.”

Vidar kept looking out the passenger window, deciding whether or not to acknowledge what Anders had said after refusing to speak since reacting to news of Simone’s kidnapping. He’d seen his brothers and himself break in more miserable and unfathomable ways than he had ever bothered to imagine, but it still unsettled him to see the cracks that had splintered from those jagged pieces of them. When Anders had crawled into himself, he didn’t press or coax him to respond. He knew the dark space inside him he had to withdraw to for this to pass and now it seemed time to hear what he’d brought with him from that place. It was that firsthand experience that made him both able to sympathize with him and dread what was to come now. Ultimately, though, it was his own curiosity that decided for him.

“What are you mumbling about, Anders?”

“Leif.”

That name still made Vidar clench his jaw against the fear it shot off in his mind. He watched the trees blur into a long cloud of green as they sped past them. Everything had become so muddled since he’d stopped sleeping. Clarity and lucidity had dwindled where he had never known it to be in such limited supply and dreams had begun to seep into these endless waking hours. He wasn’t entirely sure if this nightmare was real, providing a buffer of disbelief that had helped him from cracking under the distress it should have warranted. Insomnia wasn’t entirely without its uses in that way.

“He was right,” Anders continued. “I’m a fraud and a liar.”

“Maybe I should walk,” Vidar said. “It’s a nice day for it. Pull over and let me out.”

“I fucked her before I even found out about any of it,” his younger brother went on, his voice too loud and clear for Vidar to pretend to not have heard him. “None of this shit had happened yet. I got drunk and fucked her while everyone was asleep. Do you know why I fucked my mentally disturbed niece?”

The sour pit in Vidar’s stomach did not want to know. He didn’t want to know any of it, but it was either this or jumping out of the moving car.

“The way she would look at him, that… that connection between them,” Anders said, the words drawing out of him slowly, almost wistfully. Road rash and a few broken bones weren’t such a terrible alternative to Vidar now as he pressed his head against the side window. “I wanted that. I thought I was just curious, you know, what it would be like to have a child of my own who loved me that much… but really, I was jealous of him for getting to be a father when I was denied. I hated him for being a good dad, for giving up everything to take care of a daughter who loved him so much. I wanted to take it away from him. When I was fucking his kid, I believed I was giving her something he couldn’t, but wow, was I wrong about that!”

“Why are you telling me this?” Vidar asked past the sourness crawling up his throat. “No, no, don’t answer that, just stop. Wherever you’re going with this, stop. You’re almost home, do you think you can hold in your emotional breakdown for another five minutes?”

“I need to take responsibility for once in my selfish life and face that I’m not the person I thought I
Vidar pressed his hand to his pounding forehead and was surprised at how much anger bled into his tone as he snapped, “If you want to regret what you did to her, that’s your choice, but don’t talk to me about your fucked up fallen father figure bullshit!”

The car lurched to a stop at the light before the turn into their neighborhood and Anders put it in park, took his hands off the wheel and turned toward him. He smiled at him, a hollow expression that didn’t touch his empty eyes as he said, “This isn’t regret. I’m not even human enough to regret any of it. There’s no redemption for either of us, but I don’t feel damned. I feel free.”

The turning in Vidar’s mind was offset by the car turning down the street, that shifting and sliding of thought dizzying as he watched the familiar roads twist before him. He wasn’t sure which was more disturbing: the sense that his younger brother was officially going off the deep end or how deeply his words rang true in him. The world had been mad for much longer than they had, though. He looked at Anders’ hands on the steering wheel and recalled how gently he had caressed their slave’s body after ravaging it, then at his own, remembering how he had strangled her for making him feel the truth in their connection. It had been troubling enough to realize she and him were kindred in feeling inhuman in a human world and similarly hateful for it. He had kissed her, a stupid mistake from being caught up in the moment, and tasted the undeniable in just how deeply they went beyond kindred to kin. It was still too fresh to even think clearly about yet and already that profound connection had been severed, leaving a raw and painfully unresolved loss. It didn’t make sense that he should feel bereavement for the loss of a bond he had never wanted and had only just become aware of, but that was another mad trick in the mad world.

“We are free to be what we really are,” Vidar muttered. “We don’t have a choice, anyway.”

The vehicle shuddered to a stop up the gravel driveway into Anders’ garage, the noise of the door shutting them into darkness leaving a gaping quiet in the car when it settled. Neither man moved to exit, both reluctant to enter the emptiness of the house where their girl was not. Vidar could feel the distress welling in his brother, that tremendous grief an unfathomable and powerful thing that emanated from him even in his silence, and he pitied him. This was one of the many high prices of love and part of why Vidar had banished it from his heart, but it still swam in his blood for his family. Some attachments were inevitable. He loved his brothers. He loved his niece. He resented it all.

“Let’s get the dogs fed and go to my place for tonight,” Vidar gently insisted.

Looking out into that dark, hollow space, Simone could feel herself tip and spill into the night, sloshing out of her mind and over the end of the world as far as she knew it. The running faucet facilitated this spilling sensation, one she knew existed only in this space between drugs and dreaming but there was no other reality for her to perceive but the one filtered through her madness. Between drugs and dreaming, between a door and a window, she tried to keep hold of herself as much as her consciousness. The problem, she found, was that there was simply not much of herself left to hold onto, so she held onto the monster a little to find balance. The screen lifted out of its notches easily and tumbled down into the darkness. White flashed behind her eyes and everything jarred at once, knocking the wind out of her and leaving her choking on her paralyzed diaphragm. She couldn’t remember the fall, just the screen fading out of the field of light from the window and then she was on her back, her mouth gaping in panic to draw in the breath her body refused. The window, as it had turned out, was on the second floor of the house.
Every second mattered. Simone had to get up and move as soon as her lungs remembered how to breathe. Gravity pinned her down like a blanket of iron laid over her and her body moved slowly as though in water, but she pushed herself onto her knees, panting and shaking with the effort. The gravel was deafening and sharp as she scrambled awkwardly to her feet, vertigo making it difficult enough to tell which way was up even without the dark of night hiding it from her. She pushed into the ground until she began to stumble, not caring which direction so long as it simply took her away. Away from all the wrong in that small room, away from the man who was not acting like her uncle Henrik, away from the stain she cast on the lives she touched. If she could not stop it, then she could escape it. Her labored, wheezing breaths and galloping pulse drowned out any sound that might have reached her ringing ears, but she knew he would come hunting for her any moment if he wasn’t already there in the dark with her. He didn’t know what she was becoming or what she would do to him if she stayed, but ignorance didn’t deserve such a harsh consequence. She could spare him where she hadn’t spared the others. She told herself that she could, over and over, with each shaking step.

Drugged, disoriented, weak, and injured in many small ways including the new aches from freefalling out the second story window, that animal instinct to run fueled her tilted steps more than the paltry belief she had in her mantra. This was the only way she could protect him. There was no time to consider where she might be going or what she would do afterward, only the singular objective to flee. There was no moon in the sky and the stars were a thousand tiny pinpoints of useless light that only made her trip and scrape her knees when she looked into the distant glistening sea of them, so she clawed her way back to her feet and kept her head down in the shadows she raced through. Porchlights marked where the widely spaced houses were along the block, the punched-out black squares of windows telling Simone it was either very late or very early, and a solitary streetlight painted an island of yellow onto the curb some twenty yards away.

“Come here!”

Henrik’s brash baritone became a bestial growl that shook her bones in how startlingly close it was. Footfalls closing in behind her matched the rapid pounding of her heart in a stampede of percussion her own uneven pace could not keep time with. He was going to catch her. Her feet slapped concrete and the open space of the street screamed danger, so she careened into someone’s garden. Branches of trees or bushes scraped her arms and her feet felt sliced to ribbons by the underbrush as she stumbled through it, but there was safety in the cover of plants. Further, further, until her foot slammed down into nothing and she tipped forward, her hands clawing at the air until the ground broke beneath her in a splash. Chlorinated water enveloped her, sucking what little warmth she didn’t know she had from her instantly, and the world slowed to a crawl as she sank deeper and deeper.

Above the roar of the water filling her ears, she heard her father say, “The water is cool and calm. You’re relaxed. There’s someone in the water with you.”

And there was. She looked down at him, the stale water of the pond up to her knees and the mud squishing between her toes, and saw that the man was bleeding from a bite in his neck. She tasted blood in her mouth. His eyes were wide with panic and he held his hands up at the gun trained on his face. She followed the arm that held that gun up to the wielder’s face.

“Papa?” she whispered, the words coming sluggish and clumsy.

Leif did not seem to have heard her, his focus entirely on the sniveling man laying prone at the edge of the pond, but the man looked at her and stammered, “Please, please, I’m sorry, I-I wasn’t going to hurt you, I promise! Tell him I wasn’t going to hurt you, Julie!”
“Her name isn’t Julie,” Leif said. The man gasped out a whimpering sob at his voice, making her father chuckle. “And she’s not eighteen. My daughter’s name is Simone, she is fifteen-years-old, and she is going to end your life, Mr. Bradshaw.”

“N-no! No, please, I didn’t know- AH!”

Mr. Bradshaw’s pleas devolved into guttural cries when Leif shot him in the right side of his chest, the blood frothing from his mouth telling Simone that he had punctured his lung. She watched him writhe in the water as his screams came out in a gurgled, strangled sound. She should have been horrified, but she felt nothing.

“Let the water make him still,” Leif said to her, even and slow as though cajoling a pet to do a trick. “Let the water make him quiet.”

Without deliberating or questioning it, she stepped up to the man, forced him onto his front and pushed him down until his head was submerged under four inches of murky pond water. She didn’t think about it. She didn’t think at all. Mr. Bradshaw pushed and kicked against her and she pushed him in deeper, into the soft bottom of the pond, and waited. After only a minute, his struggles became spasmodic and weak, then slowly waned until he was still and quiet. He bobbed limply in the water under her hands, his dark blond hair spread and floating around his still head, her fingers gripping the short locks tight. She could not discern color with only the moonlight illuminating the pond, but she knew he was blond. They were always blond, the ones she chose. Her father gently pulled her away and she ran her fingers through the man’s hair one last time; a farewell caress to a stranger who had served the evening’s purpose.

“My darling girl,” Leif whispered, low and gravelly, husky with desire. “My sweet, darling hunter.”

His arms wrapped around her in an unmistakable lover’s embrace, tight enough that she felt the full effect of his desire pressed against her in the long bulge rubbing her middle. Need sprouted and grew rapidly to fill the emptiness inside her, that sudden heat of sexual yearning demanding too much too fast, and she clung to his embrace with a ragged gasp.

“Please,” she sighed, breathing hard through the almost painful need filling her. She slid down his body as she lowered herself to kneel, pulling a strained sigh from him as she dragged herself over his hardness. She nuzzled his cock through his pants, her mouth watering at the scent of his arousal so pronounced this close to her face, and stroked the long line of that bulge pleadingly. His body jerked in surprise.

“No, baby!” he whispered frantically. “Ikke gjør det, Simone!”

She groaned in protest when he pushed her away, his wide hands gentle but firm on her shoulders, and she looked up to beg her father. Henrik’s wide, startled blue eyes met her instead, the dream disintegrating rapidly around her as reality clicked back together piece by piece. Her hair and the oversized shirt she wore were wet with heavily chlorinated pool water, both clinging to her chilled skin as she kneeled in the bathroom she had escaped from. She leaned back on her haunches and tried to understand what was happening. The pond, the murder, her father, that suddenly wasn’t real, but it clung to her mind in a film of certainty that only made her question how real anything could be.

“Henrik…” she rasped, her sore throat dry and aching. “What happened? What have I done?”

Henrik didn’t answer her. He pressed his hands against his face and sighed deeply, his powerful shoulders hunching as he walked around her in awkward steps toward the shower tucked in the corner of the small bathroom. She blinked in confusion at his reaction, then blushed hard when she realized what she had been doing on her knees in front of him. Her own hands came up to her face
and covered her mouth as she held in her scream of shame and frustration. She had failed disastrously. She had fallen into a strange hallucination and had fallen even further behind than where she had begun. Too exhausted to cry again, with the fatigue and drug fugue numbing as much of the anguish as it could and pulling insistently at her already loose hold on consciousness, she remained kneeling in the puddle of pool water that had formed under her as her head hummed in a dull ache. She had given everything she had in running from this, but it wasn’t nearly enough.

“Simone,” Henrik said stiffly. “Come.”

She hadn’t noticed the shower running until she heard him call for her. Looking back over her shoulder, realization slowly filtered through her mired awareness that he was holding the glass door of the shower open for her to walk through it.

“I can’t…” she started to say, not sure how she should finish that statement. She couldn’t shower in front of him, but he couldn’t leave her alone, not anymore. He would be cautious now; any advantage she might have had to slip away had been dashed under the vigilance she put in him with this failed escape.

“Come,” he repeated, begging softer in his awkwardness.

Simone pushed herself to stand, her muscles rubbery and weak, and took a moment to steady herself and steel her will before peeling the sopping shirt from her body. Despite the chill that desensitized her, the chlorine stung in the dozens of thin, shallow red lines that marred her forearms and legs. He was probably used to seeing people in all stages of undress and injury, but knowing that did little to ease the humiliation of the task. She thought instead of the nightmare, how similar it had felt to the one she’d had of biting through that old man’s neck. She had dissociated during that vision, as well. She could remember it so clearly; the dark blood gushing and pooling in the pink muscle and yellow fat from his severed artery, the spread of that liquid turning the musty green carpet under him black. It was all so vivid, but she had felt nothing in killing him. She knew what it felt like to take a life; that horrible black pit inside her, always there, always steaming with guilt and anger and emptiness. For all the horror those nightmares invoked, they did not stir from that dark place, and so there was a cold comfort in knowing those dreams couldn’t have been memories for that reason alone.

All she had felt through those gory visions was the warmth of her father’s pride. It was the same approval and loving affection that Leif had shined down upon her when he had last made love to her under that pulsing ocean sky and she grasped onto that feeling greedily, pushing down the horror at her own callousness for doing so in her desperation for it. That old ache was just as present now as it had ever been. She knew it would always be there, even if he was not.

“We could mobilize as early as tonight and neutralize the risk by daybreak,” Leif offered airily to the grim and severe representative for a potential investor. He didn’t remember if he was from a government or private institution or even what country he was situated in, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting the right people in the right places and this businessman would help him get them there.

“I need more!” he argued emphatically, gesturing with an impassioned chopping motion that Leif followed with a smirk.

“Then your people are not managing these dissenters correctly. If you can’t strategize a proper response to these very basic issues, we will be sending our men into a situation that does not produce
results,” Leif said. He shook his head and turned his focus back to the pâté en croûte and spiced Cumberland sauce he’d been neglecting to eat in favor of manipulating the board. There was a certain dryness that sucked the passion from this slow vengeance he was doing his part to construct, something so utilitarian in the meticulous arrangement of pieces on the board, but there was also gratification in each success of placing them. “We have a reputation and agreeing to provide our services to a failing endeavor endangers that reputation. We can’t guarantee success if we are limited to operating within your proposed parameters. I don’t know how I could possibly reiterate this point any further. You have twenty minutes to give me a better proposal or I’m closing the deal with Cambodia instead.”

Never mind that he had already shaken hands with the businessmen paying to maintain Cambodia’s sabotaged attempts at democracy and had a few of Francis’ men on their way to enmesh themselves in Mrs. Marceau’s plans there. The representative left in a huff, already pulling out his cell phone as he stepped into the hall to make the appropriate calls. Leif took a bite of the rich pâté and washed down the cold fatty morsel with a deep draw of an equally rich Bordeaux, for once missing his ex-wife’s mundane and simple cooking. One could gain a certain appreciation for broiled chicken breasts and a side of microwaved vegetables after long enough.

He ate lightly of these indulgent hors d’oeuvres, eager for the real feasting to be done in the open courtyard among the real members of the order later. More funerary rituals awaited his brethren since he had evoked the full breadth of traditional ceremony in killing his final sparring partner. Cannibalism wasn’t among his preferred vices, but Francis had insisted on its benefits and had been marinating the corpse since stealing it from the incinerator pile. More than the spiritual benefits, the emotional appeal that eating his enemy’s flesh would provide to their cause had led him to accept the honor. A very fitting honor for the demon-blooded Leif Valstad, it seemed. He sighed and leaned back in his seat, the sumptuous armchair merciful on his aching joints from the sheer physicality of brawling after only just having recovered from his death.

“I don’t mind that you are eavesdropping,” he spoke in his passable French, loud enough for the woman feigning conversation behind him to hear. “In fact, I find it a shrewd practice, given my alliances. So, tell me, where is my prize for remaining allied to your vision?”

Mrs. Marceau stepped into his field of vision, her steely expression firmly fixed as she said, “Surely, you can wait for us to procure your prize after the guests have departed. There is much to be done and not much time to complete it in.”

“You’ll have much more to do without my assistance, then,” he sighed, setting the small plate and wineglass on the lamp table next to him before moving to stand.

“If you leave now, you’ll get nothing,” she warned.

“I already have nothing and I don’t need more of it, thank you.”

“Wait,” she said, her finely manicured hand reaching out as he turned away.

She froze halfway in realizing her error, alarm crossing her stoic face in a fleeting moment he would have missed if his attention hadn’t snapped to that hand invading his space. There it was. Fear. She had retreated behind her iron shield as quickly as she had slipped from it, but he had seen the shape of it. Of all things which Leif had gained expertise throughout his years, fear was a field he had mastered. He was both craftsman and connoisseur of all shapes and shades of fear and knew the patterns it stitched along the psyche of the afflicted. His eyes sharpened at what he saw in her then.

“What did you do?” he asked, soft and quiet, dropping the French for the more familiar and abrupt English.
“Bear with us one more evening,” she said, matching his calm with that impenetrable cool. “You’ll have her tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Why not tonight? There’s going to be a feast, I was hoping to invite her,” he spoke more rapidly. She glanced to the side, stirring tight motion from a cluster of men nearby. Guards. It wouldn’t matter if he could pluck just one of those hard, cold eyeballs from its socket in less than a fraction of a second. His long, sharp teeth showed in a dry grin. “Where did you put my daughter, madame?”

“You know damn well where we put her. Don’t forget who you are speaking to, sir,” she seethed. Defensive. Hostile. His intuition was confirmed in a flourish of fury expanding within him. She turned away from him with a clipped, “Complete your given task tonight and you may be rewarded the privilege of visitation.”

He watched as she made a swift retreat into the crowd, his hands itching to grab her head and snap her neck in a way he had not been tempted since arriving at this gilded prison. That gratification was denied to him for now under the assurance that a greater revenge would soon enough be satisfied, one that such premature recklessness would defeat. He once enjoyed these long games he would play against the late Mr. Marceau, but since they had begun involving his family, a primal territorialism had overtaken his usual patience and had made him sloppy and shortsighted. Mr. Marceau had paid for that transgression and now Leif was paying for his, but he was never fond of playing by anyone else’s rules.

“Mr. Valstad, we are willing to negotiate on allowing your unit access within the capital, but not-”

Leif interrupted the returned businessman by grabbing his shoulder, the withered musculature mapping clearly in his mind’s eye as he gave it a firm squeeze and grinned, “That will be fine. I have a few men I would like to personally select for these purposes, but I need it to remain discreet. It’s hard to tell who you can trust here, isn’t it?”

“Martha, I’m going out for lunch today,” Henrik announced to the receptionist as he walked through the waiting room toward the main elevators.

“Oh! Labs came back with Simone’s work!” Martha blurted out hurriedly.

“Thanks! I’ll ask Brun to check them when I get back!” he replied as he rushed out the door.

He had, in fact, already checked them under Dr. Brun’s login information to the hospital’s system. He didn’t need anyone knowing that, though, and after reading her results, he wished he had just waited for the doctor to see them first. As much sway as the kidnapping had afforded Henrik with Dr. Brun, everyone in their office was busy playing catchup after yesterday’s delays and he would have to wait for the young doctor to have a free moment before pursuing those prescriptions Simone needed. As he sped down the motorway, he tried to focus on the varieties of medications that might help his niece recover instead of the stinging, sucking rage that threatened just beneath his calm all day since finding out some of what Leif had put into her system. He’d need a cerebral spinal fluid analysis to more correctly assess the likelihood of certain cancerous tumors that could explain the level of human chorionic gonadotropin in her blood, but there was a much simpler and terribly likely explanation for that, one that matched her elevated progesterone. Whether it was Leif or either of his other brothers who had put that in her, he couldn’t be sure, but that it was any of them was sickening enough.
He had to decide on a course of action as soon as possible, which was half the reason he rushed to his condo. The other half was the uncertainty in how effective his efforts to Simone-proof his house had been. He locked the front door behind him as he bounded into his home, the sight of the heavy dresser still barricading the hallway door giving him some reassurance. He decided to stop by the hardware store at the end of his shift for a more permanent solution. Straightening his back and squaring his shoulders, he picked up the dresser and moved it as quietly as he could before pulling the door open to the darkened hallway. There was no sound or movement within, all doors as shut as he had left them, most locked to prevent her from finding another window to jump out of. He didn’t have much time to waste on courtesy, giving the small room he’d used for storage two knocks before pushing that door open.

“Simone, we need to—” he started to say, the words dying on his tongue when he caught the fleeting glimpse of smooth, light honeyed brown skin before the white sheet moved to cover it in a flurry of motion.

Simone twisted to sit up in alarm, her bare arms crossed over the thin blanket she had snatched up to cover herself in a hurry, and stared at him with wide eyes and flushed cheeks. His hastened mind had ground to an abrupt halt at what he had just barely seen even though he had seen everything before, but that had not been anywhere near this context. Checking her wounds and redressing her while she was still sedated was nothing beyond what he had normally done for patients hundreds of times before and monitoring her while she showered was only uncomfortable after she had deliriously snuggled up on him in the bathroom last night. This, however, was nothing he had thought to prepare himself for. He had barged into a deeply private and personal moment and there was no professional or impersonal space he could approach this from. So, as he was prone to do in panic, he pretended not to know.

“Uh, hm…” he stammered, then cleared his throat and started over. “We are, ah, need talk. Wait.”

He ignored the way she stiffened and scooted away from him as he approached the bed and took out his cell phone. He also ignored the shiver that crawled across his scalp and down his spine when he tasted that familiar and enticing scent hanging in the air. Memories of catching traces of that scent when she’d walk by or sit down near him flickered to his attention as he distracted himself with typing in his phone. His hands were suddenly clumsy, making him have to retype and delete several times as he tried to focus on this one small task and not feel the warmth coiling low in his belly or the racing of his heart.

His thumbs trembling over the keys, he swallowed the excess saliva pooling in his mouth and muttered, “Sorry. One moment…”

She shifted on the bed, drawing the blankets tighter around her, stirring the scents of her sweat and arousal soaked into the sheets and making his thumbs twitch uselessly when he could taste her in the air. The buried memory of something he was never meant to see, something that was never meant to be, surfaced to clog all thinking in his addled brain and he looked up from his phone to where her bare body sat curled under the miasma of bedding. He remembered, in a way he had not wanted to ever remember, how Anders had eagerly lapped and sucked at her as she had moaned through her orgasm. Henrik swallowed thickly and let his gaze drift to her flushed, waiting face. Time seemed to slow as he watched the tip of her pink tongue swipe at the moisture glistening on her rosy, bitten lips. A startling pressure announced its presence in a growing heaviness low in his pelvis and he looked around desperately for anywhere to sit before he recalled that he’d cleared everything out of this room.

“Um…” he murmured absently, the forgotten phone slowly drifting down as his hands lowered to his sides. “I… uh… Sorry. Sorry.”
He walked hurriedly out of the small room, shutting the door firmly behind him, and scooted the bookcase away from his bedroom door to lock himself inside. He tried not to think about why he needed to do this as he yanked down his scrubs and gripped the rapidly thickening base of his cock in his hand, tried not to think about who that mouthwatering scent belonged to as he chased its memory into the warm bedding back in that little room, only focusing on the individual pieces instead of the shameful whole.

“Fuck…” he growled, clenching his teeth at the rough pull of his fist.

His body yearned for softer, wetter things than the brutality of his coarse hand and that yearning reminded him she was right there, needing it as much as he did. He shoved those invasive thoughts out before they could repeat more insistently. That was his niece. He stroked himself faster, groaning through the almost painful resistance of his hand as he chased a rudimentary relief. Anything to stop these deplorable, disgusting desires frothing from the sick animal part of his brain. That was his niece. The pressure started to bear down harder and pull within him. He reached down with his other hand and caressed the rising tension in his sac, eager for this torment to be over with. Try as he might, those invasive thoughts slipped past his guard and his frenzied mind pursued them like so many little monsters scurrying to tunnel before he could crush them. That was his niece, and she was soft and wet and needy for the sex he was equipped to give her.

“Fucking shut up!” he hissed to himself.

He just needed to come. He would come, he would be disgusted with himself, but this would stop. He let his mind play out the fantasies that flashed swiftly behind his shut eyelids and remembered every detail of the sweet little cunt he had tried so hard not to look at last night. He pulled a grunting, shaking, barely satisfying climax from his cock almost immediately, catching the hot spurts of his seed in his fingers cupped over his sensitive tip as he came. Shame washed over him with each throb and he hated himself for this, but his mind still focused on both constructed images and real memories of his young niece even through his guilt. Frowning, miserable with grief, the demon of his arousal only half-sated by this crude method, he pulled his pants back up and held the mess in his hand to wash off in the bathroom. With a deep sigh, he unlocked and opened his door to trudge out into the hallway and nearly stumbled backward in shock at finding Simone standing right there, a white sheet clutched around her shoulders and her eyes gleaming strangely up at him.

“Eh, ah, what-” he stammered loudly in his surprise.

She stopped his attempts at speech when she snatched the hand he held carefully cupped in front of him. Before his frenzied brain could command his hand to pull away, she pulled it toward her and he watched, horrified and mesmerized, as she brought it to her mouth. The silky slide of her tongue against his palm and fingers and through the mess of his semen shot a thrill of excited pleasure straight to his core, short-circuiting the rush of panic and rendering him completely dumbfounded. This wasn’t supposed to happen. In any possible reality, this wasn’t something that could possibly occur. The sheet that was wrapped around her fluttered to the floor in a whisper, baring so much of that tantalizingly creamy skin and scent to him all at once. He made a strangled grunt as he tried to say something, anything, like stop or don’t, but only a shaking sigh managed past the block in his throat. His eyes tore away from the astonishing pink of her tongue lapping up his come with all the pleasure of a cat lapping at cream and his stare drifted down the body he had already seen, but hadn’t really looked at before. Immediately, his gaze latched onto the top of her cunt, the little folds glistening with her arousal and invitingly puffy, and his mouth watered in anticipation of feeling those soft petals with his tongue.

He yanked his hand out of her grasp and almost ran down the hall, slamming the hallway door shut and dragging the dresser back in front of it hastily. He didn’t look back at her. He couldn’t. He
couldn’t do this. His hand still sticky with the residue of his come and her saliva, he peeled out of his driveway and drove, his mind racing in a blur and his chest heaving as he panted through his panic. His mouth was saying something over and over before he realized he was finally saying “stop”, the English phrase that was on the tip of his tongue now repeating until it lost meaning. He didn’t remember the drive back to work, only that suddenly he was parked in the garage with the car still running and his hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel. He leaned his forehead on the wheel, shuddered once, and wept.
Chapter 58

The first thing Vidar became aware of was pain. White hot, piercing pain crackling up his neck and wrapping around his skull. He groaned and sat up, his blurred vision clearing to reveal that he was lying in the middle of his living room, but everything seemed so oddly off. He pressed a hand to the raw point of pain throbbing in the back of his head and felt his hair matted with something crusted and sticky. His palm came away with a rusty smear of drying blood. A thin and muted alarm woke him up a little further.

The coffee table was broken, the black wood splintered and split right down the center. He stared at it blearily, trying to figure out what had happened, but his memory was blocked by a thick fog. There was something lurking in that fog he wasn’t sure he wanted to see. A clatter from the kitchen stole his limited focus and he cautiously pushed himself to his feet, his head throbbing almost unbearably from the effort. It was dark outside the windows. That didn’t seem correct. It was just the middle of the afternoon a moment ago, or maybe it wasn’t. His face hurt too much to frown in confusion as he tried to think about it, so he turned from the windows and stepped carefully toward the kitchen. Light spilled into the short hall and sounds of someone shuffling through drawers bounced off the walls and painfully through his skull. With one hand gripping his head and the other braced against the wall, he shuffled into the turn. Those bright overhead lights pierced his eyes and it took him a moment to blink past it to register what he was seeing. Red was splattered on the clean white laminate of the counters and the smooth white floors, the color standing out brilliantly in the stark pale kitchen. A man he had never seen before was lying on the island countertop, more of that brilliant scarlet pooled under him and stained on his clothes. Another was slumped over on the floor, his legs folded awkwardly and red smeared in a thick streak down the wall behind him. The smell of iron hung heavy in the air. Iron, and sausage.

“Good morning, Vidar Valstad,” the man cooking at the stove said without turning to look at him.

Vidar stared at him, that calm and clinical tone ringing familiarity in the slow drip of his thoughts until it produced a name. “Agent Maier?”

“In the flesh,” Maier said, turning to flash him the impression of a smile without actually smiling and then resuming with whatever he poked at in the sizzling skillet. “Breakfast will be served shortly. I do apologize for the mess.”

Vidar nodded absently, his blank stare drifting back to the man lying on his kitchen island. He realized, with an abrupt and blunt certainty, that the stranger was very dead. The horror he should have felt with that recognition was just on the other side of that fog in his mind, though, and his stare drifted back to the American.

“What are you doing here?” his words slurred out of his numb mouth.

“Cooking,” Maier answered. “Go wake up your brother now. I put him in your guest room.”

Vidar looked again at the corpse sitting on the floor, now noticing his chefs knife sticking out of its neck. It was so strange that he didn’t see it sooner. It was all so very strange. He walked back out through the living room, now identifying why it had looked so odd. The lamp had been knocked to the floor, the different angle of light casting strange shadows over the room. It was rather impressive how different a room could look just by changing the lighting. A sharp pang stabbed down from the top of his head to the base of his neck, making him flinch and stagger, his feet automatically stumbling toward the guest room until he came through the other side of his pain looking at Anders. His little brother laid atop the bedding, his clothes and shoes still on as he slept. Vidar shuffled up to
him, looking him over for something he couldn’t think to identify. He wasn’t sure why he hesitated at the side of the bed, just watching him, but the steady rise and fall of his chest was important. A bag of frozen peas was tied to the side of his head with a strip of gauze and he poked it to find it still cold, but thawed. A deep burgundy gash decorated his cheek, framed by an eggplant of a bruise that spanned the curve of his cheekbone and pooled along the rim of his eye socket.

“Hey, wake up,” Vidar tried to say loud enough, but the volume of his voice vibrated in his skull agonizingly.

Anders didn’t stir. He gently shook his shoulder, then not so gently. He stared down at his bruised and battered brother, trying to feel and think the right things, but nothing came out of that thick fog. He shuffled back to the kitchen, each shallow step heavy and slow, his mind dragging half of a second behind. The bright lights of the kitchen were oppressive and cheerless.

“Still out cold, is he?” Maier asked without turning to see that Vidar was alone. “We’ll save him a plate.”

“Why are there dead people in my house?”

“There are dead people in your house because they died in your house.”

Vidar supposed that made sense. Maier set three places at the table before bringing the hot skillet over and dispensing the omelette evenly between them. Vidar drifted past the corpses and sat at the table when he beckoned him over, the smell of freshly cooked food waking up his senses a little more.

“I didn’t think I had sausage in my fridge,” he slurred as he sat down. The food seemed to slowly crawl around on the plate and he watched it, mesmerized.

“You didn’t. I made a trip to the store after those boys settled down,” Maier explained as he sat directly next to him.

“Who murdered them?”

“What makes you think they were murdered? Did you murder them?”

Vidar checked to make sure his kitchen was still covered in blood. “I don’t think I would make this much mess in my own house.”

“I don’t think you would either.”

Vidar caught a squirming sausage under his fork and bit into it gingerly, careful to chew in a way that didn’t jostle his aching head. He tried to swallow, but something metallic and watery came up from his stomach and he leaned off to the side to vomit. A puddle of runny blood and bile dribbled and coughed up from him onto the floor.

“Keep trying to eat. You need something in your belly other than blood or that will just keep happening,” Maier said.

“Is this my blood?” Vidar mumbled, his voice thick and froggy.

“Most likely. They were already done questioning you by the time I had arrived, though, so I can’t say for sure what you were up to before that.”

“They?”
“These guys.” Maier gestured vaguely to the two corpses with the eggs and sausage speared on his fork before biting them off. His even, professional voice was muffled through his full mouth. “Things got a little out of hand. They weren’t expecting me.”

“Ah… well… Neither was I,” Vidar nodded.

He forced another bite of sausage down and this time it stayed in his stomach. Each minute food stayed down, he felt slightly less scattered, but the whole he was becoming was not any more clear. He wanted to know what brand of sausage this was, but each time he tried to ask, his hand mechanically moved food into his mouth. It wasn’t terribly important, anyway. Nothing was terribly important. They ate in silence for the rest of the meal, Maier waiting patiently for Vidar to slowly finish before taking their plates to wash them in the sink. Vidar rose and helped to dry and put away the plates and utensils handed to him, the chore drilled into him from a young age and coming automatically. When the mess of the meal was tidied up, he bid the American goodnight and shuffled off to his bedroom. He had a sense that he had slept for a long while, but he was still so very tired.

He lay in bed on his side, mindful of the oozing wound in the back of his head, and fixed his unfocused stare to the open doorway. Sleep evaded him again as it had since his mind had been poisoned, the hours passing in warped succession as consciousness and unconsciousness bled into each other without fully being either until time became a solid and quantifiable notion once more. Each sleepless night had weakened the barriers of what he once was so sure being awake used to be. These walking nightmares no longer surprised him. His kitchen having been turned into a bloody murder scene with an FBI agent cooking him breakfast in the midst of all the gore was simply too ludicrous to possibly be real. The world was mad, but there had to be some boundaries to that madness. Even if those things were true, he needed to doubt them, or he was truly more insane than he thought he was.

So, when time became less jagged and illusory and the sun brightened his bedroom, he wasn’t surprised to find his kitchen clean and empty of corpses. The absence of his coffee table in the living room and the presence of a cold plate of eggs and sausages on the counter were acceptable points of madness. They didn’t need to be explained. He didn’t want them to be explained. Anders, however, was still solidly asleep in his guest room. He envied him, even with his bruised and cut face and soggy bag of peas strapped to his head. He looked so peaceful.

“Hey, motherfucker,” he said, shaking Anders’ shoulder. “Quit showing off and wake up already. It’s closing in on noon, you bum.”

Anders didn’t even twitch, his head only rolling limply to the side from being jostled. The bag of peas slid down with the motion and Vidar jerked away from what he saw beneath.

“I’m not prescribing her that without testing for epilepsy,” Dr. Brun said flatly, removing his glasses to rub at the indents on the bridge of his nose as he often did when exasperated.

“The seizure was a symptom of withdrawal, which is part of why I’m requesting trazodone,” Henrik argued.

“Well, according to her blood work, she was on anticonvulsants. Why would she have been taking them on such a long term basis if she didn’t have frequent seizures?”

“None of the medications in her system were prescribed. None of it was monitored or overseen by...
any medical personnel of any title,” Henrik explained, trying to maintain the impression of patience where there was none. “Given what I saw and… what he was doing to her, it’s likely that Leif was either provoking seizures or attempting to counteract the effects of an inconsistent and erratic drug therapy.”

Dr. Brun kept clicking through the lab reports, his stare carefully fixed on the monitor as he asked with a measured nonchalance, “What was it that led you to the opinion that he would actively encourage seizures in her?”

Henrik pursed his lips and tried not to seem defensive. “He might have used them as a smokescreen to justify the variety of medications he gave her. I don’t know. I stopped asking why he did the things he did; the man was completely insane.”

“So… The misoprostol and mifepristone you want, was that part of what he did to her?” Dr. Brun asked.

This constant curiosity of what had happened in the US had irritated Henrik, but most people had the tact and better sense than to ask about it so directly. Those who did not had been swiftly told to mind their own business, but this doctor had thus far been slow on the uptake. He clenched his fist behind him and tried not to think about punching his glasses into his smug face.

“That’s her private matter to discuss if she chooses. I can’t speak for her on that,” Henrik responded tersely.

“I agree. She should speak for herself on it,” Dr. Brun said. “I’m not going to sign off on prescribing her abortifacients without discussing it with her directly. This is unethical enough as it is, and I…”

The ringing in Henrik’s ears drowned out the droning doctor. He sighed through his clenched teeth, shut his eyes, counted slowly to ten in the screaming pressure of his mind, and tried to find a place beyond the anger enlivening each tensed muscle in his powerful body. He couldn’t trust his control and that feeling was both deeply disturbing and distressingly liberating. The desire to hurt this aggravating little man conjured fantasies of blood and bone breaking out of pallid flesh. A soothing static of rage coursed through his body and he felt lighter, almost euphoric when he simply allowed it to move through him.

“… Henrik, you’re asking me to write prescriptions for… for psychotropics without further testing. It’s not just unethical; this could land me in legal trouble if anyone takes a second look. If she’s found in time, I’ll be glad to see her and also refer her to someone who can begin the process to…”

Henrik looked at Dr. Brun, seeing him not as a man, but as the collection of fragile pieces that made up an existence so thoroughly meaningless to him. The frailty of such an insignificant thing denying him what his family member needed was outlandish in a way he logically knew was not. This was unethical and risky for both of their careers, but at the same time, it would hardly take any time or effort at all to crack his skull open like a coconut against the floor.

“… Henrik? Are you feeling alright? Henrik?”

He blinked, confused at the doctor’s look of mild irritation and concern until he realized that he hadn’t heard a word of what had been said, and then nauseated at where he had retreated in his mind. He ran a hand through his hair and tried to collect himself, but there was no calm response to the unspeakable violence he had been considering. Those were no intrusive thoughts or absentminded daydreams. He brought his other hand up through his hair, gripping the back of his head as he tried to process and reason why his mind would go where he would never have commanded it to.

The door opened, startling both men as Martha poked her head through and addressed Henrik with a worried look as she said, “Your brothers have just been taken into emergency again. Henrik, I think you better go check on them. It sounds like they were attacked.”

The single bare bulb in the ceiling cast a dingy yellow light over the bathroom and no daylight was able to sneak through the flat slab of plywood nailed over the window, making everything difficult to discern in the dimness. Simone’s watch told her it was six, but there was no way for her to tell if it was six AM or six PM. She found pale light in the spaces under the locked doors and, though the gaps were too narrow for her to discern if it was day or night, she lied down in a cocoon of blankets on the hard floor of the narrow hallway to stare through them. That sickly, jaundiced light that spilled from the bathroom behind her was only marginally less awful than the pitch dark without it. There were no sounds but the ticking of her watch and the shiver in her breathing, no company but the ghosts of memories that played unbidden in her mind, no distractions from the fevered madness that blurred what little boundaries were left between reality and surreality. She was alone with nothing to tether herself to, so she lied down and tried to not do anything but believe in the daylight beyond the doors. Maybe when Henrik came home, he would let her out of the three small spaces he had left accessible. Maybe he would talk with her and touch her in a friendly way to make her feel real again. Or maybe she had ruined that, too.

Her fingertips dug into her shoulders, the raw and exposed nail beds from Anders forcibly trimming them too deeply hurting more than if she had pressed her nails into her skin. There was no mistaking Henrik’s behavior earlier; both hope and doubt that he would be different had died in her when he had caught her masturbating and had stepped closer instead of away. Anger rose heat to her skin rather than shame at how suddenly and easily lust had stained what was so pure and simple between them. Whatever it was that was so wrong within her that it had spread this sickness to them wasn’t their fault, but she needed it as much as they did in the end. Morality was an irrelevant and lavish concept that their circumstance did not afford; this was simply what they were. She dragged her hands down to cup her breasts, sighing at the tender mark Vidar had made with his riding crop, and kneaded some comfort from that pain. It would have been easier, maybe even less damaging, if Henrik had just allowed himself to give in instead of running from it.

Some people were simply born into circumstances that denied them the ability to choose or change the lives set before them. Leif had to become a hunter and she had to become a slave, both of them cast into these roles without the chance to escape them. That didn’t absolve her of the responsibility for what she had done, but she also couldn’t stop it. The raw sores on her wrists from struggling against her bonds burned and itched, making her clench her jaw with want to bite them since her nails were cut. So much misery had been caused just by her existence. The misery she’d invited into her uncles’ lives had amounted a debt too deep for her to repay, a debt that denied her anger at the suffering they had subjected her to. Love welled up through the cracks in her mind instead, thick and sweet as syrup, coating the bitterness of her thoughts until her declawed fingers stopped clutching at pain. There was no amount of suffering that had made the price of affection or belonging too steep. Even if her place among them was a painful and sinful space to fill, she still belonged among them. Even if Henrik had locked her away from the world, he had not cast her out alone into it. The love that radiated from their will to keep her with them, no matter how twisted and tainted, filled her with a warmth she had hungered for all her life. She had killed to protect them and this precious feeling. Her freedom, her agency, and a little more loneliness were acceptable prices to pay for love and belonging.
The sound of something heavy dragged just outside the hallway door shocked her out of her spiraling thoughts and she froze, waiting in her cocoon as the door opened and light steps approached. That was not the sound of Henrik’s swift, heavy footfalls. Her body wouldn’t listen to her commands to move even if she wanted to. There was nowhere for her to hide, nothing for her to defend herself with. She stayed curled in a tight ball within the blankets, her eyes shut in prayer to whatever god or demon was listening that whoever it was would dismiss her as a pile of laundry in the hallway. The hard nudge of a shoe jabbing into her back dissolved any such hopes and it was all she could do to cover her mouth to keep from screaming. As the blanket was torn out of her hands and that filthy yellow light reached behind her shut eyes, she prayed for Henrik to come home.

Anders recovered consciousness while they were still in the process of reattaching his ear, but the local anesthetic and severe grogginess prevented him from panicking and made administration of general anesthesia a thankfully quick process. After recovering consciousness a second time after surgery, he listened to Henrik tell him these details with some skepticism and confusion. He didn’t remember waking up on the surgery table. He didn’t remember the blunt force trauma that had caused his basilar skull fracture and the tearing that had nearly separated his ear from his head. He did remember the kicks that had fractured three of his ribs and bruised his kidney and the haymaker that cracked one of his molars. The broken ribs and likely the skull injury were from the intruders waiting for them at Vidar’s house and the cracked tooth was courtesy of Vidar’s fist when he had found out why they were asking Anders for Simone. That was not the way Anders had wanted him to find out about the deal he had accepted with the organization. He hadn’t yet figured out the best way to broach that subject, but that definitely wasn’t it.

“Do you think this had something to do with Simone?” Henrik asked, shifting nervously in the chair beside the hospital bed. “It’s too much of a coincidence that this happened so soon after…”

“No,” Anders responded flatly, his voice muffled through the swelling in his cheek. The drugs made everything muted and distant. Or maybe it was the concussion. He blinked blearily and tried to remember what his brother had said, but it didn’t matter. “Vidar’s still here?”

“He got off easy. Mild concussion and a few stitches. Cops took him home hours ago. Nice guys, by the way, much better than the assholes we got yesterday. Do you remember what happened last night?”

“Yes,” Anders lied. Lying no longer occurred to him as difficult as it once had, the deception coming to him as easily and automatically as the truth now. “It’s all scattered and weird. What did Vidar say to the cops?”

“Well, I don’t know what he told them, but he told me that he woke up in his living room and Agent Maier cooked him breakfast,” Henrik answered, chuckling nervously. “Ridiculous shit, right?”

Uneasiness pierced that delicate film of detachment in Anders, but he tried not to let it show. With how stiff his face felt, he was confident it did not. Up to that point, he’d gained certainty that he’d hallucinated Maier’s presence and the savage violence he’d reigned down upon the men who had tortured him and his brother. But he’d also been certain that the organization had Simone until those men had begun interrogating him. Now he was certain of nothing.

“Ridiculous shit,” he agreed.

Maybe it was the anesthesia and painkillers, but he couldn’t make sense out of anything. None of this
was adding up. Such gaping ignorance produced a very different and deeper ache than the guilt of selling Simone to a club of serial killers to use as leverage in persuading his psychotic brother. It was ironic to him even now, in the midst of the haze after being halfway beaten to death for losing her, that he was more comfortable knowing she was among murderers than the nebulous nothing he now knew of her whereabouts or condition.

“Well, uh… I won’t be back until Monday, but you’re in good hands here and I’m just a call away,” Henrik said, his expression and manner exuding an urgent discomfort as he pushed himself up out of the chair. “Let me know if they release you sooner.”

“Sure.”

His older brother scratched his beard and pretended to pay attention to the numbers displayed on the vital sign monitor as he asked, “You really don’t remember anything that might relate to why they were there?”

Anders tried to shake his head in reply, but the motion pulled oddly at the stitches trailing around his ear and down the side of his face in a way that might have been painful if half his head wasn’t completely numb. The edges of his vision jerked and blurred oddly when he moved. He wouldn’t be trying that again for a while, then. It was annoying how many times that question had been rephrased to him, as though the answer could change within the three minutes since it was last asked. Maybe it was one of those aggravating cognitive tests that the nurses had put him through to check how damaged his brain was. He wasn’t sure if being consistently unable to recall new information or abruptly being able to recall new information was the correct response to get Henrik off his back.

“Look… neither of us wants to be here and your shift ended a half hour ago,” Anders said as clearly as his numbed mouth allowed. “Go home.”

Between the hectic pace of the workday and the hassle that came with his brothers, the only prescription Henrik had managed to persuade out of Dr. Brun was a low dose beta blocker to treat the hypertension brought on by withdrawal. The paranoid doctor wouldn’t even submit it to the hospital pharmacy, forcing Henrik to make a stop at a drugstore on the way home when he was already late. Anticonvulsants and antipsychotics were out of the question which, despite knowing the potential dangers of taking many of those drugs poorly prepared and unmonitored, still pissed him off. It seemed as though this parade of Hell and chaos that trudged through their lives was unending. With all the violence surrounding him, he should have been less shocked at the violent impulses that had begun to creep into his mind with increasing intensity. It was textbook post traumatic stress, but knowing that didn’t make it any easier to accept how disturbingly right it felt to want to hurt another person. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that considering holding someone captive in his condo as the best option available was perhaps more symptomatic of irrational thought than of the desperation of their situation. However, he knew he needed to look no further for proof of his insanity than the temptation he found present in his own niece. Hovering near the pharmacy counter, he stared at the selection of condoms as he tried to think of which ex-girlfriend or ex-girlfriend’s friend would be most likely to text him back.

“It’s going to get out eventually.”

He blinked out of his daze when he realized someone had spoken to him and turned to the unfamiliar voice to see an unfamiliar face. A young man, perhaps still a boy, stood facing him with a friendly smile that didn’t match his words. There was an eagerness to his friendliness that seemed aggressive,
almost hostile.

Henrik straightened to his full height, towering over the boy, and asked, “Do I know you?”

“No,” he grinned. There was something in his manner that set Henrik on edge, something in the gleam of his eyes so focused unflinchingly on him that made him want to step away. “The world is going to find out about you and your family.”

“What.”

“Sir? Sir, your prescription is ready.”

Henrik turned to the pharmacist calling to him and when he turned back to the strange boy, he was gone.
“I just don’t understand,” Vidar said, half-mumbling to lessen the impact of his own voice bouncing around in his throbbing head. He slouched halfway out of his seat to press against the cool glass of the café window, the clothes he’d been wearing for two days reeking of sour sweat and blood and torn a bit at the seams from a struggle he was only just beginning to vaguely remember. He shoved his long fingers through his greasy hair and gave the aching back of his head a wide berth. The last time he was this disheveled, it was after an accidental acid bender at a music festival in Barcelona. Although the result felt and looked similar, he was significantly more upset at the current cause.

“What don’t you understand?” Odette asked.

He could hear the irritation that flattened her tone and made the leg crossed over her knee fidget in tight, impatient swings of her pointed shoe. Not that he cared about her discomfort; half of their non-relationship had been maintained by a mutual disinterest in each other’s personal wellbeing, but he had broken that unspoken clause when he had called her to pick him up from the nightmares of his empty house. He’d made his wellbeing her business by being made so sufficiently dependent in his condition and now she had a social obligation to make herself dependable. Both resented it, but it couldn’t be helped. He couldn’t be alone and Odette was his only friend who had picked up her phone.

“How anyone could be that obstinately ignorant,” he answered, grimacing as he slid his hand down to rub his face. “That son of a whore brought those fuckers right into my god damned house. I should have punched him harder.”

“Yes, I’m sure more violence would have been very helpful,” she sneered. “Fucking primates…”

He glared at her, at her rocking foot, at the frown she fixed on her latte, and asked, “What the hell are you so pissed about?”

“You.”

“Then leave.”

“Or we can discuss what’s been going on with you like adults.”

“Or you can leave.”

She drank out of her mug, her lips touching the same brick red lipstick smudge that marked where she brought the rim to her mouth with unfailing precision, and flitted her amber eyes over his bruised and unshaven face before saying, “I called your psychiatrist while you were in the restroom.”

“A hot rush of anger pulled him away from his slump against the window and he leaned over the small table between them. “You did what?”

“I told her that you and your brother were attacked in your house last night, that your niece has mysteriously vanished, and that you were spending a lot of time with them shortly before both of those things happened,” she explained in a terse whisper, her brow set in a hard and accusatory furrow.

“How do you-”

“Because it’s national fucking news, asshole,” she interrupted him. “You thought those weirdo
‘reporters’ standing outside your brother’s house got bored and left? Hell no! They know your fucked-up family is a goldmine for tabloids. They had you clocked in and out of his place carrying your black bag on the homepage of every trash news site in Norway. You’re lucky I didn’t tell anyone what you carry in that thing. Shit, you’re lucky I didn’t tell the cops.”

A cold spill of dread doused some of the anger within him and he glanced around to make sure no one was eavesdropping as he hissed, “I don’t know what you’re implying, but you have no right to interfere in my life.”

“I’m not implying shit,” she said, rolling her eyes in irritation. “I don’t care if you fuck other people but going full on Story of O with your brother and niece smacks of a psychotic breakdown. You’ve been out of control since you’ve come back, even you have to be aware of that.”

He held his aching forehead in his palms, his elbows planted firmly on the table, and tried to say something to deny the truth Odette had laid out so plainly. It shouldn’t have been so obvious. A few photographs of him at his brother’s house with his bag wasn’t obvious, in fact. That was no basis for anyone to have speculated anything on such thin evidence, but he couldn’t conjure the words needed to dispel what she had uncovered. He pressed his face into his hands and cursed ever getting involved with a woman who had more than half a brain and apparently no qualms with using it.

“Why would you want to help me?” he muttered into his palms.

“I’m not doing this for you,” she scoffed. “I’m doing this so I can sleep at night. I didn’t do anything to stop you from fucking that doe-eyed little girl and now she’s ‘missing’.”

“I had nothing to do with that!”

“You can explain that and everything else you ‘had nothing to do with’ to Dr. Fjeldstad. Whatever she decides to do with you is on her. After this, I’m done.”

The condemnation he had been seeking for the wickedness he had enacted had finally begun to appear, but it had come too late. He’d succeeded in establishing himself beyond rescue from his diseased mind and had completed what Leif had set out to achieve in Simone. He had truly broken her. If she hadn’t been taken from them, he knew he wouldn’t have allowed this guilt to spoil that victory. Even after the distasteful revelation of how deeply the double-edged sword of their connection had cut, he would not have allowed shame to taint the splendor of ownership. However, she was taken from them, perhaps irrevocably, and her absence had implanted a desperation that had rendered him emotionally unstable. Guilt melted through the widening and splintering cracks in his control. Guilt, and hope that perhaps his condition was reversible without access to the object of his ruination.

“Fine,” he sighed, resigned to this unpleasant ordeal. “When does she want me to see her?”

“She’s on her way back to her office now.”

Henrik checked his phone again, surprised to see that Camilla had texted him back. With a heavy sigh of relief, he lingered at the stop sign before his house to read it, further relieved to find her responding to his inquiry of her weekend plans with a graciously open end. The hardware store trip to fully guard his condo against opportunity for further escape would have to be put off for tomorrow and then there was the time required to install those measures, but after that, he hoped Camilla could
provide guard against opportunity for further weakness in him. Typically, he would not resort to reaching out to an ex for sex, but this was not a typical circumstance. Unconsciously, he stroked his fingers against his palm as his thoughts once more brushed over that morning’s incident. Perhaps Camilla would even be open to a late dinner that evening. At her place, he added to the text. He hit send before he could think to be more tactful with his intentions and tilted his head back with another sigh.

His brow wrinkled when he noticed the car parked in front of his residence, the trunk of it open with a man standing, waiting, as he watched his home. Something in Henrik’s gut told him that this was about his niece, that intuition sprouting a million little seeds of fury as he turned the corner and parked his car out of view of that stranger. He pulled the hood of his jacket low over his forehead and jogged silently up to the man, slowing when he got near. This could be nothing. This could just be a guy going through his trunk after his car had stalled on his block. Pure coincidence. Henrik came right behind him, his sensible sneakers doing well not to scuffle against the concrete of the street in the slightest, and peered in to see the trunk completely empty but for a roll of duct tape. It could have been pure coincidence, but unfortunately for this stranger, that was how these things happened sometimes. Wrong place, wrong time. Henrik stared at the scruff of dark hair at the base of the stranger’s neck as he brought his arms up. This might be a mistake. He could potentially injure an innocent man. He was surprised at how easy it was to accept that possibility as he dragged him down in a chokehold that had this stranger struggling violently and, curiously, skillfully against him. Henrik held in his pained grunts as the man tried to sidestep out of the hold and elbow what he probably hoped was his groin area, but within seconds of having his blood cut off from his brain, the stranger was out.

Henrik maneuvered him into the trunk and shut the lid as quietly as he could manage before hurrying up the steps to his door. Most trunks had an interior release, meaning this stranger would be free to escape from his trunk once he recovered, but if this trunk was designed in mind to hold a person captive as Henrik had suspected, then that was just as well. The fury that had sprouted in him blossomed into full rage when those suspicions were confirmed at the sight of his front door ajar. Every hair on his body bristled and every muscle thrummed with that rage as he charged through the door, this visceral response doubling at the sight of a man wrestling to subdue his niece in a restraining hold in his living room.

He felt the strands of this intruder’s hair and the curve of his head under his palm before he realized he was smashing his skull against the corner of his kitchen counter. That rage, so full and thrilling, soared higher and higher with each pound against that granite edge. Every hit was loud and fulfilling, a drum beating to the rhythm of his rage. The give of flesh stopped at the collision of rock and bone until they both began to crack with each strike. This was exactly what he’d wanted to do to Dr. Brun. This feeling was exactly what he had been craving for much longer than that. This sweet, hot, consuming rage was so right. His chest was heaving, a feral growl scraping out of his throat with each thrust of this squirming, screaming worm against the counter until the squirming and screaming stopped, but Henrik did not stop until he felt that unyielding bone collapse with overwhelmingly satisfying crunch.

He let the limp man under his hand fall to the floor and saw the blood and jagged bits of flesh that clung to the jagged dents in the counter. Splatters of red radiated from that point, expanding in a burst of color on the mottled white granite. Panting through the elation that continued to flow up from that dark part of him he had denied for his entire life, he gazed down at the carnage he had created and laughter erupted from him. Blood pooled thick and wide beneath that misshapen and grotesque head, dead beyond any doubt, one eyeball distended from its socket and its limbs arranged in the awkward splay of a ragdoll. Henrik had murdered this man. This man had earned murder from him.

“H-Henrik…”
That small, timid whisper somehow reached past the roaring frenzy in his head and the laughter pouring from his throat. All at once, the purity of this feeling decayed with thought. He had murdered this man. The laughter and the fury cut abruptly, leaving only cold sweat and terror. His hands and face were wet with the blood that had splattered from the sheer physical brutality of what he had done.

“Henrik… It’s okay… You’re okay…”

He turned automatically toward the voice, seeing his niece kneeling naked on his living room rug. The terror in her wide eyes mirrored his own. He could see his insane, murderously older brother in the shattered silver of her stare. He could feel him in the insane, murderous pit of himself. It should have felt like an unexpected and foreign thing to murder someone, but beyond the horror and panic held suspended in this knowledge, it felt comfortingly familiar. His hands were shaking. Hand tremors were a common symptom of benzodiazepine withdrawal. Tremors, and increased blood pressure.

“Your medicine…” he muttered, turning stiffly to the door. “I left your medicine in the car.”

His bones seemed to vibrate each time his foot struck the ground as he jogged past the strange car, the sound of the stranger beating the lid from the inside of the trunk echoing down the block. Henrik didn’t remember leaving his home. He didn’t remember if he even shut the door. Simone might escape. He once had a girlfriend who had indoor cats and all hell would break loose if he let one of those bastards slip outside. An odd chuckle choked past his panting breaths as he recalled the pandemonium of coaxing spooked cats out from under cars and bushes. That relationship didn’t last long. It occurred to him that it had been a few minutes since he’d checked to see if Camilla had texted him back and he dug his phone out of his pocket, smearing red all over it as he walked briskly to his car and read her reply. His excitement deflated slightly at reading that she was busy that night, but dinner tomorrow was open. That was okay. No, that was perfect. He was busy tonight anyway. He stared at the screen long after it went dark and showed only his reflection under the blood smear. He didn’t know he was crying until he saw the tears tracing lines through the blood on his face, but once he did, the deep ache in his chest dragged him to his knees and a strange keen howled out of his throat.

Dr. Fjeldstad’s office was even quieter without the murmuring chatter of the secretaries the other doctors shared at the front desk, giving an uncomfortable stillness to the air as Vidar and his decidedly ex-not-quite-girlfriend entered the floor. Odette crossed ahead of him and sat down to regard the contents of her purse, her impatience and irritation rolling off her with each wide step of her long legs. He didn’t know legs could be so expressive before this night. He tried to translate his anxiety into anxiousness to get this over with and receive the sentencing he would earn from each damning admission in this half-baked attempt at a redemption he knew he could never achieve, but he was just too worn down to shift his emotions anymore. He had no more will or reason to keep up his thin veil of control anymore. If his crimes were not uncovered during the investigation into Simone’s kidnapping, then they would be eventually uncovered when she is found, dead or alive. Secrets, no matter how well concealed or protected, tended to find a way of revealing themselves given enough time and he was not a patient man. This was the better way. He stepped past Odette’s resentful disregard of his presence to Dr. Fjeldstad’s door and knocked before he could rethink this.

It could have been any regular bi-weekly appointment by the way Dr. Fjeldstad opened the door with a silent nod in greeting and stepped aside to let him through, waiting until the door was firmly shut before saying, “Good evening, Vidar.”
“Good evening, doctor,” he replied. He did not sit. She did not offer him to sit.

She adjusted the clear plastic frames of her reading glasses, the show of nervousness and the pinch in her features precluding her carefully phrased, “I understand you have some unpleasant matters to discuss with me. I’m afraid I have some bad news to bear first.”

“Seems to be the theme of things lately,” he said passively, hands in his pockets, attempting to make himself seem as nonthreatening as possible given the atrocities he would soon be admitting to.

However, it did not seem it was him who was making the doctor nervous. She seemed rattled, distracted even, as she leaned against her desk and said, “I was given some… information that has brought my attention to certain factors of our doctor-patient relationship and, in light of those factors… I have concluded that it is necessary to end our doctor-patient relationship.”

This was not the discussion he was dreading, though it brought a different and unexpected dread as he attempted to process his shock. He couldn’t hide his disbelief in asking, “Are you terminating my therapy with you?”

“I apologize if this seems abrupt,” she said stiffly, “because it is abrupt. Ideally, we would not be initiating termination until the final phase of therapy has been resolved, and I do regret that I am unable to proceed with you to that point. I also regret that I do not have a referral to provide to you. I can only wish you luck and bid you farewell from here.”

“I don’t understand. Is this because of what I did? I’m aware that they are heinous claims, but aren’t you at all obligated to at least assess my statement of those actions? Are you just going to turn me over to the police?”

Dr. Fjeldstad folded her hands in front of her and offered him only a solid wall of professional impartiality as she answered, “No. I am simply terminating therapy with you. Goodbye, Mr. Valstad.”

The insistence for him to leave was clear, but his bewilderment prevented him from believing it.

“So, that’s it?” he asked. “Some random woman tells you my dirty secrets out of the blue and you call me over here just to drop me?”

She didn’t react, not even to blink, as she waited for him to exit. He scoffed, opting for annoyance to fill the gap of reaction he did not yet know to respond to this development with. His annoyance did not lead him any further out of his bewilderment. This just didn’t make sense.

“Two years,” he seethed. “I’ve been coming to you for two years and you never once gave me the impression of a quitter. You won’t even tell me why. What am I supposed to do?”

“She answered.

He blinked at her, stunned, then slowly nodded. He really was this beyond redemption. God only knew what she thought of him then to have driven her to this point, but he supposed that he had crafted a very vivid idea of what he was capable of in their previous visit. He was a rapist and, according to Odette’s assessment, for all appearances also responsible for his victim’s disappearance. He didn’t kidnap or kill her, though he might as well have. He’d taken a cracked woman and purposely, methodically, brutally broke her the rest of the way, effectively reducing her chances of surviving to zero in the condition he’d tormented her down to. Simone was never meant to be apart from them, though; they were going to take care of her. He wanted to explain that to Dr. Fjeldstad, to make her understand that what he did was only necessary for his niece’s happiness in the long run.
Simone was never going to be able to make it on her own anyway. He was helping her accept and embrace the role she had been designed to fill in life instead of letting her continue to flounder in the false hope she could be anything else. That had to be worth something. The world was never meant for them, but they could make a space for themselves in each other. They were meant to be together. They were family.

The last string of his self-control snapped at that revelation, something in himself breaking with a sharp pain that nearly had him cry out. All the denial, all the blocks and obstacles he had erected to protect himself from truly acknowledging it had been chipped and chiseled away until he now stood in that truth. Deeper than any genetic ties or titles of uncle or niece, there was that instinctual magnetism that drew them together, all of them. He stumbled out of the cozy little office with its comfortable, sleek furnishings and unyielding professionalism into the empty waiting room, barely able to acknowledge that Odette had left and completely unable to care. That yawning ache that had haunted him since Simone’s kidnapping opened wide enough to swallow him hole as he struggled to contain it with the control he no longer had. He’d lost their Simone but he couldn’t lose this need for her that sang in his bones and roared in his blood. They were family in a way that, by all rules of human society and culture, shouldn’t be. He knew this, knew it was madness, but they were mad enough for it. Leif had cracked them all open and smeared them together under that magical madness. Vidar leaned against the front door, his hand pressed over his grimacing face as he tried to hold himself in. This was what their oldest brother had cursed them with: each other.

The door opened abruptly and he nearly tripped through it, gripping the doorsill to keep from falling and being torn halfway out of his miserable mind by a familiar dull voice saying, “Good evening, Mr. Valstad. It seems as though you require assistance.”

He peered through the tight cage of his fingers, horror stiffening his spine as he saw Maier regarding him with his dead shark eyes and doll-like smile.

If she hadn’t had struggled, this man would not have died. Simone watched the man on the kitchen floor, certain by his crumpled and cracked head and protruding glassy eye that he was dead but not so certain that he wouldn’t rise and lunge for her again. If she had not delayed him those few precious seconds, he would not have had his skull caved in. Henrik would not have come to know murder. She would have been dragged from this prison and into another, likely worse, fate, but this man would not have had to die and her uncle would not have crossed that threshold. She did this to both of them. The pool of blood spanned wide on the linoleum, leaving only a small margin to step around and search the cupboards on the other side of it. Dragging down a loaf of bread she found to rest her shaking knees on the floor, she tore open the plastic and shoved a couple slices in her mouth. She was too hungry to chew, nearly choking several times as she swallowed the thick dry chunks of this dense bread. She let herself get weak and life saw fit to remind her harshly of this mistake. There was nothing she could do to correct it but to remain vigilant in the future. Don’t be sorry, be careful. Be stronger. Be faster. Be smarter. Don’t, and people could die. Slowing down after the first few jagged swallows, she tore off a large mouthful and crawled over to the corpse.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered through her food as she reached over and gingerly pressed the eyeball back into the socket with her forefinger and thumb, “but you shouldn’t have come here.”

She resumed watching the corpse as she perched on the balls of her feet and finished the crushed-up chunks of bread, waiting for him to stir at any moment. She knew the dead could come back to life. There was no guaranteed safety from life. Memories lived on, actions rippled through time, there was
no escape. Nothing is ever really destroyed, just transformed, so she waited. Waiting was all she could do for now, anyway.
Chapter 60

Leif ran his hands over the sumptuous material, a high-grade silk and wool blend woven in a herringbone pattern so subtle and precise that it first passed as a simple diffusion of the stately navy color, and breathed in the scents his touch stirred from the fabric. Vicuña wool, he knew by the especially fine feel, was confirmed by its gentle gamey smell that lacked the lanolin of sheep wool. He’d once had the fortune of being in Peru during the annual shearing of the wild vicuñas by villagers in the Andes and had been so charmed by the colorful ceremony and the tawny creatures that he’d harbored a fondness for their precious wool ever since, much to the benefit of his wardrobe and the strain of his budget. That the summation of his fondness was to acquire and own was a tendency that had not eluded him. He contemplated his possessiveness as he tested the highly valued fabric between his thumb and forefinger, finding the grain to be exquisite enough to snag his greed.

When he found something to be of sufficient value, it was never enough that he simply admired it in its element. He was not of the same virtue as those Andean natives who herded and sheared the vicuñas only to release them back to the mountains. He saw the high regard their culture held for this untamed animal to remain free and, in recognizing that value, was instantly driven to acquire the object of their worth for himself. He never could be satisfied until he had plucked the flower bloomed so ostentatiously at the zenith of its beauty, poured the finest 19th century Madeira to breathe in that first plume of fragrance upon uncorking, or harvested the forbidden fruit of his own loins once captivated by her lust and sacred biology. As deeply ingrained as the sin of greed was within him, there was its close cousin, frivolousness, which he abhorred with a powerful distaste. Although greedy, he did not acquire capriciously; the value of what he had desired was only ever increased by being in his possession. He missed his carefully curated collection of suits and apparel, finding himself eager to begin reacquiring the essence of what had been lost. And so, it was the vicuña, and only the vicuña, he would consider once found among the swaths presented to him.

“Would you have this in windowpane check?” he asked, addressing the tailor in their mutual French instead of relying on his corroded Italian.

“I could have it be made so, if that is what the sir requires,” the old man replied with a thoughtful furrow of his overgrown brows.

“Have it be made so, then,” Leif answered with a smile he had not worn since before his death; the polite mask he turned onto the unsuspecting world. It had calmed the tailor, who had entered and became nervous upon realizing that the guards crowding this dungeon-like room was not for Leif’s protection, but for the tailor’s own self. There was no use to be had of a tailor that was nervous to touch a client. Leif examined the chalked and stitched prototype suit the tailor had fitted to him, eyeing the bold length of the cuffs with some indecisiveness. “This three-piece— I think a solid gray vest would do nicely, yes? A more elaborate pocket square is in fashion, I believe, something that highlights by contrasted color and intricate fold. I’ll leave that up to your taste. When do you expect to have it ready?”

“The suit, it is done in four, maybe three weeks,” the tailor offered, unclasping his hands to weigh the air with his palms as though weighing his answer before acquiescing with a resigned, “but for the sir, it is done in two weeks.”

Leif shifted his polite smile into one of fixed gratitude.

There were many things he had lost when he had died, but things could be replaced, refreshed, and renewed, as was often otherwise necessary in the impermanence of everything. He had not died as
the pharaohs died to maintain claim of what went with them in their tombs, nor had he died as the
atheist died to vanish all that he was into eternal oblivion. He held no strong convictions on whether
this was or was not Hell; a destination that, if any such existed despite his doubts, he was certainly
qualified. Hell or not, he was here and had found that his desires, his appetites, and his sins continued
on with him. He intended to replace the things that could be and, soon enough if not today, reclaim
the most precious object of his greed that could not be replaced.

Once the tailor had left and Leif was escorted to the last appointed meeting of the day, his now
constant companion filed in seamlessly at his side. More than half the guards were at least somewhat
aware that the great Dr. Aguiyi and the dead arisen Valstad harbored motivations separate from
propelling the Marceau takeover and none of them seemed to disagree with it, allowing the doctor
the free reign of most of the grounds that was officially any member’s right, but unofficially regarded
as restricted during this tumultuous time. The festivities had come to a close with last night’s feasting,
leaving these halls deserted of the revelers, spreading them out into the world to tell those who could
know about all that had transpired here.

Members of Francis’ ragtag group lingered, over thirty war-hungry and bloodthirsty men littering the
hall in pairs and trios, appearing at ease but, by the nature of their lives and the necessity of this
moment, constantly primed for violence. Francis was never far from his pack of dogs, and therefore
neither was Leif. He knew them each by how they were meant to be known, by both the names they
gave and their proclivities, and had found them all to be exceptionally monstrous. While Leif had
greed to fulfill his exquisite tastes, Dr. Francis Aguiyi had greed to amass and command an army,
one that he saw a great and powerful opportunity in acquiring through Leif’s rising status as a
reluctant leader of the order. The spectacle of Leif Valstad, the living dead embodiment of the
mysticism that the order had been founded on in centuries past, had been fully exaggerated to the
success of securing himself as a respected symbol of what the Marceau regime was fatally lacking.

Francis drew his clouded eyes to him, the thick cracked leather of his mouth pulling into a smile
beneath his ashen beard. They had all but won, but Leif had gained nothing, and he suspected that he
would gain nothing still. He looked back to their path, to the long Turkish rug that ran like a cluttered
river up to the large ornate doors of Mrs. Marceau’s office, and swallowed the venom rising in his
throat.

Vidar sat across from Maier at his kitchen table in a bizarre replay of his waking nightmare, the
hallucination now seeming to him as a premonition of this moment as the agent rifled through the
hard leather of his courier bag. In the corners of his vision, he thought he could see the thick splatters
of blood coating the counters and walls behind him, but everything was as clean as he had left it
when the paramedics had arrived early that morning. He tried not to notice how Maier seemed to
know the layout of his flat when he headed immediately into the kitchen upon escorting him through
the door, but he couldn’t shut off his squirming mind to spare him the uneasiness that observation
brought. Even under the bright lights of the kitchen, Maier’s eyes did not reflect any shine or color,
the flat and lifeless quality in them driving Vidar to focus his stare on his cheek or chin as he had so
often noticed Simone chose to look at people. The stray thought of her pulled at the wild mess of
emotions he carried just below what stilted composure he could craft around the agent. The instinct
to not let this man see him be vulnerable was irrationally present. Injured, insane and exhausted, there
was no hiding how obviously vulnerable he was, but the instinct to conceal it was nearly involuntary.
He sat up a little straighter when Maier slid a thick manila folder to him.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here in Norway,” Maier said, folding his hands on the table
and smiling his empty smile, “and I’m sure you’ve guessed that it is in relation to Ms. Valstad’s
disappearance. Before you open that folder, I should tell you this: nothing we discuss here leaves this
room. That includes my own discretion on these topics, but that discretion is limited to how far you
are willing to cooperate. Please keep that in mind throughout this interview.”

Vidar’s fingers were numb but thankfully steady as he opened the file, finding the top page of the
documents to be a photograph of him entering Anders’ house, his black bag in his hand and his back
to the camera. The next photo was a grainy but undeniable shot of him walking down the hall, the
high angle and quality like a still from security footage. That steadiness in his fingers vanished and a
wave of dread crashed over him at this realization, his dread growing into horror that beaded sweat
along his brow at the next picture. Anders’ bedroom, both him and his brother seated on the bed at
either side of Simone, that same angle from above and quality of a video still. He flipped through the
next photo, then the next and the next, seeing and remembering how they had molested and assaulted
the bound girl between them. Anders with one hand at her throat and the other tucked between her
legs, his own hands torturing her breasts. The recognizable stem of the riding crop in his hand as he
steadied her to straddle over Anders’ lap, her head tilted back and mouth open in a cry of pain.
Simone’s body, bent and bare but for the cuffs and chains that tied her arms behind her, seemed so
small between them.

There was no excuse, no denial, no explanation he could give to any of what was so clearly
displayed in each of those grainy photographs. Caught between the file and Maier’s patient stare, his
hands still folded so politely in the peripheral of his vision, Vidar was far too full of the grief of the
past to make room for the grief awaiting him in the agent’s intent. His mind could not carry both this
proof of what he had done and what it meant to have it bared to him by a man of the law, so he
continued looking at the photos. The sight of their slave being used by her masters as she was
intended to be used produced a savage pleasure that ran parallel to his shame, riding above it like a
banner marking the monster he had become. Even faced with imprisonment and ostracization, he
wouldn’t take any of it back if he could. There was no remorse in what he had so thoroughly
enjoyed and yearned to enjoy again. His fingertips traced the fuzzy image of her laid out between
them after they had used her, his pale arm slung around her to keep her from trying to escape, and he
felt a strong possessiveness rise to swallow his guilt. A little room to consider the man sitting across
from him was made in the wake of this possessiveness.

“What is this?” he asked, sharp under the indignation from this violation of his privacy. “An arrest?
Blackmail? What do you want from me?”

“This is an interview,” Maier answered as blithely as his flat tone allowed, “and what I want from
you is full cooperation for what little I will ask of you. You recall Anders Valstad confessing the
conditions that brought Ms. Valstad home with him?”

Vidar didn’t answer. He didn’t know much other than the brief explanation that reserving her in
servitude to the maniacs who held Leif captive was what it took to have Simone pulled out of the US
so quickly and easily. He knew enough to know that he should absolutely not answer that question,
especially not to the FBI.

Maier ignored his unresponsiveness and continued, “That knowledge already involves you in the
deal, but instead of neutralizing the threat your knowledge poses to my plans, I would instead like to
extend an amendment to that deal by involving you further. Anders Valstad’s failure of discretion
can also go without penalty, pending your agreement.”

The nervousness and dread that Vidar felt in the presence of an FBI agent that held incriminating
evidence on him was nothing compared to the hateful revile of being in the presence of one of them.
There was no mistaking the wording as a mistake of a non-native speaker. There was also no
mistaking the threat woven into this charade of an offer; if he refused, it would almost definitely result in not only his death, but that of his younger brother’s as well. He tried not to let his hostility show as he closed the file and slid it back towards Maier.

“Allright,” he said. “I’m listening.”

“It’s such a refreshing change of pace to employ discussion towards resolution of such volatile matters,” Maier said, that reptilian smile spreading into a hollow grin. He took the file back into his bag, replacing it with an identical one and sliding it forward, keeping his hand atop it as he said, “As a primer to the exact nature and details of the amendment, I feel it is necessary to reveal the bigger picture. Examine these photos at your pace and I will attempt to provide an adequate summary of their history and relevance.”

Maier pulled his hand away to resume his polite posture and Vidar, with no small amount of apprehension, opened the file. A copy of an old film photo of his father, uncle and oldest brother laid atop the small stack, all of them much younger and surrounded by a dozen limp and lethargic people lounging and posed in odd ways. It took him a moment to realize that Einar, Bjørn, and Leif were the only people alive in the photo.

“Oh, good! You’re shocked!” Maier interrupted the confusion clogging the horror erupting from this realization. “That simplifies things. As you may have perhaps inferred, the late Mr. Valstads also partook in the hunt. They were, in fact, responsible for training and passing on the tradition to the young Leif Valstad, a tradition that spans back several generations in your bloodline and one that Mr. Valstad intends to continue. Fun fact: Ms. Valstad was the one who just recently uncovered that photograph and brought the FBI’s attention to the past crimes of your family. They will eventually be investigating your family’s farm through the legal attaché in Norway and they will find evidence of murders dating back several decades before your father and uncle were even born.”

Vidar’s mind lurched through the mire of everything this implied, stress causing the pounding in his head to deepen and compelling him to bring the photo closer. It didn’t seem doctored. He didn’t suspect it was but hoped for it and swallowed his despair when he found no indication of it. There was a horrible sense to all this that shattered his image of his father, a man he had harbored no special affection toward by his physical and emotional distance from his sons. The ancient envy he held against Leif for being chosen to live with Einar transformed into a brief pity for him before devolving into an admittedly petty sense of vengeance. Leif was chosen but being chosen was not the privilege he and his brothers had always been resentful of. He looked at young Leif’s haunted, terrified gray eyes and couldn’t imagine seeing even a glimmer of that same fear in them now. The past was only as relevant as how it affected the present. There was nothing that was done to this boy that could excuse the heinous crimes he would come to commit. That his hatred toward his brother was prioritized above the disturbing reconstruction of his own father as a murderer was perhaps a sign of his own declining mental health, but he already knew he was no longer quite sane.

His mind lobbed a memory linked to the fun fact Maier so glibly supplied, reminding him of Simone’s strangely emphatic request that he tell her about his father and uncle. He’d dismissed it as a silly curiosity that her insanity had blown to outstanding proportions, but in light of this new information, he reconsidered his perception of the girl. He wondered what kind of person would pursue such dreadful knowledge instead of repelling from it. He wondered again, as he had since watching her level the handgun between Edward Kyun’s eyes, if it was perhaps not insanity that accounted for much of the mystery in her motivations. A new guilt sprouted out of this, a guilt of squandered chances. If he had bothered to see their slave as something more than a broken, insane invalid, so much could have gone differently. He would have seen the abuse Leif had enacted on her instead of letting him pull the wool over their eyes, at the very least. Of course, if she had reached out to him instead of falling under Anders’ unwitting manipulation, he would have probably just fucked
her too. He never was a good person. He put the photograph down and laid his forehead in his hand, willing the pounding to lessen.

“So, what am I supposed to do with this?” he asked, quiet in the presence of his headache. “Am I supposed to apologize for being born from this madness? Am I guilty by relation? What is the point to this?”

Maier’s blank eyes twitched to focus on him now, the dense vacuum of his emotionless stare reminding him of how dangerous this was as the agent responded, “The point is that you learn so that you can more effectively discourage the development of deviant behaviors in her. Anders performed well enough in retaining her, but he was promoting traits that would be deemed unfavorable by Leif Valstad. You did well to disrupt his efforts and revert her to a state that is conducive to her role. I want you to be her handler once she’s been recovered.”

“You’re mistaken—I’m not…” Vidar paused, needing to say this aloud but having to work past his reluctance to admit it to this outsider. After a moment, he whispered, “I wasn’t training her for any purpose but to better serve my brothers and myself.”

“Precisely,” Maier responded. “She’s been conditioned to respond to her father with devout piety and submission. Whether intentional or not, that conditioning extended to all of you as well, so you were correct in your assessment and treatment of her as a sexual subordinate. You are all equally as hereditarily predisposed to these sexual dynamics with your female descendant, therefore I agree that you all have the equal right to bond with her as mates.”

“Wait. You think I was fucking her because I’m ‘hereditarily predisposed’?” Vidar asked. “That’s got to be-”

“I do confess that I may be conflating correlation with causation,” Maier interrupted. “However, given your family history, the evidence toward that conclusion is rather uncanny. The Valstad line very rarely produced female offspring, but when it did occur… Let’s just say, the family tree did not branch out far in those generations. You are certainly not displaying a necessarily deviant behavior in your desire to copulate with your brother’s female offspring. I had figured incest was a cultural trait and maybe it is, given how pervasive familial culture can be psychologically integrated within an individual, but there’s a certain romance to it being hereditary, don’t you think?”

The temptation to anguish over being the product of incest nearly distracted him from defensively stammering out, “I’m not like that! I don’t… That’s disgusting!”

Maier’s thin lips stretched once more into that reptilian grin. “What was it that you accused Anders Valstad of before pressuring him into sexual intercourse with you and Ms. Valstad? ‘Repression for your puritan peace of mind’? Come now, let’s not be obtuse. This is, was, and will be a family matter.”

“What do you want me to do, exactly?” Vidar nearly snapped, desperate to change the subject before the nausea in his twisting gut wrung too tightly. “If you want me to train her into subservience, I’ll fuck her until her only will is the will to serve, but don’t, don’t try to tell me I’m anything like him.”

“Well, so long as that is what you are willing to do, then I will refrain from further criticizing your motivations toward doing it,” Maier conceded. He rose from his chair and pulled the file away, placing it in is bag and rifling through it as he continued, “Thank you for your time, Vidar Valstad. I am aware that you are as eager as I am to recover your niece, so please rest assured that I am doing everything possible to find her. I am also aware that you are quite fatigued, so it would perhaps be prudent to consider adjourning this topic for today. This will not be our last meeting.”
Henrik had to do something about the corpse in his kitchen and the man in the trunk. Regardless of the peril of his mind or the panic of what he had done, he had to do something. The warmth and soothing touch of his niece holding him on the sofa was a balm on the calamity of this crisis, but he would have to leave the calm she shushed and stroked into him so compassionately. His face buried in the uninjured crook of her neck, her meager weight across his lap, it was almost surprising how well they could fit together, how natural touch came to them when he hadn’t the mind to fear its consequences. Huddled together as animals would seek reassurance from their pack, the distance that their language barrier maintained was closed in this nonverbal communication. From the firm insistence she had used to drag him into the bathroom and wipe the blood from him to the timid coaxing she had led him into her arms, the racing madness had slowed its spinning until he could breathe again. What foreign words she spoke were not with the expectation to be understood, but only the intention to soothe with gentle tones.

The tactile sweetness of her soft body and smooth skin seemed limitless once he had begun to return her caresses. That his hands, the same hands that had so brutally crushed a man to death, could still be able to touch something so fragile as her without so much as bruising her was a solace that broke him down to tears. Stroking the length of her side, his hands following the dip of her waist and the flare of her hip, he savored the feel of her chest slowly depressing against him as the warm stream of her sigh brushed past his ear. His scalp tingled as she ran her fingers through his hair and his muscles melted under the slow rub of her hand along his neck.

As he absently kneaded the crest of her hip and traced his thumb along the ridge of her pelvic bone, she whispered and sighed, “Ah, that- that’s nice… oh-h…”

His mind had calmed to the point that he did not fear each thought that floated into it, slowly returning reason to him until he could allow himself to think. Not about what he’d done, not yet, maybe not ever. But this slow exchange of comfort had seemed safe to think on until the delicate waver in her voice snagged and dragged up an awareness that had eluded him until now. He shoved it down, needing this for just a while longer. He didn’t want to think about what they were doing or the position they were in. He didn’t want her lack of clothes to bare anything more than simply unrestricted touch; this could still be purely for comfort if he didn’t acknowledge what else it could be. He nuzzled deeper against her neck, inhaling her scent and enjoying the pleasant warmth he found it stirred in him.

He could recognize this sensation as the release of oxytocin and dopamine, a natural hormonal response to welcomed intimate touch, but one that flooded him into a deeper calm with the accompaniment of her scent. What feature of evolutionary biology made the scent of this girl elicit activation in his reward-related cerebral functions was beyond him to suppose, but the reaction was palpable. As she returned his nuzzle with a kiss atop his head, her mouth lingering there to breathe against his scalp in a way that made him relax into a boneless heap, he suspected that this scent reaction was mutual. Through the pleasant fog it produced in his mind, he found it easy to accept that they were still animals despite the pretensions of their humanity. Whatever the cause or function, he hugged her tighter and let the touch and scent of her fill him with that intoxicating warmth.

“This doesn’t have to change who you are,” she murmured, her softly spoken words puffing out more warm little breaths against his scalp. He slid his hand back up the smooth expanse of her thigh, listening to the sound of her voice and not the content of her speech. They could talk later. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t have a choice, right? It’s nobody’s fault if it had to be done. We’re alive and we’re… we’re gonna be okay… one day. Right? We’re going to be just fine. You did what you had
to do and now you have to live with it, but you’re alive... I’m sorry, Henrik. I wish this was easier. I’m sorry this happened. I’m going to try harder to make sure you never have to go through this again. I promise. I promise, I promise, I promise.”

“You promised,” Leif said, tutting Mrs. Marceau with a disappointed shake of his head. He spoke in the English he was most comfortable with, having grown weary of the demand French had stretched his vocabulary and no longer feeling so polite as to use it. Rudeness was something he abhorred almost as much as frivolous acquisition, but his patience with her had been worn down low enough to begin scraping away at his well-mannered poise. “What good is your word if you can’t keep it?”

“I had merely entertained the idea of extending you the privilege of visitation with your daughter,” she replied coolly, that stony visage hardening further to contain the fear that trembled beneath it. “You have been afforded many privileges here. I recommend you do not continue to test them by making demands.”

“Doubling down on a bad bluff is a bold move for someone with so much to lose,” he said. He smirked at the guns held ready in the guards’ hands; no mere neuromuscular incapacitation by taser darts for him tonight. The stakes had been raised to lethal standards and not by him for once.

Her hazel eyes, nearly as dark as swamp water in the low light of the single lamp that enshrouded anything beyond the desk in shadow, narrowed almost imperceptibly as she said, “I had you rescued from a trial that would have undoubtedly put you on death row. I had your execution revoked with the council. I have given you freedom to the entirety of these grounds, audience with our chief clients, participation in laying the groundwork for the success that will be the future of the order, and you have given me grief and demands. I pray your perception may change before I provide you perspective on what I could deny you.”

“Ah. Here is a prime example of why you have built your own failure,” Leif grinned, leaning forward in the plush leather chair he’d been restricted to for this meeting. “You think that by creating a shortage, you can create a demand for you to supply and your potential buyers will pay your inflated price. You think that by creating need or debt in me, I will pay you with my loyalty and obedience. You think I am unreasonable to not be grateful to you, but I can’t be grateful to a thief who has robbed me of my freedom, my family, my time and tried to sell it back to me in pieces. The truth that we both know is that you need me more than I need you, if not because your ‘leadership’ would not exist without the illusion of my support then by the simple math that I have no need of you at all. Not only am I unmotivated to pay your price, but now you have lost the one thing I was interested in buying back from what you have stolen.”

Mrs. Marceau glowered within her shell. The hard set of her jaw was the most emotion Leif had seen her display since she had slapped him and he hoped she would try again. It would be the last thing her hand would ever do if she were impulsive enough to try.

Unfortunately, impulsivity was not among the many shortcomings the woman possessed as she mustered all the fake calm she could in her words. “You are in no position to speak so brazenly to me. I hold over half our numbers under my command and my need of you is not so great as to tolerate such insubordination any further. You will cooperate to earn your privileges, or you will no longer receive them.”

“You really believe that? Any of it?” he asked. “I’m afraid the only person who has succumbed to your attempted manipulation is you, madame. You thought you needed my loyalty to obtain theirs,
but all this charade has proven is that they are fully willing to follow me, even if it is toward something as foolish as following you. The irony here is that it was entirely your own doing."

"You will be restricted to your quarters once more, stripped down to a true prisoner’s rights," she warned.

“This regime you believe you have won was doomed to failure by the very framework with which it was designed," he continued, heedless of her threats. “You sought to run this cult as a business, but they aren’t motivated by profit margins and bloodless board room successes. You can’t acquire their loyalty as a resource and that is why you have failed. You’re not a leader, Mrs. Marceau. You’re just a capitalist.”

She addressed the guards with a flippant gesture as she ordered, “Lock him up. Take everything but the mattress. Clothes, books, bedding, everything.”

Leif’s smirk sharpened at the stillness that remained in the room. Mrs. Marceau waited for her guards to respond to her command and, as the seconds ticked by in silence, that hardened shell of her composure began to crack and crumble. He rose slowly, smoothing down the jacket of the dark business suit she’d had him wear to appear more human before the stakeholders earlier that day, and she stared up at him with panic and hatred rising under her thinning control.

He smiled at her a moment longer, gloating in the meaning of this moment they both understood, before nodding to one of the guards and cheerfully saying to him, “Rupert, would you be so kind as to escort me back to my quarters? I believe I’m done here.”

Henrik’s jacket, heavy with blood, engulfed Simone’s much smaller frame ridiculously, but its dark and muted color did well to hide her among the shadows of the bush she ducked in. She was glad her instinct to not let him venture out alone again proved to be correct as she watched him deliberate and dread with his large hands spread over the trunk of the car parked on the street. The periodic banging from within that trunk could only be either another victim of the attempted kidnapper or the kidnapper’s partner. Seeing how her uncle’s powerful shoulders bunched and tensed in shuddering panic as he hesitated for several minutes at the car, she confirmed it to be the latter. The knife gripped tightly in her hand, its gleam hidden under the heavy jacket, reassured her that what she had to do was right.

At last, Henrik retreated up the steps into his home, having failed to muster the will to the task as she had hoped, and she crept quickly from hiding. When he would come to realize her absence, there would not be much time to do what must be done and she did not want to risk him coming back outside before she was finished. The knocking resumed as she stepped up behind the long black car. Bang, bang, bang. Her fingers shook, as they always did these days, while she searched for a button or latch. Bang, bang, bang. A sharp pang of fear seemed to stop her heart when her fingers caught on the latch.

“Make him quiet,” she whispered to herself as she willed her hand to squeeze that latch. “Make him still.”

The lid flew open as soon as the latch pulled at the release, the sudden motion being met with one of her own as her hand shot out from the fold of the jacket. Every muscle in her body was alive and acted without thought, obeying a will not entirely her own as she pushed forward before even seeing the wide expression of surprise on the huddled man’s face. The white of his eyes startled her back
into the moment and she looked down to the knife handle pressed against him, just below his solar plexus.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, breathless. Her heart thundered in the wild chaos of terror, so loud and strong that she felt as though the air around her bounced in time with her racing pulse. He was as frozen in panic as she was, but she was able to move first. The grunt he made when she jerked the kitchen knife out of him was guttural and frightened, a sound that she knew would haunt her for the rest of her life, however short that would likely be. Blood flooded out from the deep slit she had to stab into him in order to reach and sever his aorta, the high arterial pressure sending out an astonishing amount of blood that would usher him into unconsciousness in a few seconds and certain death in a few minutes.

“I’m sorry you have to die.”
Anders downed the painkillers with a swig straight from the mostly emptied bottle of scotch, not really needing them, but needing a stronger form of intoxication than alcohol could provide. The dogs scattered in a cacophony of claws tapping and scraping on the floor as he stumbled when he tried to walk and a laugh coughed out of him as he grabbed the wall. Maybe his body didn’t need the extra kick of narcotics, but his mind certainly did. He wiped the wetness of sweat and tears from his numb face and chuckled between his sobs as he slid along the wall into his living room. Truth be told, his skull fracture had fully healed by the six-week mark and all the ways he had been sliced and diced had closed into fresh pink grooves of flesh that would harden into the white lines of scar tissue he’d carry for the rest of his life. Physical pain had left him, leaving only the invisible wounds that might never heal on his heart and mind. This day marked two months since Simone had gone from his life. The first week had been a smear of anguish and self-loathing, but he had held such bright hope that she would come back. His thirtieth birthday had come and gone as a desperate blip along the blur of that second week; a bitter day where his hope burned searing hot until he drowned his senses in drink. Then it had been a full month and he began to truly hate the hope that niggled him like a burr stuck in his sock, its presence made known only by the pain it created. Worse than the hope were the moments and full nights where he lied awake without it.

He knew what everyone else had thought. Pretty girl like that, in the spotlight of murder fanatics and perverted sickos, there were a thousand ways she was raped and killed and locked up in some dingy basement in an unsuspecting suburb somewhere. He’d cussed out every trash reporter and tabloid slimeball who wanted to interview him, not being shy or subtle about how they were the ones who had put her in that spotlight. It felt good to blame someone other than himself, even if he didn’t really believe his own screaming accusations. Simone was already declared dead in the eyes of everyone else. Everyone but him and sometimes Vidar, when he would come over and make sure he was still breathing. Like right now, as the dogs heralded his brother’s arrival in a chorus of happy yipping and yapping that came blessedly muffled to Anders’ ears. Or rather, ear, with the scarred one not hearing as well as it used to.

“Suicide watch!” Vidar announced, carrying the aroma of meat with him. “Anyone call for a professional noose-fitter around here?”

“How much do you charge?” Anders responded, sitting up from his splayed position on the couch.

“Depends. How much you got left in that bottle?” he asked. Anders held up the meager slosh of scotch, earning him a chiding tut from the older man. “Sorry, sonny, looks like you’ll have to kill yourself with an unfitted noose today.”

Anders managed a laugh that didn’t tug the invisible wound inside him. He watched as his brother stepped over the back of the couch, sat down next to him, and placed a pizza box on the coffee table.

“It isn’t even noon yet. Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” he asked as Vidar shoved a slice of sausage pizza at him.

“I’m playing hooky,” he answered, turning on the television. “I figured you’d call in sick today too, so here we are.” He gestured to the television with his slice and said through a mouthful of pizza, “Have you been keeping up with the shit happening in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? Those crazy Ouroboros sons of bitches are claiming takeover of the country and demanding it be called Zaïre again. And now China of all places wants to start sending in troops to smoke them out! Maybe I should mind my own business, but isn’t China pretty far away from Africa?”

Chapter 61
Anders tried to focus his blurring vision on the television, able to discern the hauntingly familiar symbol the Ouroboros terrorist group had adapted as both moniker and flag. He avoided the news just to avoid seeing that serpent circling into itself to devour its own tail, each time only reminded of that same beast Simone had painted on the hotel mirror in Vermont. That was so long ago now. Everything was becoming so long ago. The image on the screen blurred further as tears welled in his eyes and began to spill down his unfeeling face.

“Reality has gotten unreal in the world lately,” Vidar continued as he handed Anders a wad of napkins to dry his eyes. He never remarked or paid any notice to the crying now. “It’s like our childhood cartoons are becoming real. Like G.I. Joe, right? Ouroboros is like Cobra, but there’s no Joes to fight em so they’re just taking over the world. Remember watching G.I. Joe at Pappa’s when we were kids?”

“I think that show was before my time,” Anders slurred. “I’m not a dried up old hag like you.”

“Yeah, eat shit,” Vidar sneered. “You hit thirty. It’s all graying pubes and heartburn from here, littlest brother.”

“My pubes aren’t gray,” he muttered defensively.

“Enjoy that while it lasts.”

Anders frowned at his brother, his indignant glare lingering as he considered him. Things had changed between them and within themselves, all of them. He’d expected change to occur after everything they’d been through of course, but it hadn’t headed in a way he could have expected. Two months ago, he would have never thought Vidar would be sitting next to him on his couch, bringing pizza on a whim and joking around about utter nonsense to keep him from drinking to death alone. He also wouldn’t have predicted that Henrik would have become so distant, almost resentful toward them. Vidar derailed his sluggish thoughts by stealing the bottle out of his hand while he was so dazed and draining what was left in three chugging gulps. That was fine. There was plenty more in the cupboards.

“Have a good lunch, Henrik,” Martha smiled as he made his way across the waiting room.

Henrik smiled back and waved at the receptionist, his good mood stretching his grin wide and adding a bounce to his step. It seemed hard to be in a bad mood these days. The sun was shining longer, summer was finally in full swing, and his life had never felt so full and meaningful. Even grumpy little Dr. Brun seemed less difficult these days; he was, in fact, rather glad he didn’t kill him. Stepping out into a balmy late morning, grinning to find not a single cloud in the sky, he jogged to his car. He didn’t want to waste a single minute. His new apartment was close enough for him to walk to work, but driving was still faster and he wanted to get the most out of every moment of these lunch breaks. He ran to catch the elevator, crowding in next to a young woman with a stroller, and hit the button for the sixth floor just as the doors shut.

“Beautiful weather today, right?” he grinned at the young mother.

She smiled and nodded politely, not seeming too open to elevator small talk. He loomed over the stroller to look at the baby and caught the infant’s deep blue eyes. A tiny pink-skinned newborn, its melanin still not yet developed enough in its irises to reveal what color they would stay. He waggled his eyebrows at the baby and chuckled at its blank stare before he caught himself. It seemed as
though every infant he’d come across lately drew his attention, so much so that he’d heard more than a few comments on how his biological clock must be ticking. He cleared his throat and straightened, embarrassed at this compulsive baby-seeking behavior when he’d never even considered having children before. Before what? he wondered. Before he had been so thoroughly confronted with the limitations and inevitability of his own mortality, he supposed. Or perhaps it was a biochemical response to being in such close and consistent proximity to a pregnant girl. His good mood dampened a bit at the reminder. There was much he had been selfishly avoiding and ignoring in regard to his niece, but that particular problem was very soon going to become unavoidable. He was running out of tomorrows to pass that uncomfortable talk onto and she was running out of time for a medical abortion to remain an effective and safe option. Tonight, he decided firmly. His eyes drew once more to the precious bundle in the stroller before he could remind himself not to gawk.

He turned the deadbolt he had installed to lock from the outside before turning his key in the hole below it, a feature he’d had a hard time explaining to the landlord without outright saying he needed to keep someone locked inside. Once inside, he relocked the reverse deadbolt with the key he always kept tied around his neck before kicking off his shoes in the entry. Every day, the same ritual, never failing to lock the reverse deadbolt.

“Simone?” he called out.

No response. He’d stopped expecting one by now. His socks muffled his steps on the light wood flooring as he crept through the apartment, looking over the sparse furniture of the living room and into the open kitchen as he made his way to the hall. Her sketchbook and charcoal pencils were on the new sheepskin rug in the living room, exactly where he’d forbade her to use them. A short sigh huffed out through his nose in mild irritation at how obstinate the girl could sometimes be. He checked the storage closets, the cupboard below the bathroom sink, then went and checked the cupboards in the kitchen just in case before venturing into their shared bedroom. The small twin mattress he had bought for her was propped up against the wall, completely unused but for the one night he’d managed to keep her out of his bed.

He really should just get rid of it, but the idea of getting rid of the option for her to sleep on her own left him with a bad feeling. Even if its function was entirely symbolic, he needed that symbol to remain. Their dynamic was full of symbolic gestures, barriers, items and ideas to help them maintain some form of normalcy and sanity to their abnormal and insane circumstance. The unused bed, the pillow tucked between them at night, the thin barrier of cloth to cover where hands could never roam. All so functionally useless but entirely necessary, at least for his peace of mind. He stared down at the mess of their bedding— their bedding, the automatic thought happening upon him with a nauseating twist in his gut—and touched the smooth ivory satin of her short nightgown folded on her side of the bed. He didn’t hear her step out from behind the door wedged against the wall, nor detect her silent movements until she leapt onto his back.

“FUCK!” he shouted, her sneak attack knocking him face-down onto the bed. He grunted as she wrenched his arm behind him and dug her knee into the center of his spine. “Simone, stop now! Bad girl!”

“Say uncle, uncle!” she demanded.

The laughter ringing in her voice reassured him that this was only play and not one of her fearsome flashbacks, but that reassurance only went so far as he still bore the bite marks on his forearm from her last episode. Using the raw force of his ample strength, he pulled himself up to his knees, causing her to wrap her legs around his middle and grab onto his shoulders to stay on his back.

“Get off me, you little monkey!” he grinned, trying to put some growl in his words to threaten her,
but she only clung tighter.

“If you can’t say it in English, you can’t blame me for not obeying!” she teased.

Her bare heels dug into his abdomen as he tried to shake her off gently, but she only relented when he scraped enough English together to say, “Simone, let go now!”

She slid off him bonelessly and rolled onto the bed, the infectious sound of her laughter cracking his attempt to frown disapprovingly at her until he scooped her up in a bear hug and laughed along with her. It seemed he wasn’t the only one in a good mood that day.

Leif could register the sting of the soap rubbing into the split skin over his throbbing knuckles enough to be aware of the pain, but he didn’t mind pain. He did, however, mind the splatter of blood decorating his new dress shirt. With a heavy sigh, he took off the shirt and stood only in his pants and shoes as he ran the stain under cold water.

“Old Scratch,” one of Francis’ men, Veracruz, an ex-mercenary aptly named thus due to his originally being from Veracruz, greeted him by the nickname they’d taken to calling him. “That guy you was beating on died. You find out about your little girl?”

“We’ll see. This one actually had some information that might lead us somewhere,” Leif answered. He rubbed at the stubborn stain with the pad of his thumb, careful not to fray the weave of the fibers. “Which means his friends were withholding information after all. Gather them into the courtyard. I would like to peel them and toss their faces to the fish.”

“Yes, sir. But… the fish is all gone.”

Leif’s scrubbing stopped. He lifted his gaze to Veracruz’s intricately branded face, the pierce of his steel glare freezing the ex-merc in the reflexive terror at being the target of his full attention.

“How do you mean?” Leif asked, unable to control how his voice dipped low and scraped over his vocal chords like gravel. He had grown out of practice at maintaining his false voice to the point that now he reverted to his natural dark pitch at the slightest distraction.

He could see the man’s throat bob as he swallowed nervously and repeated, “The fish is all gone. They dead. Ah… You know, the servants, they not around no more. So… the fish dead now.”

That did, unfortunately, make sense. The purging of any outsiders from the estate had thrown domestic upkeep of the vast grounds into brief disarray. In Francis’ eagerness to rid the new organization of anyone not fully sworn and aligned to them, they had yet to account for the fact that the most loyal hunters were not often the best housekeepers. Apparently, there was also not an adequate aquarist among the assassins, guerilla soldiers, blood cultists, triggermen, and murderous zealots that had fit Dr. Aguiyi’s standards in the unification of the crumbled organization under the new Ouroboros regime. Leif freed Veracruz from the pin of his stare and shook out the soaked garment, leaving it draped over the edge of the sink as he walked past the fright-stiffened ex-merc.

He stepped briskly through the kitchen, the large stainless steel and laminate room slowly returning to the immaculate order it had been when he’d first decided on maintaining it as his preferred interrogation arena, and continued through the vast Venetian hallways and corridors that comprised the main Marceau manor. The sharp clack of his shoes echoed off the marble where the bloodstained rugs had been removed and bounced off the gunshot-marred walls. Not much killing had been
necessitated, but Francis’ men had been chomping at the bit to taste violence for weeks at that point and, frankly, so had Leif. The smell of cigar smoke led him to Francis poring over a marked map and dozens of photographs spread out on a wide coffee table in the drawing room.

The two men next to the doctor, men Leif recognized as the chief tacticians in the Zaïre effort, stood immediately upon his entry, their eyes not hiding the terror they felt in Leif’s presence while Francis didn’t raise his concentrated stare from the map to ask, “How’d it go this time, my friend?”

“Better,” Leif answered. He wiped his bleeding knuckles on his bare chest before they could dribble onto the rug, smearing bright crimson across his sun-bronzed skin and fair body hair. “I apologize- I was not aware you were currently strategizing. I’ll find you later, doctor.”

Francis rubbed his leathery hand over the ouroboros mandala tattoo covering his scalp and sighed, “If you hope to catch me when I’m not strategizing, then you will catch me when I am dead. Please, let us discuss what is on your mind.”

“Very well,” Leif replied, then approached the men, nodding to the tacticians in greeting as he sat across from Francis. The tacticians nodded back, lower, nearly a formal bow in their anxiousness not to incur his displeasure. He disregarded the minor distaste of such sycophancy to address his companion in a grave regard, “I have just received news that we have neglected the koi to obliteration.”

Francis lifted his head, the deep cracks of his weathered face expanding and twisting in bewilderment until his clouded eyes widened in realization. “Oh, drat and damnation, you’re talking about the pond! By God, I’d completely forgotten about them! Well, this is terrible!”

“They’re going to want to set up a provisional government for that to be at all effective,” Francis grinned slyly, tapping ash from his cigar onto the DRC president’s picture, right at the crux of the X marked over his face. “Stick a pig in his bottom line and he’ll squeal every time.”

“Ouroboros is everywhere and everyone at the moment. The entire western coast is lighting up with militants claiming credit and carving snakes into their skins,” Leif smiled, preening his comrade’s pride. It worked briefly, soothing the doctor’s consternation, but then his heavy brow and the shadowed cut of his mouth fell in morose regret. Leif deliberated his next thought for only a moment. “Frank… I’d like to propose a revival of the fish fountain. We may employ an aquarist to train a few fledgling initiates how to go about the process, if you would agree to it.”

“I don’t know. We’d likely need to have the aquarist at least inspect the fountain if not oversee the process, and we mustn’t permit outsiders access to this sanctum… But they were such lovely fish,” Francis frowned, shaking his head. He leaned back against the tufted leather couch with a deep sigh, regret weighing heavily on him. The tacticians, upon realizing that the meeting over the fate of their home country had indeed been interrupted to mourn a fish pond, glanced to each other to confirm the ridiculousness of this suspicion. Neither Leif nor Francis paid any mind to them, focusing the entirety of their attention to the task at hand. “Very well. I cannot endure this failure. Self-sufficiency is a winding path of million small steps and Ouroboros did not spring forth fully formed from the forehead of Zeus. Some outside assistance is inevitable.”
“I will procure the resources and ensure that our secrecy is not compromised,” Leif assured him.

“No, no, no,” the doctor grumbled, gesturing emphatically. “Delegate it to Skinner. You’re already busy enough.”

“Skinner is presently rigging the election in Venezuela. Perhaps Face-Eater? He’s adept at adhering to normative social standards when interacting with the general public.”

“Face is a good choice,” Francis nodded. “Oh, you mentioned the inquiry went well. Did you get something useful from that batch of dissenters?”

“Indeed. Two of their men failed to report back when they were sent to interrogate my brother Henrik regarding Simone’s location,” Leif answered. “Considering the amount of time that has passed since we’ve raised her bounty, it can be reasonably assumed that they did not obtain her to collect the reward for themselves.”

“So, the mystery is reduced to why they disappeared.”

“I have no doubt that they were killed. Their faction was one comprised of loyalty. No deserters, no traitors. I’m very interested to find the person who thought it best they fail that particular assignment,” Leif said. “Would you pass this on to your man on the ground there?”

Francis smiled at Leif, the older man obviously impressed at that deductive reasoning. “Of course. I’ll call it in immediately. Excuse me a moment, gentlemen.”

The doctor pushed himself up from the plush couch, his tacticians left standing befuddled and alone in the room with a shirtless and blood-smeared Leif Valstad. In the absence of his comrade, he rapidly grew irritated with them.

“Would it kill you two to relax?” he sneered. “None of us have arrived here without surviving the hardships endemic to this cause, but by god, don’t allow that rigid sense of purpose and duty to trivialize the value of anything beyond its practical use! You can’t quantify meaning in the same manner you can’t quantify chaos. Sit down and start appreciating the moment. It’s all you’re ever going to really have.”

The tacticians sat down immediately, their terror and stiffness irritating him further. Exasperated, he got up and walked back to the kitchen, ignoring how they both flinched at his sudden movement. Over the past couple months, his patience had worn thin and his temper had found reason to flare where he knew none existed in reality, but the ache of being apart from his beloved daughter had unfortunately run deeper than he could have predicted. He had long dreaded the thought of what his life would look like without her and the world was indeed losing color and meaning. He had no fish to feed and admire, but he still had faces to carve off. This was all the meaning he could muster until she returned to his world, so he would carve and interrogate and murder while he waited and hoped each new clue would lead him to her. When the time would come that she returned to him, and it would come, he was going to ensure that she never slipped away from him again.

“Have a good night, Henrik,” Martha smiled as he made his way through the waiting room.

Henrik grinned and waved goodbye to the receptionist, eager to get home as soon as possible. They had cleared their patient queue 45 minutes later than their posted hours despite his best efforts to rush them through and he had done a shoddy job setting up for the next day, but he was still somehow
only at 15 minutes overtime. He’d gotten good at being less thorough at his job, something he had promised he would never do once stepping out of hospital nursing and into the much less hectic realm of clinic work. That stalwart ethic and perfectionist drive seemed so naïve and myopic now that he had something important in his life outside of work. Nonetheless, he reassured his pride that not many nurses could do better than what he did with half the effort and in half the time. The drive home was over before he knew it, no longer having to wade through traffic to reach his twisting and turning block, and he caught the elevator just before the doors shut, this time crowding in beside an elderly couple.

“Beautiful weather today, right?” he smiled to them.

They smiled and nodded to him, the old woman piping up with her tiny voice, “It’s a beautiful day for us because we’re visiting our first great grandchild!”

“Congratulations! That’s wonderful!” Henrik grinned, his brassy baritone filling the small space and prompting beaming grins from the proud great grandparents.

He leaned back against the wall, trying not to appear obvious as he re-examined them. They were elderly, but he didn’t think elderly enough to be great grandparents. Then again, he didn’t exactly have a concept fully developed in his mind for that role. None of the men in his paternal line had lived much past 65 and his grandparents had met unfortunate ends when he was too young to remember them. It occurred to him then that at his present age of 38, even if he went out and got a woman pregnant that night, there was a good chance he might not live to see his grandchildren, let alone great grandchildren. The thought chilled him in a way he didn’t expect, throwing him into a troubling mediation of regret on his life choices that he snapped out of when he nearly walked all the way into his kitchen without re-locking the deadbolt. As he tucked the key back under his shirt collar, he felt the overwhelming need for a drink. A constrictive slide around his middle startled him into flinching, the fearful tension that electrified his frazzled mind relaxing when he heard Simone’s giggle and looked down to see her brown arms hugging him from behind. She was getting too good at being stealthy.

“Come, come, come eat!” she insisted impatiently, pulling him backward.

He stepped into her smaller stride, trying not to stumble as they made their way to the small dining table where one of her culinary creations awaited them. She sat perched on her the balls of her feet on her chair, her privilege to sit any strange way she pleased being the only condition they could agree upon to get her to sit at the table with him for meals, and bit into what appeared to be chicken bones. The meat was separated and left on the platter between them. At least it looked normal enough. He tried not to stare as she broke apart the bones with her teeth and licked at the soft marrow within.

“Simone,” he began, ready to test out his English once more even if he was not quite ready to broach the topic that had weighed so heavily on his mind these past couple months. “We have need to talk.”

Her silver eyes shot up to him from her stack of bones and she asked eagerly, “Can you take me outside this weekend? I want to feel sunlight. Grass would feel nice, too. I won’t run this time, I promise!”

His mouth twisted into a frown as guilt sat heavily on this already weighty task. “Maybe… We will talk later. Simone, I need for… Ah… Listen, yes? You are, ah… pregnant.”

“I am… gravy’d?” she asked, her smooth brow furrowing in confusion. “I didn’t make gravy. Are you not going to take me outside because I didn’t make gravy?”
“No, no, ah... one moment...” he grumbled as he pulled his phone out of his pocket to search for the English word for pregnant. Upon seeing the dozen or so unread texts from Camilla, however, he groaned and got up from the table. “Sorry, excuse me.”

He felt Simone’s stare burning into his back as he left the dining nook to shut himself in their bedroom and deal with his now ex-ex-girlfriend’s demands. He knew he should have just delayed making the call, that he was being a coward in hiding from this moment behind some superfluous excuse once more. One more day wouldn’t hurt. Maybe he would wait until that weekend, until she was happy and relaxed from a few hours out in some secluded wilderness where she could feel the sun and the grass. Or maybe he just wanted to wait until it was too late for her to choose what to do with the baby growing inside her.
Anders stood in the stifling silence of the attic room. He knew he shouldn’t be up there, that he was only torturing himself by being in this space that was supposed to be Simone’s own, but he had a reason beyond immolating himself in the misery that it stoked. She wasn’t coming back. He had to accept that, and part of accepting it was to stop holding a space open for her that she wouldn’t want to fit into again even if she did turn up alive. He’d proven it to himself and to her, time and time again, that he could not change the monstrosity of his own nature any more than he could change the monstrosity of the world.

He sat on her bed, the one she had all too seldom used in the short time he’d had her, and folded the clothes he had bought her before placing them in a storage box. He started with the ones she hadn’t gotten the chance to wear, knowing this would only get harder when he began to handle the ones that still carried traces of her scent. He didn’t know it would be as hard as it was when he found himself unable to move with the red dress gripped tight in his clenching fists. She was so beautiful in it. He was trying his best to be good to her back then, only to fail so thoroughly and so soon. He’d never deserved to have her. He had to let her go.

With her clothing put away, he moved onto the scarce few personal items she’d had. Her hairbrush still had some of her long, wavy hairs clinging to the bristles and he put it in the box before he did something useless and strange with them. Anyone would think him mad had they seen the impulses he’d indulged under grief’s influence, but he supposed he was a little mad now. He knew his sanity and normalcy had become largely performative. As he picked up and inhaled the scent on her pillow, he wondered if perhaps all sanity was a learned performance. He peeled the case off the pillow and placed it in the box.

Standing from the bed to check the dresser drawers, he noticed the edge of a strap sticking out from under it. He crouched down, a maneuver he still met with an anticipation of pain that had since stopped accompanying it, and pulled out a very expensive-looking camera, a wallet, and her sketchbook. A wave of relief and wonder filled him as he opened her sketchbook; he’d thought it completely lost. His heart raced with emotion and anticipation as he flipped through the pages, delighting at the skillful and realistic depictions. The drawing of him and his brothers exactly as they were as children, the smørrebrød sandwich in Copenhagen, him and all his dogs crowding the hallway, Rolf’s grinning face exactly as he looked when he expected a treat.

The drawings grew progressively stranger as they went on. A man’s head carved open on his father’s kitchen counter, Bjørn photographing a body made of static strapped to a chair, a very young Leif staring straight at the viewer as a thick garden of poppies flourished from his opened and hollowed-out torso. He nearly dropped the book at the haunting stare of his oldest brother and the drops of rust that filled the petals of each poppy, not doubting that the pigment was Simone’s own once-scarlet blood. With quick fingers, he flipped through the pages to the last drawing she made: the ouroboros coiled within the face of the watch she constantly wore, the arm wearing the watch still only the geometric shapes and curved lines she began her figures with.

She never finished her last drawing. The weight of this fell heavy on him, almost dragging him away from a memory dredged up at the sight of that watch and the mythical symbol of the serpent. The last terrible day at his father’s house, just before the FBI agents had knocked on the front door only to be immediately gunned down, he’d taken the watch off her unconscious body to wind it and popped the back of it off. He realized now that the symbol drawn there was the ouroboros. The snapshot image of that symbol and the three sets of numbers were as clear in the photo album of his memory as they were when he’d held that little gold disc between his thumb and forefinger. In the relative clarity of
his mind outside of that chaotic moment, he was now also able to see that the numbers were perhaps latitude, longitude, and what he immediately recognized as the year their odd uncle Bjørn had died. He typed the numbers into his phone while the memory was still freshly exhumed, his curiosity further piqued when the map pulled up a territory in France.

It might have been all the head injuries he’d sustained these past few months, but he couldn’t stop thinking these were all somehow connected. The drawings, the ouroboros, Bjørn, Leif, Simone, and whatever was in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France. He flipped through the sketchbook again, stopping at the drawing of the man’s head on the kitchen counter. He knew that face. That was one of Leif’s last known victims, the one who survived a few days in a coma after being horribly burnt. Compelled by the hunch, he searched for that victim’s name, pulling up a Hector Marceau of Neuilly-sur-Seine, France.

Anders sat back down heavily on the bed, overwhelmed by the sickening confirmation that these connections were not just the delusions of a battered brain. He’d rather just be insane, for now he had a responsibility to do something with this information and he knew, with mounting dread, that this rabbit hole would not lead him anywhere good.

The warmth of Henrik’s body heat that pressed to Simone’s back melted the ache of loneliness and the magic of touch hummed and sparkled under his fingers to dispel the fearsome calamity of anxiety from her mind. This was what she waited for every day, what made the pain of being so alone bearable enough to wade through, just to rest on the shore of this sweet comfort. Tonight, as they did most nights, they started out spooning on the sofa as he watched television and she pretended to watch it with him, the only difference being that the gin he was well into drinking had made him a little bolder and clumsy. He stroked her belly under her shirt in a caress that almost tickled and every so often the bristle of his beard swept along the curve of her neck in a nuzzle, making her stretch to offer more of her sensitive neck and purr out an appreciative hum. The way he touched was always gentle and sweet, taking delight in the ways it pleased her as much as the feel of her pleased him, an exchange she shared equal part in as she caressed him in return. This was the contact she’d constantly craved and rarely received without cost. There was no pain to pay for this pleasure, no sex to torment her conscience. They were just two people who enjoyed the comfort of each other’s touch.

“Denne jävla telefonen…” he slurred as he pulled his hand away from her to fish out the phone that buzzed in his sweatpants pocket.

She turned and snuggled into his front as he typed a response to the text. It was likely that woman who always texted him. Camilla, she had gathered, from the pleading way he said it whenever the woman would call him and those conversations would invariably end up in an argument. Henrik’s strong arms hugged her to his bare chest and she nuzzled against the soft down of his body hair as he texted. It was good that he had a life outside this apartment. He deserved it. He could handle it. Just because she couldn’t didn’t mean he had to limit himself. This was for her own good and his needs were different from hers. He needed a woman and, no matter what her body demanded with the burning heat of the sin that sizzled under his innocent touch, she couldn’t be that for him.

“You don’t believe any of that."

She ignored the voice and listened to his heartbeat speed up as she playfully nipped the well-developed swell of his pectoral muscle, taking a bit of petty vengeance in the way he giggled and squirmed. The scent of juniper from the gin on his breath and sweat mingled well with the pine
fragrances of his masculine hygiene products, products that somehow smelled very different on her than they did on him.

She wished she could fit more seamlessly into his space, but he seemed to want to highlight their differences. The excessively girly skirts and dresses, frills and bows and Peter Pan collars, floral prints in pretty pastels, all so firmly feminine and innocent that she felt more like a doll than a woman when she looked in the mirror. But that was what he wanted her to be. It irritated her when she would allow herself to think on it. He would always be so much bigger and stronger, his very maleness providing such an unfair advantage as he built his muscles to these proportions she could never hope to achieve in her thin little female body in this little apartment that held nothing to train against but her own weight. She could sneak, she could surprise, she could even subdue if she was lucky, but she could never win a fair fight against any of them. When it came to raw strength, and it always had as they held her down and did as they pleased with her, they would beat her every time. And he, this bear of a man, so audacious with his unfair body, dressed her like a little girl and did as he pleased.

*Or does he dress you up like a little girl because he doesn’t want to think about doing what would please him the most?*

She bit down hard on Henrik’s chest in annoyance and he yelped as he jerked away from her.

“**Simone**!” he scolded, his deep voice thudding with anger that struck fear into her core like a cold knife stabbing through her middle. “*Hva i helvete?*! **Bad** girl! Go to bed!”

*Naughty, naughty child.*

That reflexive fear was eaten by the savage feeling that constantly simmered within her, a feeling she could only express through whatever boiled over her shortening barrier of thought into impulse. Reaching up, she watched as his eyes widened in surprise and felt the coarse hairs of his beard between her fingers as she gripped the sides of his face. Frustration and confusion drove her to lunge onto him, but she didn’t quite know what she was being driven to do until she tasted the sharp bite of juniper berries. Sneak, surprise, subdue. He grunted and tensed beneath her at first, then as she licked against his slackened mouth, he melted softly under her kiss. She poured the poison of her curse into him with a moan that drew his tongue to return her slow caress. Despite all his strength, surrendering to her poisonous touch and a little gin left him pliant and quivering. Tainting the last of her uncles didn’t hurt as much as she’d imagined; he’d done most of it himself night after night, never quite exceeding the boundaries he pushed, frustrating them both to this point.

“Simone… baby, do not… **faen**…” his strained pleads came in a jumble of incoherence as she sucked at his neck. A streak of sweet, hot, powerful hatred carried her to slide the crux of her need over his, the thin material of his ratty sweatpants leaving little of his desire to mystery against the yet thinner barrier of her panties. He gasped and winced beneath her as though in pain, a pain she knew was entirely within the conflict of his body and mind as he bowed his pelvis to meet her sway. “Don’t… don’t, baby… ah-h…”

“Were you expecting a medal for keeping me locked in here for so long without using me?” she asked, her voice ragged with want and anger. He didn’t respond, either unable to discern her English or too caught up in the way she rolled her hips as she whispered the words into his neck, but she didn’t say it for him anyway. “At least your brothers were honest. You’ve been making me live your lie, but I don’t care about saving your conscience anymore. You punish me for what you deny about yourself and I am **done** being everyone’s worst part of themselves. I won’t be your dirty little secret. I am not going to live in the shadow of anyone’s cowardice.”
His hands gripped her hips, his strong fingers digging into her sensitive flesh as he tried to still her motions, but she was too flexible and undaunted by discomfort. The heat of her need, so long ignored and repressed, flared at the raw pain and dragged a whimper from her he mistook for one of agony. His cock throbbed against her at the high, breathy sound even as he eased his stifling grip.

“Baby… vi må stoppe før…” he slurred between panting breaths. “I can’t…”

She stopped his babbling with another kiss, sucking that familiar taste from his tongue and reveling in the intoxicating fog that clouded and soothed them both. The hands that were trying to still her reached under her skirt to knead and grope the flesh of her ass and hips. He throbbed and moved under her, the thrust of his thickness rucking her dampened panties inward until his worn sweatpants were mostly sliding over smooth skin. Two months without sex when she had come to crave it daily was a torture she had begun to think had cured her of that sick need, but it had never gone away. Desperation to satisfy that greedy sickness ate all reason until she was clawing at his waistband like an animal.

“Simone, stop!” he exclaimed, grabbing her wrists and wrenching them away before she could yank his sweatpants down.

“You fucking coward!” she hissed. His grip was strong enough to gnash the tiny bones of her wrists together as she slid against his cock, pressing him hard against her aching cleft. That consuming hatred loomed up from that primal place in her, but not for him. No matter how much she knew she should, she could never get that hatred to stick to any of them, so it floated aimlessly until it could attach itself to things she was allowed to hate. Things like herself. “Don’t you get it?! You can’t lock it away, you can’t cover it up, you can’t ignore it because this is what I am for!”

Her eyes screwed shut and she yelped as he shoved her, the room spinning until she blinked away the dizziness to find him looming above her. The unhinged gleam in his glare as he bared his teeth so close to her face made her freeze, but the harsh scrape of his nails at her thighs as he held them spread wide apart kept that savage fury and need burning above her fear. He looked as though he would tear her apart at the slightest incitement, a silent threat she had no doubt was true from how his muscles tensed and bulged to lunge upon her. She met his heated stare unflinchingly, riding on the crest of her savageness, drawing from the seemingly bottomless well of strength it offered. As his fingernails dragged slowly and painfully toward her center, she recognized that same savageness in him. This was what they were, after all: monsters. A cruel satisfaction startled her at the thought.

He must have seen something pass over her expression then, some shadow of guilt or uncertainty, because as suddenly as he had toppled her, he stood from the couch and left. She became aware of how her heart thundered all the way up into her throat when the solitude closed in on her, but she had no time to lie there trembling in shock at what had come so close to happening. Listening to ensure he had locked himself in the other side of the apartment, she reached between the couch cushions and pulled out the thin chain she had unlatched from his neck, the key catching the light as it dangled from it.

*His body becoming charred black and shriveled, the smell of his own burning flesh thick in the air, how did he do this and not scream and writhe in pain?*

“He chose not to,” she answered, gripping the key in her fist until the jagged teeth of it bit into her palm.

It had been weeks since she’d last been outside and not having walls around her or a ceiling above her made Simone dizzy and overwhelmed at how open it was. She couldn’t look at the sky without feeling like she would fall into it, making her cling to the sides of buildings and dash across street...
corners. There were so many people out, so many eyes and lives reaching into her thoughts all at once. She didn’t know where she was going, although it didn’t entirely matter; she knew where she had to end up. Freedom was beautiful and more tempting than it had ever been, but it was not for her. It was never for her, never was and never going to be.

“Hey, you speak English?” she asked, getting the barista’s attention at the café she’d ducked into. The young man looked up at her with shrewd eyes that answered the question before he could employ whatever grasp he had on the language to respond. “You have a phone I could use?”

“Ah…” he muttered, his squint shifting into something different, something more focused. She wrapped her arms protectively around herself and shriveled under his scrutiny. There was too much in his eyes that she didn’t ask for. In a burst of recognition that startled her, he suddenly exclaimed, “Oh! You’re that girl! Simone!”

“‘That girl’?” she parroted back. Alarm stirred her anxiety into a frenzy. “Wha-what-what the f- What are you- No! No, I need to make a phone call! Please! May I please use your phone?”

A couple sitting behind her spoke to each other, her name peppering their rapid conversation, and a man to her left was already holding his phone up to take a picture. Confusion blunted her mind, letting anger easily take the reigns of reaction as her adrenaline shifted her flight response into fight. When her heel connected with the photographer’s gut in a high side kick, she was reminded of the times she had felt most free. Hitting the city nights with her friends in search of anything to stave off the frustration and fear that haunted their days, they’d only ever found trouble. Fun, whimsical, violent trouble that they could create and enact on those who, in their broken minds, deserved it more than they did.

*But you deserved what happened to you.*

These people might or might not deserve it, but that wasn’t on her mind as she turned from the hunched and gasping photographer to upend the chatting couple’s table, sending both them and their coffee mugs scattering. The barista fled among them, leaving this man alone to suffer her wrath. What burned in her to inflict this havoc was knowing that the mental illness that had connected her to that band of derelicts and delinquents was a product manufactured by the one man she was supposed to – and unfortunately did – trust above all others. Even the bit of identity and connection she’d managed to weld together by embracing her mental illness in that group was taken from her. As she stomped the downed photographer over and over upon his rib cage, the vileness of her life occurred to her as it often had when she allowed those thoughts to storm her. She could never be free because there was no place in the world for the monster that was emerging in her.

“Ms. Valstad.”

Simone looked up from the bloodied and shaking ball of the man she had been tormenting into submission for several minutes now to see a figure in a plain suit with a plastic clown mask covering his face, but she recognized that professional tone immediately. The dreams and nightmares she’d had of this moment could not have predicted the calm that washed over her now.

“Mr. Maier,” she returned his form of greeting as she stared into the shadowed holes of that cheerful mask, knowing the eyes beneath them were just as empty. The man under her groaned, gurgling something that might have been words as she rose from sitting atop his curled back.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said, then turned to the group of gawkers watching through the café windows. “Many have, in fact. Would you care to accompany me somewhere more private?”
The night was settling over the bright summer sky as Vidar drove far outside the city until there was only a thick wall of trees on one side of the road and the green expanse of farmlands opening the other. Too nervous and still too drunk, he passed the dirt road he was supposed to turn onto and had to double back. This was the first time that madman had ever called him out to meet him anywhere but the privacy of his home and Vidar was almost sick with anxiety of what it could be he wanted to show him all the way out in the heavily-wooded middle of nowhere. Whatever it was that was out here, he was sure it wouldn’t be good. He knew too much to be ignorant of the danger his circumstance afforded him. Far, far too much, more than he had ever wanted to know or think about. Seeing the unmarked post he was told to watch for, he pulled off onto a driveway that was little more than a narrow clearing of trees, having to drive painstakingly slow over the bumpy trail until his headlights found a dilapidated cabin.

“Good fucking god…” he mumbled, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. “I’m going to die in a horror movie cliché.”

The woods were alive with the wind rustling through the pines and a million chirping insects and night birds when he stepped out onto the soft undisturbed loam. The quiet hum of a power generator rumbling below the cacophony of nature was the only sign that this place was at all occupied, let alone occupied anytime in the last century. He walked around the windowless cabin until he came upon a door and took a moment to loosen the fear gripping his spine before knocking. Moments dripped by sluggishly, building the hope that no one was there, a hope that was useless since he wouldn’t dare leave even if he had to wait all night. Finally, the clatter of locks being undone came muffled behind the rotted and mossy wood until the door opened to a shockingly solid concrete interior. He had to glance back at the fragile wood to be certain he hadn’t blacked out and wandered elsewhere before stepping into what could have been a bunker fit to survive any apocalypse. He nearly jumped out of his skin when Maier shut the door behind him.

“I appreciate that you accepted my invitation despite such short notice, Vidar Valstad,” the ex-agent said as he latched a series of locks. “Your diligence is valuable.”

Considering the choice was either to accept the invitation or accept death, Vidar had a little difficulty replying, “No problem. So, now that I’m here… Um, why am I here?”

Movement caught the corner of his vision and he reflexively turned to it, unsure what he was seeing was real even as he met her wide silver eyes. The breath was stolen out of his lungs in the tightening constriction of his chest until it felt as though his heart had stopped, only to jump and lurch back to life as Simone took a staggering step backward.

“What is he doing here?” she asked, the question directed towards Maier but her wide eyes not moving from his.

“Your uncle is here to help you remember where you've been these last two months,” he heard Maier answer. The words were lost in the distance.

Vidar dashed to her, his hands sinking into the blissfully familiar waves of her hair before curling into fists before she could jerk away. Her scent stirred all that same savageness in him, reigniting neural pathways that had lain dormant in his brain since her trail had gone cold. Any illusions he may have had that the madness she’d inflicted on him would fade in her absence was smashed against the ravenous drive to reclaim their slave by means and impulses that pulled him in a hundred different directions at once. His palms itched to slap and squeeze bruises into this wealth of unmarked and tender flesh as much as they ached to soothe and protect her from whatever danger had taken her from them. He wanted to hear her scream as much as he needed to hear her reassure him that she was
From this tangle of desire, one frayed impulse flared into action and he gripped the sides of her startled face as he leaned down. The taste of her mouth, of their terrible connection, slammed the reality of this moment hard over his disbelief. She was alive. She was whole. She was here.

She batted him with an open hand against his side as she grunted and tried to twist away from him, but there was no real force to her resistance. He wrenched her head further back by her hair and she relented her efforts with a pained whimper, allowing him to deepen the kiss as she opened to him with that fearful obedience he’d missed so much. The warmth and softness of her mouth accepting his tongue brought yet more desires to mind and to the pressure rushing to his groin. However, a scent so similar and so separate from her own wafted up from her skin, a scent he had known all his life and startled him to find on her now. He parted from her mouth, content to bite his way to the side of her neck where that scent was strongest. The sour antiseptic reek of hospitals, the sharp odor of sweat and stale gin, the sweetness of pine and bergamot, all of them closely associated to the base note that only belonged to Henrik. He pulled away from her neck to examine her with this suspicion heavy on his mind.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like for you to begin the interrogation,” Maier’s polite interruption widened Vidar’s awareness to the world around him.

Embarrassment at having a witness to his raw reactions was enough to loosen his grip on Simone’s hair, but not enough to disengage his hold on her. Maier didn’t bring them together to merely reunite them; the maniac had a specific use for him. A specific, terrible use.
“Isn’t it enough that we have her now?” Vidar asked as he watched Maier pull a metal cart to the center of the sparse room. He tried to keep his tone neutral and disinterested, as though he simply didn’t see the need for such hassle, but he knew he was hedging too closely to the gut-wrenching horror at what might happen to Henrik if Maier finds out.

Maier examined the rope that hung from a pulley at the ceiling, giving it a hard tug and testing the fibers as he explained, “If retaining Ms. Valstad was the only objective, I would agree with you. However, it has been deemed necessary to obtain the party responsible for this extended delay in our plans. Unfortunately, for reasons I also intend to extract from Ms. Valstad, she has been uncooperative in divulging any information whatsoever to complete that task.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know anything,” Vidar suggested hopefully. “I mean, it’s not uncommon for kidnappers to wear masks or blindfold their victims, right?”

Maier placed his duffel bag on the rolling cart before turning to him. The impassive silence in response to his suggestions made Vidar’s jaw tense in regret at having said them, certain that this maniac could see right through him with those dead shark eyes. Then, those eyes twitched mechanically to Simone. She stiffened noticeably in his arms and he pressed her closer to him in a rush of unexpected protectiveness, but he was too distracted by his simmering panic to deeply consider that peculiarity in him as he cupped the base of her head and began to rub soothing circles against her scalp.

“Ms. Valstad, tell me anything you may recall regarding your recent captivity, please,” Maier said with the distinct clarity of a repeatedly recited request.

“Fuck off, Maier,” she spat, her hostility transforming the fear that had stiffened her muscles into anger.

Vidar gaped in shock and dismay at her bold obstinence, seeing exactly how she had sealed her fate in this interrogation. His fingers twitched to yank her hair back and punish her for her artlessness, but he knew a greater punishment soon awaited her and to act on this frustration prematurely would reveal the root of it. That stubborn streak in her had obviously not relented under whatever care Henrik had provided; if anything, her backbone seemed to have only been fortified. As much as he dreaded the outcome, he did not so much dread the methods with which Maier seemed intent on utilizing. She did indeed need to be brought to heel.

Maier turned his empty stare back to Vidar, a slight smirk painted on his placid face as he said, “She knows.”

As Maier turned back to his task of meticulously emptying the contents of his bag onto the cart, Vidar took this opportunity to lean down and, under the guise of intimately embracing his missed pet, whispered into her ear, “I can smell Henrik on you. Did he let you go, or did you wriggle away when he wasn’t paying attention?”

She flinched, her whisper nearly inaudible as she asked, “They’re going to kill him, aren’t they?”

“Don’t say a fucking word,” he warned, his fingers curling into claws at her waist.
He noticed, with a curiosity his constantly multitasking mind could support even now, that her middle seemed just slightly more fortified in the literal sense along with her spine in the figurative. At least Henrik had the decency to amend some of that waifish malnourishment in her while he had her. Satisfied that he’d effectively communicated his stance on maintaining her secrecy, he slid his hands lower to indulge in the delightfully pronounced curve of her ass, pleased further to find that she had filled out even more there.

“Mr. Valstad,” Maier said, dragging his attention back to the center of the room. “Bring Ms. Valstad here, if you would be so kind, and restrain her if necessary.”

“Gladly,” he responded, meaning it as he pressed her forward with a tight grip on her hip.

She did not fight him, but as they approached, her steps became halting and disjointed. He glanced at the stiff resolve veiling her terror before following her glare to the cart. The astoundingly long needle on the syringe caught his eye first, as he was sure it did hers, before taking stock of the vials, gloves, cuffs, spreader bars, blindfold, rods, chains, harnesses, and all manner of implements to restrain or cause pain. The psychological effect this ghastly array had on her was immediate and he tensed at the likelihood that she could not withstand what Maier seemed to consider interrogation. As he eyed the various hooks, blades, and needles, he wondered if he could maintain his own compliance and participation. As vast as he knew his perversions and sadistic enjoyments ran, that was outside of his realm.

“You can stop this at any time, Simone Valstad,” Maier helpfully reminded her as he pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves. The snap of the thin rubber made her flinch back against Vidar, reminding him of the role he was supposed to be playing in all this, and he gripped both her arms to keep her still. “Just tell me what you know, and we will cease directly.”

At first, Vidar wondered if she had even heard what was said to her through the shock that had affixed her attention firmly on the syringe. Then, with just a slight and stiff movement, she nodded, a shaky sigh leaking from her slackened mouth.

“Very well,” Maier responded, then turned his blank face to Vidar. “Might I recommend you begin by binding her arms? Whichever manner you prefer, unless you want her free to attempt to defend herself. Either way, I must insist that she wear the face harness. The mouth strap will make it much less likely that she break any teeth in clenching from pain. Oh, wait. You didn’t happen to bring any personal lubricant, did you?”

“I… No, no I was not expecting to…” he trailed off nervously. That wasn’t good. He needed to relax, focus on the thrill of this task instead of the high probability of damning his brother to death, or he might end up on the receiving end of these same methods. He began again, “It’s not entirely necessary. I can get this little slut wet like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I see…” Maier nodded pensively. “Yes, that should do. I’ll need to palpate deeply to determine the position of her uterus, so let me know when her vagina is sufficiently lubricated to facilitate digital penetration.”

“You want me to get her wet now? Right now?” Vidar asked incredulously. His frustration flared at this sociopath’s inconvenient ignorance of the very basics of human emotions and their physiological effects. “You should have mentioned that before laying out your torture kit in front of her!”

“If you are not confident in your ability to sexually arouse Ms. Valstad, I can utilize saliva as a rudimentary lubricant, though a more viscous and sanitary fluid would be preferable.”

Vidar stood momentarily stunned before hissing out, “Did you just insult my competence and imply
“That you would spit on my bitch’s snatch to finger her uterus?”

“I apologize if I came across as insulting; that was not my intent. I’m not doubting your prowess, nor would I offer my saliva when her own is both readily available and less likely to transfer harmful pathogens. Also, unless her cervix is considerably dilated, direct contact with her uterus would be physically impossible without causing catastrophic damage to her reproductive organs and I was firmly instructed to leave her unmutilated.”

Vidar willed his irritation to calm with a long, drawn-out sigh through his nose. It was difficult to keep in mind that Maier was a dangerous murderer he should not respond to in anger when he was also a huge pain in the ass know-it-all. Rather than risk verbally replying to his grating remarks, Vidar turned his girl around to face him instead of the torment she was soon to endure. Perhaps if he eased her into it, got her to where she approached this as sex play instead of pure torture, she could endure it long enough to convince Maier that she wouldn’t talk. Tipping her face up with his thumbs hooked along her jawline, he knew it was a naïve thought. He had no idea how far Maier was willing to go and he wanted to avoid considering it, but his curious mind squirmed with the need to know, to plan, to outsmart this hopeless scenario.

“Vidar…?” Simone whispered shakily.

He stared into his slave’s fearful gaze and saw his niece, her eyes shining like silver mirrors and brow wrinkled in uncertainty as she looked to him for a reassurance he could not offer with any honesty. That protectiveness rose again, an inept and useless thing that could only make what he had to do harder, but the temptation was too strong to push down for the sake of necessity. He let himself fear for her and, within that fear, once more found that savage root that connected them. More than their slave, more than their niece, she was theirs, and he kissed her with the certainty of that fact. More than their slave, more than their niece, she was theirs, and he kissed her with the certainty of that fact. Her soft mouth was slow to react, mortal terror blunting any other emotion or thought, but he could go slow to coax that heat he knew burned in her. He let his hands wander as they pleased, drawing shuddering whimpers from her as one remained to grope her breast while the other slid further down to slip under the waistband of her skirt. He chuckled when his fingertips brushed over the wet heat on her panties, his touch drawing a gasp from her that parted their kiss.

“I knew you missed me, sweetheart,” he jeered, his voice husky with want. He rubbed a tight circle over the tiny bump of her cloth-covered clit and nipped her full lower lip as she drew in another, louder gasp. “Did he fuck you like I do?”

“No, Sir,” she answered shakily.

The steadily building pressure of his erection throbbed at her obedience, even now, even after this long, to address him properly. He pulled her hand and pressed it to the crotch of his jeans, grinning at the gentle squeeze she applied when she gripped his shaft through the thick material as her gaze lowered and she wilted in shame.

“I missed you too, little bitch,” he smiled, then twisted her nipple through her blouse as he rubbed brutally hard on her clit.

Her eyes squeezed shut and she bared her teeth in a pained grimace, a small squeak of a cry escaping her when he didn’t let up on this assault. His smile sharpened into a smirk as she bent and tried to pull away from him, stopping her efforts with a harsher twist on her nipple that had her gripping his arm plaintively while she gasped through the pain. She was so lovely when she bent to the pain he could give her. She leaned against him for support as her legs began to tremble, her face pressed to his chest adorably. He was about to pull away, to switch back to being gentler to keep her off-balanced and confused, but she leaned into his harsh touch. His eyes widened in surprise as she rocked against the hand tormenting her labia, her jagged gasps gaining a rapid rhythm and growing
into a noise that sounded like moaning until it was, without a doubt, moaning.

“Ah-! Ah, I can’t-! Please, Sir, I need-!” she nearly cried, her nails digging into the material of his jacket until he could feel the pricks of her crushing grip on his forearm.

The stuttering sway of her hips stopped with a hard jerk and he could feel her little cunt pulsing under his fingers as she came with a broken wail of a sob. He watched her struggle through her orgasm in astonishment, not having expected her to come so easily or quickly, let alone at all under these circumstances. The warm spill of her release drenching his fingers past the ineffective barrier of her panties brought a shiver of some ancient and primal response in him, making his clothes suddenly unbearably uncomfortable.

“Is she-”

“Shut the fuck up,” Vidar interrupted whatever Maier had begun to ask as he scrambled out of his jacket while trying to hold Simone’s now struggling and sobbing form against him.

That was probably the wrong thing to say, but he couldn’t think beyond his need to get inside this soft and wriggling female. Her body was weakened and sluggish as she tried to push away from him, allowing him to wrench his pants off without letting her get away.

“You’re not going anywhere, little bitch,” he growled out as he yanked her to him.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry I did that, I just- I couldn’t stop!” she stammered, shaking in his grasp as he yanked at the ribbon tied around the collar of her blouse until it tore loose in a barrage of buttons popping open.

The sight of her breasts, bare as he’d suspected beneath that blouse, only taunted him to expose more of her and she cringed defensively as he tore the waistband of her skirt in his eagerness to remove it. She grabbed onto his wrist when his fingers hooked onto her panties, the flimsy sensible cotton and elastic ripping from her with just one hard yank. Her attempts to deter him were laughable, but that she was back to resisting him after the training he’d put into her was no laughing matter. He grabbed her by the roots of her hair and yanked her down, making her crumble to her knees easily, and didn’t give her time to recover before pulling her face against him.

“Open up and make it good, whore,” he ordered, pressing her tear-streaked cheek to his cock impatiently.

She did as she was told, turning her open mouth onto him and trailing up to his tip with her tongue to seal the sensitive head between her lips, all with such fear. If she thought this was the beginning of her torture, he could run with that. Feeling her whimper as she slid him cautiously deeper to crowd into her throat, he could definitely run with that. Tangling his fingers more securely in their hold, he pushed his way into her throat until her nose pressed into his pubic hair and she spasmed around his intruding length. Ever since Anders had drunkenly lauded her talent for fellatio, he’d been cursed with regret that he’d not gotten the chance to experience it himself. As he watched her struggle to control the gag reflex he purposely triggered with short, quick thrusts deep in her throat, he thanked whatever god or devil saw fit to fulfill that regret in reuniting them here. He tangled his other hand in her hair to hold her down on him when she began to twitch and attempt to dislodge that thick obstruction in her airway.

“Do you deserve to breathe?” he asked. “Do you think you’ve earned that, little bitch?”

The dismay written in the furrow of her brow and the borderline panic in her wet eyes as she looked up at him with the begging she was unable to verbalize was a stunning sight. Anders was right; she
was beautiful, but with a mouth full of cock, she was gorgeous. It made him want to punish her further for being so enticing.

“You don’t deserve anything but what I give you,” he spat.

He held her down for a few more seconds, seconds he knew stretched to their fullest extent in her panic as she pushed her hands against his thighs and tried in vain to pull out of his grasp, just to let his point sink in and savor her desperation before releasing her. She jerked away immediately and gulped in air between heaving coughs, her hands braced on the cold concrete while she tried to recover. The startled mewl that shook her hunched form when he placed his foot between her shoulder blades was amusing enough to make him smirk.

“Have you remembered how to behave yourself yet?” he asked. Still catching her breath, she answered with a nod and he pushed her down further with his foot. “Face down, ass up, sweetheart. There’s a good bitch.”

He considered the instruments on the cart as he admired her kowtowed position, reaching over and selecting a simple pair of handcuffs. As he knelt behind her and tightened the cuffs around her slender wrists, he saw her shudder and heard her breathy whine at the metallic rattling of the ratchet. His cock ached at the fear she still received from bondage. She couldn’t have been more perfect to fulfill this savage lust he burned with to dominate and subjugate. Two months of safe and sane play with women who would balk at what he would ask of them to supplement this need had only left him hungrier for his slave’s sweet submission. He held onto the short chain of the handcuffs with one hand as the other reached between them to press the thick head of his cock, throbbing with the hot blood that engorged it to a painful hardness, to her slit. He teased her slippery entrance, rubbing along the whole of her cunt up into the cleft of her ass, chuckling at her little grunts and gasps as he took his time deciding where to fuck her. The stray thought of what awaited her after this, of Maier’s fingers searching her vagina, decided it for him in a thrum of territorial zeal.

“Ah-AHH! Oh god oh g-AH!” Simone’s high and tight voice cried out as he pushed into her drooling cunt, the soft and heavenly feel of her stretching to accommodate his sudden intrusion prompting him to ram harder into her until he bottomed out in just three excruciatingly pleasurable thrusts.

“There’s no God for you here, little bitch,” he smirked, the words straining out of him as he bucked into her almost involuntarily. “Mm… Oh, yes, I’ve missed this…”

He fondled her hips and ass as he set into a strong rhythm, the supple curves emphasized by her bent position. Her golden skin was completely healed of bruises, leaving only the pink lines of scar tissue on her arm, throat, and faintly here and there on her back. Each mark she would bare from this moment on would be from those she truly belonged to. At the glee this knowledge brought, he dug his nails into her hip and relished how she moaned loudly and clenched down on him as he dragged four long rows of scratch marks into her.

“Oh Hell, Simone…” he groaned, her soft cunt and the adorable sounds he fucked out of her quickly becoming much too delightful.

She pulsed around him and bucked back into his more rapid pace as he wriggled his thumb into her asshole. Pumping the thick digit past that tight muscle, he considered pulling out and fucking her open there, but the drive to mark his territory won over any other temptation or reason. He should not ejaculate inside her vagina. He reminded himself that he should absolutely avoid coming in that hot, velvety, snug little cunt.

“Please… Please, fill me up, Sir… oh, fuck, I need it inside me so bad…” she begged between sharp,
desperate gasps.

Shit.

His release crashed down hard on him, pressing a deep groan that grated out of him as his entire pelvis throbbed with the pressure of his climax. That overwhelming tension and release had him spill deep in her and he couldn’t care about anything but the satisfaction of claiming her in that most primal way. His slave, his dear, delicate, darling slave sighed and shuddered so sweetly as he filled her with the culmination of his pleasure. While ecstasy fizzled out into euphoria, he leaned over her bent body and turned her by her chin to fit his mouth over hers. She received his kiss passively, the detection of her humiliation and regret making him huff out a laugh.

“You little vixen,” he chuckled. He slid out of her, leaving her huddled in shame on the floor as he stood to loom over her. “You’re so pathetic. Maybe I should let Mr. Maier fuck your secrets out of you, yes? Do you think he would be gentler than me? Does your American cunt miss getting stuffed with American dick?”

“I’m not at liberty to perform genital-to-genital penetrative intercourse with Simone Valstad,” Maier piped up from where he still stood patiently observing them.

Vidar glowered at him, snapping, “Christ, I’m trying to scare her! Isn’t that what you want?!”

Maier glanced down at the girl cowering on the floor, then nodded. “My mistake. Perhaps, then, now would be an appropriate time for me to examine her.”

“I’m far from being done with her.”

“It won’t take long. It’s also necessary to determine her condition before we begin the interrogation in order to set a guideline of how much stress we may safely apply to her.”

“You need to finger her to make sure she’s healthy enough to torture?”

“Digital examination of her vagina is a necessary part of the process, yes.”

Vidar frowned, his possessiveness warring with the knowledge that these polite and passive requests were nothing less than orders from this dangerous maniac, but it would be entertaining to expose her to the impression that he’d let Maier rape her for his amusement. “Make it quick.”

Vidar stood by and watched, shocked as Simone shot up to kick at Maier the moment he stepped within range, but the maniac seemed to be incapable of feeling pain as she bloodied his nose with her swift heel and winded him with direct blows to his middle. Or, rather, he seemed to almost enjoy the abuse, a crooked grin splitting his face as he endured her impressively high and lightning fast kicks. Her frustration and desperation mounted until she lunged at him, a growl tearing from her bared teeth as she made to bite his neck like the predatory creature she resembled more than the broken girl Vidar knew her as just moments before. Maier seemed to have been anticipating this move and used her own trajectory to slam her front to the wall. With a practiced quickness, he kicked her legs out from under her to press her to the floor. The efficiency and strangeness in the brutality Maier executed his task was a chilling reminder of what this man was capable of.

“Mr. Valstad, would you mind attaching the spreader bar to her ankles?” Maier asked, his voice froggy and nasal now from the abuse to his nose and face. He moved to straddle her ass, but this seemed more to restrain her from effectively kicking or moving her lower body than to instill any sexual threat.

Vidar couldn’t trust himself to speak past the tightness he abruptly found in his throat, so he grabbed
the bar and strapped her squirming ankles into the cuffs. There was no reason he could find for his discomfort. Nothing had happened to her that was any worse than what he or Anders had done and the thought of her suffering between them brought him pleasure, so he was bewildered at the bitterness he found in watching Maier so much as touch her.

“I am going to turn her onto her back. I’m going to need you to bring me the syringe and then restrain and immobilize her torso to the best of your ability, understand?”

“Understood…” Vidar rasped.

He tried not to imagine what Maier was going to do with the syringe during this “examination”. He tried not to imagine anything that might happen that night. They just had to make it through this, then Maier would give up on trying to find out about Henrik and he would have his slave back. Until they needed her. He swallowed that bitterness down again as he walked back with the ridiculously long needle, handing it off to Maier, who then tucked the syringe between his teeth as he flipped her over. Her ferocity was not at all subdued by her reduced ability to act upon it, launching her into a fit that had her rearing up and snapping her teeth at Maier. She would have bitten his face if Vidar hadn’t caught her shoulders and slammed her back down to the floor.

“Let me GO! I’ll kill him! I’ll tear his fucking throat out!” she snarled, writhing under the men’s combined hold.

“Perhapsh anotter time,” Maier responded glibly around the plastic syringe tucked in his mouth.

Without wasting any time, he pushed his gloved fingers inside her sloppy cunt and pressed along her lower abdomen in search of her uterus, dragging out an enraged cry from her that chilled Vidar’s spine. He’d never expected this raw, volatile fury from her, having only caught slight glimpses of it despite all the terror and pain he’d put her through. But that was him. Maier was not related to her. Seeing this evidence of Leif’s conditioning in her, how deep it ran, was startling. Maier had explained it to him in those awful “lessons” but seeing it in action was more alarming than hearing about neural pathways or a particular drug’s effect on reshaping memory during recall. She wasn’t a masochistic, docile little submissive. She was merely, in every literal sense of the term, made for them.

“Steady now…” Maier said, the needle grazing her skin between her navel and vagina.

“What are you doing?” Vidar asked before he could stop himself.

“I will extract a small amount of amniotic fluid to test the fetus for chromosomal abnormalities or genetic disorders that may have resulted from inbreeding,” Maier explained. Simone groaned as the needle pierced her skin and he pushed it in slowly, centimeter by centimeter.

Vidar’s blood ran cold. “She’s pregnant?”

Maier pulled the plunger back with painstaking care, drawing up a clear yellow fluid into the barrel as he responded, “Of course. You didn’t think time was of such emphasis just to get her back to you, did you? A female with Ms. Valstad’s unique genetic attributes must not be wasted. And don’t worry—I’ve dissected enough pregnant female subjects to know how to safely perform this procedure.”

Vidar felt a strange buzzing in the back of his numb mind. “Why do you care?”

“I, personally, do not. If the fetus is healthy, I will bring it to the person who does care quite a lot.”

“And if it isn’t healthy?”
Maier pulled the needle out, bringing a pained whimper from Simone as he answered, “We will terminate and you will impregnate her if Leif Valstad is unavailable to sire another infant.”

Vidar could identify what he was feeling as wooziness but could not determine much aside from that. He didn’t want to know, he was sure of that even as he asked, “It’s Leif’s?”

“Most likely. There’s the possibility that Anders Valstad could be the father, or even you.”

It was impossible for Vidar to decipher what was more disturbing: that Leif might have knocked up his daughter, that he might have knocked up his niece, or that she was to be treated as breeding stock for the exclusive purpose of either.

“That should do it,” Maier announced as he pushed himself to his feet, holding the filled syringe gingerly between his fingers. “While you were reinforcing your sexual dominance over Ms. Valstad, I was inspired by the racial gap between you. Based on that racial aspect she has no doubt considered of her ‘slave’ status, I am confident that she would benefit most from a traditional American approach on that theme. Have you used a bullwhip before?”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day
“The UN has approved the Europe-based mining conglomerate’s request for international arbitration and they are seeking legal action against the DRC,” Dr. Aguiyi said around the half-smoked cigar tucked into his mouth. He lit the cigar, taking a drag off its mysterious and pungent blend in pensive slowness, then let the smoke billow out onto the cloud of his wooly beard as he remarked, “I don’t know who the hell they’re seeking legal action against since we slaughtered the entire cabinet, but it’s cute that they think their laws will still extend to Zaïre when the dust settles.”

“Mm-hmm…” Leif mumbled, his attention fixed more to the drawing he was attempting in the margins of the novel he’d been slowly reading.

As interesting as he was sure the book was to some, he had never developed a taste for fiction and had found this distraction insufficient. He had also never developed a talent for recreating living creatures in pencil as his daughter had, abandoning the shoddy depiction of a rabbit that more resembled a long-eared pup to return to his strength in assembling complex geometric perspectives. In his opinion, *The Brothers Karamazov* was improved with his added illustrations of nineteenth century Russian monasteries, but that wasn’t saying much. He only drew to hear the familiar and comforting sound of graphite scraping against paper; the daily background noise of what used to be his small and private life. If he listened to it long enough, he could feel as though his Simone was sitting in the same room, sketching away in the mutual enjoyment of each other’s company.

“Hey, you okay, Old Scratch?” Francis asked, tapping his stack of reports across his desk to where Leif sat engrossed in shading the onion-shaped domes.

“Peachy,” he muttered, mimicking his daughter’s stock sarcasm to that inane question.

“You want to drop acid and watch the boys brawl in the yard?” the doctor offered.

“Not tonight, Frank.”

Silence stretched on, but Leif could not recapture that elusive illusion with how Francis watched him, the imposition of his gaze too loud above the scape of the pencil. Zaïre, Venezuela, Cameroon, Haiti, he was far too uninterested to be stretched so far over the world when all that he wanted could fit so perfectly in his arms.

“We’re going to find her,” Francis assured him.

“Don’t do that.”

“How?”

His pencil stopped its rapid scraping, letting the silence descend over them in the thick tension that followed before he explained, “Do not extend my daughter on some magical idea of confidence and theory. I cannot sustain myself on the idea of her alone; I must have her in reality, in this life that I am living right now, but I don’t have her, do I? She is not here, so I must confront the concept of being without her as a question of how. How am I going to live this life where she is not? I don’t have an answer to that, Frank, and I don’t appreciate you trying to answer that for me. You want me to continue passing my time here accomplishing your goals, then tell me to work, but don’t tell me to wait and hope. Don’t try to comfort me with words; I have no use for them.”

Francis removed his dusty bowler and ran his thick hand over the mandala tattoo, sighing in that weary way the elderly could summarize their exasperation with life itself. “What do you want me to
do, Leif? If the men see you this depressed, they’re going to lose morale and you know this entire thing is held together by the confidence they have in you. Not to mention that I hate seeing you so god-damned sad. Shit. I promised Bjørn I’d look out for you. So, what the hell can I do?”

“You’re already doing what you can,” Leif answered, the hard edge gone from his tone as he continued shading. “You’re not a fairy godmother and I’m only asking that you don’t try to be one.”

As graphite gave dimension to the monastery Leif designed above the beginning of chapter three, he weighed whether or not to tell his friend about his plans to have himself smuggled into Norway and decided once more against including him in that knowledge. Francis might have had his best interests at heart, but he was still a shrewd leader that had placed Leif at the center of his complex plans. It was better to betray him in silence and allow both of them to remember only the best of each other.

Interrogation was a word to which Simone did not understand how little she had associated with until being introduced to it as the concept Maier was versed in. Interrogation, to her, conjured images of a small, badly lit, plain room with a table between her and her interrogators. Interrogation, to him, was still in a small, badly lit, plain room, but there was no table between her and her interrogators. In fact, there was nothing between them. She hung by her wrists, the rope burning her skin as her hands went into a fuzzy numbness each time her legs faltered to maintain the precarious tiptoe balance to reach the concrete floor, stripped down to the watch on her wrist and the straps buckled around her head to fix the leather in her mouth. What strength and stamina she had built in those long lonely days of physical exercise in the apartment prison was not enough to prepare her for such an extended period of being stretched en pointe, but the threat of her shoulders dislocating or acquiring nerve damage in her hands was enough to keep her toes pushing against the floor.

At the first thunderclap of white hot pain searing through the nerves of her exposed back from the loud crack of the bullwhip in Vidar’s able hands, she shrieked in agony and anger at the ineffectiveness of words. Words could not convey that interrogation was the sweat that beaded on her bare skin, the tears and saliva that streamed down her chin, and the screams that hit the leather strap clenched between her teeth. Words only obscured reality and muddled the meaning their ineptitude could not transfer, but words could still achieve such devastating damage.

She could end this torture with a few meager words, which was why whenever Maier slid the strap out of her mouth and asked her who’d had her, she could only let two tears loose from her ragged throat, “Fuck off.”

So much hinged on so little. This was the power and failure of words contained in the burning lashes across her back. She would not break to Maier for the pittance of relief, but that did not stop him from sliding the strap back into her mouth and stepping away from her.

She tried not to shudder too obviously when he calmly commanded, “Again.”

The whistle of the whip cutting the air behind her made her legs stiffen, but that explosion of agony as the leather snapped across her back brought a hard yank on her wrists as her feet skid out from under her in that compulsion to writhe. She could not choose her automatic response to pain as the burning monk or her father had been able to, but she could choose not to give into it. She’d made a promise to Henrik. Where words could fail so often, she could at least give her own word meaning and value.

“Again.”
The crack of the whip, the burst of pain lighting up behind her eyes, the block of the leather muffling her cries. There were no other constants this world had offered than rejection, humiliation, isolation, and agony. There was no inherent altruism in men. Every light cast a shadow, every kindness had a cost. She wondered how it had taken her this much to see what her father had tried to teach her.

“Again.”

The crack, the pain, the betrayal of her body bending to the torture. There was nothing he could do to her that hadn’t already been done. There were no more disappointments or disillusionments left to discover. She’d had her freedom, her home, her family, her country, her body, her mind, her memory taken from her at the will of men. Not monsters, not demons, just men, as human as herself, made of the same fragile flesh, precious blood, and brittle bone. They were all just as breakable. She had to be more than human to break them.

“Again.”

Her knees buckled to the pain, but the rope denied her the relief of giving her weight to the floor. This was the world that had taken the life of a frightened boy and broken him into the shape of a monster. This was the world that deserved the horror he repaid it. This was the world he had tried to prepare her to survive while sheltering her from it for so long. She understood that now. She understood her father’s love.

“Has this refreshed your memory yet, Ms. Valstad?”

It had.

The room came into blurry focus in a dreary and dimensionless smear of gray as she surfaced halfway from her delirium. The skin of her back burned and throbbed, sizzling along the nerves, and the leather held her tongue down against the powerful need to spit. Her ankles ached from pushing her toes down to lessen the pull of the rope until she wasn’t sure if that was any better than the ache it put into her joints to dangle. These things were all so fleeting and fickle, so empty beyond such simple pain and discomfort. There was nothing to this man, this rope, or even this whip. It was all so banal. There was nothing to fear.

Maier’s white wrist slid into her peripheral as he unbuckled the leather strap. Her jaw flexed when he removed it once more, that incessant ache something that would be there hours or maybe even days after the strap had been gone, but it would fade. This all would fade. One, two rotations of her mandible, then working the smaller muscles to spit out the froth that had pooled from her mouth. Clumsy, the spittle mostly joining the dribble down her chin, but everything was still in working order. He leaned forward, standing at her side, his face a pale beige smear in the corner of her vision as she kept her stare downward.

“Tell me anything you may recall regarding your recent captivity, please,” he politely requested again.

Her head hung weakly, a thread of drool dangling from her slackened lips as they twitched when she tried to form the words, but all that came out was a dry scrape across her vocal chords. He stepped closer, his body heat brushing against her cold sweat putting a bit of groan to her sounds in revulsion.

“How many men were there?” he asked. His voice buzzed in her teeth, but she could not let herself flinch away. “Or perhaps there was just one?”

“Ss— just…” she rasped, the rest of her dry whispers too quiet to be heard.
Maier leaned forward, his movement wafting over her. He was so close, too close, nearly touching her bared skin as he filled the entire left hemisphere of her vision. Every hair stood on end in a wave of revulsion when the material of his shirt grazed her chest.

“Just one. Describe him, please. Did he have any markings, scars, tattoos?”

“Ah… I… r’memberr…” she mumbled at the tail of a thin breath. She could map his position by the pressure of the air around him and his heat, almost hearing the bulk of him blocking the openness beyond where he stood. Too close, but not close enough. “Tch… ffn… ah…”

A shift in the air, the turn of his head, leading his ear close enough to her whispering mouth. The artificial fragrances of aftershave and soap were overpowering, but beneath that, she could smell the reek of his humanity. Skin and sweat, flesh and bone, temporary and tenuous. She caught his flesh between her teeth with a jerk of her hanging head, his reaction time too slow to avoid her jaw clamping down on a mound of cheek next to his mouth. His immediate response to pull away tugged her sharp teeth further into his skin and he leaned in instead, hissing in a gasp and grabbing onto her bare torso.

“AHH-AH! Ms. Valstad, please!” he grunted, his words warped by the harsh pull at the corner of his mouth.

The pressure she exerted into the bite crushed both the skin and subcutaneous tissue, breaking capillaries that would display bruises vibrantly on his whiteness. She considered bloodborne pathogens when that metallic bitterness made contact with the vulnerable mucous membranes of her mouth, but the probability of contracting disease did nothing to deter her from twisting her head to rip him wider. She could break his humanity to pieces and use his pain as her tool, as he had sought to do to her. She could feel that same indifference in reducing him this way, but she would not let her own violence reduce her in turn. This violence had meaning, emotion, and life. This was punishment for his deception in bringing her here instead of to her final fate and she would relish it passionately. He buckled and choked out a guttural shriek as she wrenched away from him with her prize of flesh stretching precariously between them. When the skin tore on his face, he stumbled away to brace himself in a huddle on the floor with his hand pressed against the bleeding wound. The snap of his flesh splitting loosed a great wave of relief that swept the tension from her body and cleansed her mind of the noise that rage had filled it with.

As she watched him pant through the pain she had given him, she could taste the sweetness that was vengeance among the raw blood and tissue that clung to her teeth. Perhaps her father had found something similar in the act of killing. She wondered, without the accompaniment of revulsion she’d expected with this thought, if perhaps she could now feel what Leif felt in killing. While there was no excitement in the likelihood that she would have to take another life, there was also no dread. A calm, neutral curiosity at the prospect had paved over that black pit of horror inside her at some point. A blur of motion rushed past her and she watched, surprised at how quickly her uncle descended upon him. She watched, her delirium clearing in shock as Vidar bludgeoned Maier with a heavy kick to his head that transitioned into stomping when the man crumpled onto his side.

“Stop-s-STOP! STOP!” she yelled as soon as she could get her throat to cooperate. “Don’t kill him!”

Vidar’s raised knee froze before it pushed his foot down into the unmoving man, his wild scowl turning to her as he snapped, “I don’t have a choice!”

“Yes, you do! You can still choose! Please, just stop!” she cried.

“Why?!” he snarled, turning from Maier and coming upon her in five wide steps to grip her neck and
growl out, “You want him alive to enslave us both?!”

His touch imparted the terror that had been so curiously absent under Maier’s much more brutal torture, but she couldn’t let him know what it was to kill. She’d seen it change Henrik, haunt him in the murder she knew tempted him the same way her father was so tempted. Perhaps the same way she was now tempted, as well. She couldn’t let him know what it was to kill, although there was another much less dire but no less important reason to prevent this murder. She needed Maier alive to be the one to deliver her to her father. She needed him to be the living proof of the truth that could free her father from his bondage to those that held him. She couldn’t explain that to Vidar, though, or he would surely kill him just to prevent that.

“You want them to send someone worse?” she snarled back, but her voice wavered under that instinctive drive to appease his hostility rather than draw its focus. She couldn’t bend to it now, no matter how the spark of his touch sapped the energy her violence had imbued in her, so she swallowed that impulse and maintained contact with those burning blue eyes. “If you kill him, they’ll kill you.”

“I’m not going to sit and wait for them to come,” he sneered, his hands sliding up to cup her jaw and disable her only point of movement. “They are going to… you will be forced to… We can run. We don’t have to be their pawns and we don’t have to die if they don’t find us.”

She caught the fear glimmering behind the hatred in his eyes and in the desperate curl of his fingers, her strong façade crumbling under the weight of her guilt as she asked, “What about Anders? And Henrik? They’ll go after them.”

“It’s only you that they want,” he argued.

“Then let them have me,” she said. The guilt constricted her chest and throat, making her voice tight and eyes burn with tears as she pleaded, “Let them have me! If you kill him, they’ll chase you, they’ll find you, and they’ll gut you! Please. Leave me here. Run. Run!”

His fingers slid into her sweat-dampened hair and the rage burning in his glare dimmed to a smoldering resolve that terrified her more than the violence of his wrath. This grim, firm resolve was so much more dangerous than anger. Anger at least imparted an unpredictability, but his will was fixed and focused. Her weakened legs trembled as he leaned down and kissed her wet lips possessively, smearing the blood of the man he believed to be their enemy on his mouth. Instead of pulling away after kissing her, he lingered, nuzzling his cheek against hers. The presence of such blatant affection from this cold and cruel man bewildered her into shock.

“You belong to us,” he reminded her firmly, evoking the horror and comfort that those words meant to her.

When he leaned in again, she returned his kiss until he pulled away and walked behind her, toward where she knew those horrible instruments were arranged. Her panicked breaths stirred her arrested mind back into active thought.

“Vidar? Vidar, what are you doing?” she asked, trying to turn but her legs could barely even cooperate enough to keep her up. The scrape of metal on metal scratched her brain. “Please, don’t do this. You don’t have to do this.”

The knife he held in his hand as he walked past her to Maier’s crumpled body was a small, cruelly curled blade.

“No…” she rasped, panic squeezing her lungs as he knelt next to the man. “Nothing is going to
change if you kill him! You don’t have to do this! Please, don’t!”

He leaned over him, his back turned to her so she couldn’t see what he was doing, but a movement
along the floor caught her eye. He didn’t respond to the warning she yelled before Maier’s arm shot
out and Vidar collapsed under the paralyzing effect of the stun gun she saw him jab into his side. The
burning agony in her left shoulder distracted her enough to tell her that she had nearly dislocated it in
her wild thrashing against the rope, but she couldn’t stop herself from pulling futilely as Maier
crawled atop her uncle and uncapped a syringe from his pocket. She had to get to him, had to save
him from that murderous maniac, but she’d let them tie her down to this spot. The enraged cry that
tore from her as he injected something into Vidar’s neck made Maier look up at her.

The sight of his mouth elongated into a one-sided Glasgow smile from where she’d ripped him was
made all the more gruesome as it opened wider to show his molars while he spoke, “Patience, Ms.
Valstad. I’ll come for you in just a moment.”

Though the grounds of the Marceau estate were extensive, there was no substituting freedom, even if
that freedom was squeezed into a narrow tunnel Leif had to duck through to fit. The catacombs of
the dead fed into a sprawling ossuary that extended far beyond and below the property, known only
to those who had acquired such knowledge as it had been passed down to them from those who
knew firsthand. Bjørn was among the few who knew of the tunnels that lied beyond, and so Leif
was among the yet fewer who still knew. As Bjørn had been a true believer in the old ways, Leif
was reminded of what he had to trade for that knowledge while he navigated the dim memories of
that day to find his way among the stones. While he reminisced about the trials, Rupert dragged the
body of the man who had followed them down to these narrow tunnels. All Rupert had needed to
acquire this knowledge was loyalty, but willpower and pain were not nearly as valuable as that rare
quality.

“We’re directly below the Seine river,” Leif said, his deep timbre echoing into the unending darkness
beyond their lantern light. “This tunnel has held since its construction in preparation for German
occupation in World War II. We might be the first men to walk this far into it in decades.”

“Well, that’s just right comfy,” Rupert muttered. “So, what ya mean is: it’s gone without inspection
for decades. Suppose this thing might collapse on us any minute?”

“Suppose it might, but what could you do about it?” Leif smiled as he stepped over a large jutting of
grout that had pushed through the curved concrete wall. He set the lantern down and reached over
the obstacle with open hands. “Pass him here, I’ll drag him for a bit.”

Rupert lifted the corpse by the shoulders, grunting with the effort, and frowned when Leif carried it
over the jut with ease. As he picked up the lantern when he climbed over after the corpse, he
groused, “Can’t see why we don’t just leave him down here, Old Scratch.”

“Rats.”

“What’s wrong?”

“No. Rats. Ossuaries are like pantries to rats as it is.” Leif readjusted his hold on the sagging corpse,
dragging it by its ankles through the silt and gravel instead of its shirtsleeves. “No need to invite them
in through the backdoor by leaving fresh meat about. Several of my own ancestors rest there, after
all.”
“Who’da thought a demon-blooded Valstad would be so sentimental?” Rupert smirked.

Leif chuckled in amusement at what a ridiculous joke that was, then blinked in surprise at realizing that it wasn’t a joke at all. His actions and thoughts had not been those of the rational and practical man he had thought himself still to be. That rational and practical man would be poring over plans and crafting contingencies in the effort to acquire power for Ouroboros, not ducking through subterranean tunnels on his way to search out his daughter. There was no reason for him to do any of this aside from his own unquestioned want. In fact, it was all very unreasonable and completely lacking in practicality. Had his uncle or father known what he was walking away from, they would throttle him for his foolishness. If he were at all logical, he would simply begin the breeding process again and start anew on carrying on their legacy, but he couldn’t bring himself to even consider it. He didn’t even need to consider it before; he simply knew it to be his duty and had conceived and raised Simone by that duty.

Unbeknownst to him, however, he had changed. All that he had done to groom devotion and attachment in his daughter had also called forth a response in him, creating something he hadn’t ever truly had before. Something beyond logic and reason, beyond duty and obligation. As he continued to advance into the unending shadow ahead of him and leave more and more shadow in his wake, he came to understand exactly what that something was. In the love that had so unexpectedly sprouted from the seed of curiosity she had planted in him when she had met his lustful stare six years ago, the fruit it had borne into his life was purpose.

The sound of water falling in heavy, splattering drops woke Vidar from his dreamless sleep, but the soft sound of a female voice opened his eyes to the dim yellow light pouring through his bedroom door from the hallway. He drifted on the edge of consciousness for what might have been several seconds or several minutes, just listening to that voice and the patter of water. While he tipped over that edge, he dreamt briefly of those whispers drawing nearer, of breath brushing over his bare skin and fingers ghosting gently through his hair. In this dream of such caring tenderness, he opened his eyes again and saw his niece leaning over him, but he was not in his bedroom. Beyond the pale gray of her irises was the wide expanse of a pale gray sky.

“Good morning, Sir,” she said, her voice as warm and soft as her smile. She brushed his hair away from his temple, her gentle touch bringing the smell of blood. “Are you waking up now?”

His brow furrowed as his foggy mind worked to translate her words and form an appropriate response. These weeks of rigorous study of the English language had not yet brought him to the point where he could effortlessly conjure full sentences without first translating them in his head. In working his mind, it sharpened, clearing some of that fog until his effort to answer her question was suspended in a strange suspicion. He blinked, turning his gaze from her lovely mouth to the trees that encroached at the edges of his vision, then followed them to their wooded surroundings. Despite the fantastical setting and the impossibility of this forest nymph that had taken Simone’s form, he had the oddest suspicion that he was not dreaming.

“Simone?” he rasped. His throat was so dry. “What are... Where am I?”

“We’re still here,” she answered, enigmatically as a dream should, “but don’t worry. We’re safe. Whenever you’re ready, we can leave this place.”

He could feel the scratchy texture of the woven blanket from his car trunk rolled around him, the unyielding and cold ground beneath him, and her warmth tucked next to him. It was all so vivid. He
looked down the torn neckline of her blouse, the girlish ribbon dangling ruined and lopsided to bare her where the shirt would not close, all the way down. The simple desire to feel the softness of that exposed skin drew his hand up and her smile faded as he touched her chest. That wasn’t how she usually responded in his dreams. She placed her hand over his wandering fingers to stop him and he looked down to see the rusted brown of dried blood caked under her short nails.

“I’m sorry, I… Just, please, not here…” she muttered.

The blood under her nails. Blood. The blood seeping from the long stripes he’d cut into her back with the whip. The blood gushing from Maier’s Glasgow grin, the most expressive smile the man had ever worn. He’d held the knife to his throat, ready to cut themselves free of him for good, but the blood had not come. He didn’t kill Maier. This wasn’t a dream. This was a nightmare.

Vidar grabbed onto her bruised and cut up wrist, squeezing pain into her until she winced as he demanded, “Where is he?”

“He’s gone,” she answered, breathless and cowering. “He’s not going to hurt you anymore.”

“Where?”

He squeezed harder, earning a whimpering yelp from her as she grabbed onto his arm with her free hand pleadingly. Then, panting through the pain, she brought her glare up to him and he nearly startled at what he saw in that burning silver. Who he saw.

With the same firm coldness to her inflection as Leif, she answered, “Somewhere you don’t have to worry about.”
Chapter 65

Vidar wasn’t used to not knowing what to do. Even if his decision was to do nothing, he was always confident in the thought process that led him there. What knowledge he lacked could be supplemented by inference gathered by context or relevant experience, or at least assurance that more information would soon be acquired to build on. He had no context or relevant experience with this, and the outlook of acquiring any information seemed grim. What he had was insufficient data and an insane creature of a girl sitting at the edge of his bed, telling him not to do anything in response to the sudden end of the sociopathic maniac who had held control of his life for the past two months. He knew just enough to know that he knew nothing. That was why he was packing his suitcases with his bolt action hunting rifle loaded and ready within reach.

“Where will you go?” she asked, fiddling with the broken ribbon of her blouse like a guilty child.

“We are going anywhere they won’t find us,” he answered. “Stop that.”

Her hands fell to fold politely in her lap without hesitation or even a scornful look. Whatever hellion she may have been when she had answered Maier’s questioning with vitriol and violence was nothing like the meek little thing before him now, but he couldn’t trust that this was really her either. He didn’t know what to think of her anymore.

“I can’t leave,” she said. “And I can’t stay with you.”

Vidar wrinkled his nose in irritation and revulsion at the reminder of their dreadful use of her, sneering, “You are just going to let them have you after what happened last night?”

“If I don’t, they will punish you for my disobedience. Besides…” she paused, and he could see how tight her hands nervously squeezed together. “What they want is not any different than what you’ve done. It’s not a problem for me anymore. You’ve done a good job at being my handler.”

He froze in the middle of folding a shirt into a suitcase, his widened eyes drifting to her in shock. She wouldn’t look at him, her carefully blank stare fixed to the floor and her posture tense and rigid. Anger seeped in past the dissolving wall of shock in him and he slid the suitcases off the bed and onto the floor, the heavy thumps of them hitting the hardwood making her breaths come quicker and her hands clench tighter.

“Let me make some things clear,” he said as he stepped closer. She didn’t resist him when he pushed her by her shoulders to lie face-down on the bed, didn’t fight him as he moved to straddle her thighs.

“I am not your ‘handler’. I did not do a ‘good job’ to train you for their use. What he wants is nothing like what I’ve done.”

She didn’t resist him sliding her skirt up or lifting her ass with a yank on her hips, but her hands curled into fists at the sound of him unzipping his fly.

“I am your master. I am training you to better serve me. What I want is what I take from you, because you are mine to take from.”

He reached over and pulled the tube of lube and a short length of nylon rope from his nightstand drawer. The skin of her wrists was rubbed raw and bruised, but she still did nothing to resist him as he tied them together behind her back. The trembling in her hands extended to the shiver he could hear in her deepening breaths, this evidence of her fear thrilling him as much as the long thin welts from the whip striping her beautiful ass. He was already impatiently hard by the time he knotted the
“If you ever speak like one of them again…”

A whimper shook out of her when he slicked the pretty little hole tucked in the cleft of her backside with a generous glob of cold lube.

“… you will be punished. I am choosing to be lenient this time. Keep that in mind, little bitch,” he finished as he freed his erection from its constricted confines.

“I’m sorry,” she shuddered when he pressed the tip of his cock to her asshole.

“Show me how sorry you are and fuck yourself on this dick, sweetheart,” he smirked.

He gripped the base of his cock to steady it against her first fumbling attempts to push back against it, smearing the clear goop up her cleft when she completely missed. All his dread and uncertainty melted away as he watched and felt her grind ineffectively on him. She was really trying her best and he had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at how adorable it was. This inept little lamb was nothing like the ferocious she-wolf that bit and tore at a man only hours earlier. This was his sweet slave as he remembered her; helplessly lost and hopelessly naive, so very malleable to his desires. The softness of her flesh sliding against him made the expectation of sex unbearably anticipated, so he gave her a bit of guidance by pressing the tip of his dick firmly at the yielding center of her pucker. She pushed against it and that tight ring slowly opened over him, making her gasp out a startled grunt at the intrusion. Without any warmup to open her, she was impossibly tight, that muscle throbbing and twitching to accommodate his girth into where it was so blatantly unnatural to receive it.

“Does it hurt, little bitch?” he smirked.

“Y-yes… a little…” she whimpered into the bedding.

“Good. Keep going.”

She struggled just to keep her muscles relaxed as she pushed again, a high whine building in her throat as she stretched around his tip further until the ridge of his head popped through that band. The warmth inside was notably hot, as though her fever hadn’t left her in all this time, making him sigh in pleasure as it enveloped him. His impatience to ram the rest of the way into her and fuck her asshole to a less uncomfortable level of tightness was mollified by the titillating show of her struggling to fit him inside. The short, huffing breaths, the sweat beginning to shine on her golden skin, the agonizingly slow push to take him in mere millimeters at a time; it was all so enthralling.

Her dainty approach to taking a cock up her ass wasn’t what he’d sold his soul to Maier for, however. Whatever she’d done with that sociopathic maniac wasn’t enough to make up for all that. The horrors he’d learned, the madness that had fractured his mind, the violence that had befallen him and his brothers for having merely brushed the truth that had been concealed from them; there was nothing that could possibly make any of this ruination and terror worth it, but she was a start. He pressed into her, too eager to keep up this slow pace, and relished her astonished gasp with a swell of his cock and his ego as he slid into her a few more centimeters. He held back from bucking into her too quickly, wanting full use of her ass for later. This luxurious friction was something he wanted readily available to him at any given time.

“Oh, holy mother of fuck…” he muttered, straining to suppress a groan that leaked out of him in a long sigh at the tight heat he sunk into.

To her credit, she took the slide of his cock considerably well, forcing herself to relax and breathe as
he rocked into her. The affection that expanded with an ache of joy in his chest wasn’t a feeling he expected, but it pulled his smile into a grin as he watched the mesmerizing sight of that tiny hole stretching around his shaft.

When he finally hilted in her, he stroked her haunches in a fond caress and leaned closely over her to whisper, “You understand now, yes? Wherever we go, this cock is where you belong. Welcome home, sweetheart.”

He could feel her wince at his words, then shudder through the tension that constricted her muscles in her already tight ass, making him dig his nails into her hips and hiss through this overstimulation. It wasn’t until her second shudder made her cringe and huff out a quavering whine that he realized she was crying. A cruel thrill worked its way up alongside his strange pride in her and he slowly rocked against the nearly uncomfortable grip deep in her ass. She was so easy to read. That need for love, belonging and acceptance was so simple to manipulate. All he needed to do was teach her that this was the only way she could earn love and her desperation for it was all that was needed to blind her to deception. Though his skin itched to tear off their clothing and feel her bare softness slide under him, he was aware enough of the damage he’d wreaked on her back to refrain from exposing her just yet. He shook off that feeling that dangled too close to guilt at how much further Maier had made him hurt her than even he had ever preferred to go.

“You did so well taking the whip,” he cooed into her neck, rocking in her with just slightly more force. “All that time alone with Henrik, you must love him to protect him so devotedly. Do you think he would do the same for you?”

For a long while, only the creaking of the bed and her ragged panting answered amid the rhythm of their flesh, then she muttered thickly, “He should never have to.”

“Oh, my, you really do love him, don’t you?” he chuckled. “Don’t worry—I’m not jealous. You were made to love us, after all.”

She flinched and shuddered when he slid a hand beneath her, but as much as she tried to staunch her reactions, he could feel her body respond to his fingertips grazing her clit. The wetness that had slicked her there revealed the depravity he knew she couldn’t help but succumb to and he rewarded her lustfulness by stroking that inflamed bud in a rhythm matching his thrusts. The response this pulled from her was almost instant, making her gasp and push back against him, that uncomfortable tension waning just enough for him to start fucking her with the force he needed to build towards release. It would take considerable training to get her to the point they could do this without extensive stretching beforehand. He chuckled with the glee that prospect of training brought and nuzzled her neck in a whim of affection.

“You love this,” he whispered tauntingly into her ear. “Don’t try to deny it. Heh... Well, maybe not this specifically, but you love serving your purpose to us. No more pretending, no more searching for where you belong in the world... Does it not feel good to finally let yourself be what you really are?”

“Yes, Sir...” she whimpered, her voice small and thin. Defeated.

“Good girl.”

He kissed up her neck to the side of her face, the taste of her salt on her smooth skin reaching his awareness before he realized what he was doing. He didn’t care to restrain himself anymore. The pressure of his arousal throbbing through his pounding pulse ticked up bit by bit with each rolling thrust into her until his pace reached a ruthlessness that more matched his mounting need. The sweet sounds of the panting grunts he knocked out of her, his increasingly ragged breaths, the creak of the
bed, and the wet slide and collision of their flesh filled his ears in a beautiful symphony of sex. The scent of her sweat, her arousal, her blood and the spice that was simply Simone filled his discerning nose in a heady bouquet that he inhaled greedily.

He gripped her hair and turned her to face him as much as her flexible joints allowed, taking a moment to admire her lovely, pained face before leaning in to taste her kiss. A spark ignited a tingle that fizzled and buzzed through him at the press of their lips, a spark she apparently shared as she moaned at the slide of his tongue. He groaned into their kiss at her taste, that mysterious and alluring something literally and figuratively at the tip of his tongue, as she flexed and pulsed around him in her orgasm. That she would come, he had no doubt, knowing himself more than proficient in the ministrations of his fingers at her clitoris, but that she would happen to come when he kissed her made him feel a rush of triumph. His slave was adorably pathetic in her need for emotional connection and affection. As she gasped against his mouth and arched her back, he extended her climax by rubbing in tighter, harder circles against her throbbing clit to encourage her need and delight in the feel of her tightening rhythmically on him.

That delight tipped easily into the overwhelming imminence of his own release as she still pulsed from hers, that deep grip inside her rubbing his sensitive glans with each thrust until he couldn’t hold back. As that tension in his sac snapped in a surge of profound ecstasy, he pushed hard against that grip and growled out his pleasure. Spilling in her brought a fervent gratification along with the thrill of claiming her in this most primal method and he threw himself into that sensation without thought. This was good. This was right. Ejaculating in his niece was suddenly the most natural and expected thing in the world. Euphoria descended over all else, drowning his brain and his body in a potent hormonal cocktail, and he smirked blearily at biology’s dirtiest trick to get him to bond with this perfect mate. Pushing aside the greedy tendrils of that illusion, he slid out of her and rolled onto his back, exhausted by his orgasm and the sheer physical fatigue of all that had happened.

The rare and blessed promise of sleep weighed heavily on his eyelids before being interrupted by Simone’s timidly half-muttered, “Sir... could you please untie me now?”

His brow wrinkled in brief confusion until he remembered that she’d only been so cooperative because he’d bound her. He’d forgotten this was rape. His hands were clumsy as he undid the quick knot, then shaky when he saw the fresh blood that smeared the abused skin of her wrists beneath the rope. The fog of hormones and fatigue did well to stave the burgeoning calamity of thought just below his consciousness as he pulled her close, instinctively seeking her softness and warmth. He was asleep the moment her body molded so perfectly to his, his mouth tucked against the scarred crook of her neck.

The sea stretched on in all directions, only stopping where it met the infinite sky in the straight horizon. Seated atop of one of the rows of the shipping containers, Leif focused on his breathing and let his discomfort with this wide-open space work through him. Months of being sequestered in a mansion had made his mild agoraphobia worsen to the point that his first look out onto the ocean had made him dizzy, so he forced himself to ruthlessly pursue the notion that he would fall endlessly into that open sky to prove just how impractical it was. Fear did not heed practicality, however, and though he knew this, he held onto the belief that at least exposure might lessen the anxiety that churned and clenched his gut. Whereas the wide horizons of Vermont had trees and hills to disrupt that gaping openness, out here, there was nothing. Open below into those dark depths, open above into that endless sky. Nowhere to hide, nothing to grasp onto.
He turned his mind away from the small comfort of the solid metal beneath him and forced his guard down until there was nothing that separated him from his fear, then began to meditate on that distortion inside of him. If he could not control his fear, then he could not control his mind, then he could not control his existence. He immersed himself in the open, allowed it into him as what it was rather than what fear attached to it, and then moved towards the fear instead of away from it. This was the process he worked through each time he awoke to find himself still alive to get through another day, only to refresh the process upon somehow awakening yet again. If fear itself was his daughter’s crucible, then living was his. At the undisciplined wandering of his mind to the now constantly nearby thoughts of his daughter, he broke from his meditation in a sigh. He was clearly no Buddhist monk.

“Four hours ‘til Kiel, Old Scratch!” Rupert yelled from below.

“Thank you, Rupert!” he called down over the edge of the freight container to where his ally stood along the railing. “Would you be open to joining me for supper once we hit port? I know of an acceptable Italian restaurant nearby!”

“No thanks! He who sups with the Devil should have a long spoon!”

“To keep your distance, or to steal from his plate?”

“Neither! I’ve got a mark in Kiel, so I’ll see you back on this ship for Oslo!”

“You’re still taking contracts?”

“Murder is a good alibi in our line of work! Enjoy your supper, Old Scratch!”

Leif watched as his fellow hunter, a man who called him old when he bore deeper wrinkles in his pallid English brow, walked along the rail to leave him to his fear once more. He leaned back on the metal and kept his eyes open to the menacing sky the pulled at the ripple in his pulse, but he could not stop his mind from wandering to his daughter. He wondered if she was afraid right then, and if she was, what was pulling at the ripple in her pulse. A different will sopped up that bit of fear in him as he chased that stray thought, growing weeds of emotions from the fertile soil of his anger. For too long, he had been kept from his girl, first by the plotting of the Marceaus and then by the necessary circumstance as fugitive and figurehead. It was by his own impatience and the instinctive call to seek her out that had driven him to this cargo ship routed to his long-forgotten homeland. He was still unaccustomed to such spontaneity of emotion and thought, but the matter of his child had long since rent control from his grasp and placed it in a will beyond his own. The idea that anything could be terrorizing her that wasn’t his own purposeful doing brought a protectiveness in him that was more savage and demanding than his deepest bloodlust. In her presence, these wild, unruly whims could hold their own logic and sense. In her absence, they could tear him apart in how they clawed away at the careful order of what he once was supposed to be. He’d never felt diminished by it, though. The monster her effect had crafted was sharper and stronger than the machine he had been conditioned to be.

So, he would be returning to his homeland not as the boy who had been taken from it nor as the man he had disguised himself as for so long, but as the monster that love had made of him. He stared up at the boundless sky and bared his fangs in a smile.

With a painstaking slowness, Simone slid from her uncle’s embrace, listening to the evenness of his
breaths to guide her movement. It was difficult to be careful when so much of her was limited by pain. Her shoulders and arms trembled to support her pushing away from him even just inch by inch and her legs would not listen to her command to stand when she finally slunk to the floor. She crawled on her knees and knuckles to the doorframe, climbing up the wood until she stood slumped against it. The shift in gravity leaked his semen down her bare legs, joining the crusted trails of his come from earlier. She grabbed the rifle and pulled it up by the muzzle as she leaned against the wall, the cold steel in her hands heavier than she’d imagined as she’d watched Vidar load three long brassy bullets into the top of it.

It was especially front-heavy, she was surprised to learn, as she held it with the butt cradled against the front of her shoulder and peered down the long barrel. She’d always thought rifles would be more evenly-weighted, or just heavier in the back by the way she’d seen it held like so. She’d seen enough to know how to shoot it and now, thanks to Vidar’s unwitting demonstration, how to load it. The safety was already off and there was a bullet ready in the chamber. Knowing that had made her hyperaware of the rifle with a nervous flutter in her pulse, even throughout the fear that had already been keeping her blood fast and thick. Lining up the rear and front sights to see through the singular narrow eye of the muzzle, that nervous flutter expanded to pulse in her chest like a moth beating and burning itself against the light of a hot glass bulb.

Anyone she looked at through this snug little space down the long path of the barrel could be killed with a simple squeeze of her finger. Vidar’s face, so much less frightening in sleep, fit perfectly in the frame of the sights. She hooked her index finger on the trigger, applying just the lightest feather touch to the smooth little mechanism. The moth in her chest beat furiously against the searing light, the powder scales of its wings smudging the glass. She worried that he would hear it and wake. There was no time to delay, however. She slung the strap across her back, holding the rifle across her torso to prevent it from moving as she bent and gingerly picked up the box of rounds from his open suitcase, then grabbed his jacket, wallet and car keys as she limped out of the house.

Like the rifle, her experience with operating a motor vehicle was limited to observation. With her mental status, the prospect of learning to drive was never even broached and being a non-driver in a borough like Brooklyn was not out of the ordinary, but she’d always wanted to at least try it. Even just the ability to one day be drive out of that congested, chaotic city to glide along the freeways to places she’d never been before, to go where she wanted according to her own schedule, was a distant dream she’d kept alive. The rumble of the engine igniting, the lurch of backing over the curb, and then the scramble for the seatbelt she’d forgotten to buckle were all enough to fill her with giddiness as she borrowed Vidar’s car and somewhat fulfilled that longtime dream.

“Ten and two, ten and two, ten and two…” she muttered excitedly to herself as she gripped the steering wheel tightly and put just a little more pressure on the gas pedal. The car picked up speed and she slammed on the brakes in a fearful reflex, her heart pounding and her lungs panting. She swallowed, steeled herself, and eased her bare foot slowly onto the gas pedal again. “You got this, Simmy. You’re a natural. Maybe not a natural driver, but you’re a natural something. Car thief? Yes. The speed limit is probably more than fifteen miles an hour, grandma. Do they have speed limits here? Do they have traffic cops? Shit. Fuck it. Fuck. Shut up.”

The car staggered and crawled to a more respectable 25 miles per hour that she monitored with frequent glances between the speedometer and the road until she screeched to a halt at the stop before the first turn she knew she had to make. She waited for the car that was coming from a far distance away to pass, then the next, then she was idling for five minutes as this pattern continued until she finally worked up the courage to turn. There was no time to delay. Her spine rigid and aching muscles tense, she forced her foot off the brake and very slowly took the turn, only accelerating when she had straightened onto the road. Whether she liked it or not, this was going to be a learning experience.
As cars sped past to get around her cowardly pace, she was utterly unnerved, but also thankful for the thorough distraction. If she had the opportunity to focus on her thoughts at all, this would have been much more unpleasant. Between learning how to drive and reconstructing the way in reverse through memory, she had no room to consider anything else. For once, the anxiety that quickened her pulse and filled her belly with lead had a very identifiable and solid source. There was no mingling of conflicting desires and horrors, no confusion, no betrayal. She managed to park in the lot of a convenience store without hitting anything, though she took up the space of two spots and the car was only two-thirds in.

After stuffing Vidar’s coat pockets with snacks, a travel size sewing kit, several tubes of what she hoped was antibiotic ointment, and a bar of soap, she grabbed as many liter jugs of water as she could carry and walked out without paying. When the clerk ran out after her yelling something she couldn’t and didn’t care to understand, she put the jugs down carefully on the concrete and took hold of the rifle slung over her back. The clerk tripped as he ran back into the store. She didn’t feel good or bad about it, only minorly inconvenienced as she had to bend her aching back to pick up the jugs and continue limping to the car. There was no time to delay.

When she finally turned onto the dirt road that was nothing more than a brief pause in the thick line of trees and brush, that giddy and focused anxiety left her to the dread and anger of returning to the cabin. The car jerked and shivered over the unpaved road until she turned off into the driveway she knew she would miss if she didn’t know what she was looking for. There was nothing on the outside of that awful little building that gave away anything amiss, but she held the rifle ready as she turned Maier’s key in that deceptively simple lock.

Things were seldom what they seemed. So much of her life had been based on tricks and deceptions. Even beneath the lies, the truth was rarely true. She hated that she had to deceive and trick to get anywhere in this world. So much was illusory, vague, and nebulous where she had expected it to be solid and final. Not this time. This time, she would squeeze the truth out from the lies, purify it, distill it until it was real.

With the rifle aimed to where she could hear the scrape and rattle of chains along the smooth concrete floor, she removed her hand from the gun just long enough to flick on the dim lights. There was no time to delay. She had to begin interrogating Maier while he was still lucid and alive.
Chapter 66

It had been the comforting warmth and relief of finally having his beloved slave in his possession, safe and close, that had pulled Vidar into the sleep that had so often evaded him and rarely heeded even the prescription sedatives on the worst nights. It was the cold settling over where she’d lain that woke him now. His long, flat hand smoothed over the bedsheets as his brain, dazed from the abrupt reintroduction to natural sleep, slowly and patiently collected thought. The idea of her absence occurred to him as a sensation of loss he could not place, as though he’d just woken from a lonesome dream he could no longer recall anything of but sorrow. With the drag of his hand, his shoulder and arm ached a bit from handling the wide sudden motion of the bullwhip, that ache bleeding memory into his thoughts that brought something sharper than what he had allowed himself to feel before. Guilt pierced through that ache, magnifying it, spreading it like a chemical burn upon his mind. Anger washed over him to drown that guilt, to cover it in a balm of blame toward anything and anyone other than himself that had put the whip in his hand and tore muffled screams from her when he could not soften the impact of the cowhide cutting her flesh. He could apply anger to anywhere, but guilt only went inward to where he could not bring himself to look. Consciousness roared up from that balm of anger and all at once, his mind was a bustling, hot, overcrowded calamity of thought that converged to one sharp point: Simone was gone.

Vidar stumbled out of the empty, cold bed that was still damp with their sweat and sex, her scent stirring up from the sheets with his abrupt movements. The freshness of her sweat clinging to him and mingling with his own riled him further. He’d miscalculated, misjudged her obedience to be the same as what had kept her in Anders’ house even throughout all that they’d done to her there, but she’d escaped from here at the first opportunity. That she would remain so complacent with the circumstances set for her by him was an assumption he had made from some silly idea of loyalty she had toward him. She’d kept what he’d done, no matter how vile, a secret, but secrets were not solely kept out of loyalty.

He tore through his house and only found what was missing: his coat, his wallet, his keys, his car, and more alarmingly, his rifle and ammunition. A chill froze each notch of his spine in a rapid flash as he considered how the girl he had freshly whipped and raped had taken a loaded rifle in her small hands while he had napped, completely unaware. While she had not killed him the way his brain automatically completed that envisioned scene, he hated that she had wounded him by leaving. That she could wound him. There was never a place for tenderness between them, but he’d allowed the beginnings of such delusions to take root under a mindless pursuit of unmonitored desire and rampant emotion. Her submission, surrender, secrecy, and servitude were not devotion no matter how effective Leif’s conditioning was, just like his misguided affection towards her was not love. It had never been love and it could never be love. Scorched earth permitted nothing to grow; not the deeply buried seeds of guilt, not the invasive spores of delusion. No, there was nothing there to wound but his pride. There was nothing else that could be.

He sat hunched over his knees in his unlit living room, breathing hard from his frustrated and fruitless search while he tried to move his thoughts away from the aggravating depth of disturbance her leaving had inflicted and instead focused on what to do. Maier was dead, and with him, Vidar was either free or in more dire circumstance with the people that maniac had been working for. Either case had led him to the same conclusion that disappearing was the most rational choice, but now that she was gone, he found himself stuck. The plan was still rational, yet he was not. Even though she had betrayed him and would likely betray him again, he could not vanish without her. He had to find her.

From all that Maier had told him, the police could not be trusted. As easy as reporting his car stolen
would make this, he could not have the cops finding Simone only to have her delivered to Leif’s captors for the hefty bounty they’d placed on capturing her alive. How Maier had gotten to her first when she’d made such a public spectacle of herself was pure luck of him being in the area and alerted to the live feed of her thrashing that man in a café on social media. Vidar could only hope she wouldn’t do something so garishly ostentatious again. No, he would have to do this with as little exposure as possible. He’d need to do this himself.

He leaned back into the couch, his aching shoulders sinking into the leather cushions as he speculated. As far as he knew, Simone had no knowledge of Norway, its language or customs, its geography or towns. She had not associated with anyone outside of their family here. She was hostile towards men, shy around women, and mistrustful of strangers in general. If she’d gone anywhere, it would either be to seclusion or to the familiar. Henrik had offered her both. Vidar had no knowledge of the particulars of their arrangement, but her skin had lightened considerably in the time she’d been in his older brother’s care, unquestionably from a lack of sunlight that should have been plentiful as summer lengthened the days. She’d been kept indoors, safe, tucked away somewhere that had slathered her in Henrik’s scents. He didn’t see any chafe marks that implied she’d been tethered, though. A stray bitterness cut across his analysis when he considered that perhaps she’d favored Henrik to have stayed with him willingly, but she had ended up leaving in the end, barefoot and unprepared to handle the outside world. Having left only to find torture, it was not unthinkable that she would run back to Henrik.

His brother’s selfishness to keep her all to himself while he had become enslaved to Maier and Anders had wasted away in emotional turmoil gnawed at him, no matter the hypocrisy in his intending to vanish with her immediately. He wouldn’t have kept it secret or refused either of his brothers if they wanted to join, though. She belonged to all of them, after all, and he was merely doing what was necessary to facilitate their possession of her. The fantasies he harbored of being in a place where their relation was not public knowledge, where they could exist as they were instead of as they should, were only additional motivations. Being able to kiss her mouth or hold her close without worry of what anyone might think was only a minor extra. Seeing her unborn child into the world was an unexpected addition to that fantasy, one that sobered him from his distraction.

He quickly stood, unnerved by that intrusive thought, and walked rapidly to fetch his cell phone before walking outside. That wasn’t something he wanted, not at all. He’d never wanted to be a father, let alone to an inbred abomination that could belong to any of them. That was Anders’ bizarre fantasy, one that repulsed him from the moment he’d confessed it during one of his bad spells. He was just agitated and still in shock over the dreadful news of her pregnancy, letting his mind get ahead of him in digesting that idea. He shoved those thoughts down, burying them to join his guilt as he focused on more urgent matters like how he was supposed to go confront Henrik without a car. Going to Anders while Simone was out there still saturated in his scents would be too troublesome to explain without revealing more of the truth than he had ever intended. That, and he would likely try to kill Henrik if he found out that particular truth. No, it was not worth tormenting Anders with her return only to destroy him once more with her disappearance. He scrolled through his contacts, coming again to the same one that had announced she was through with him after each time she’d broken that vow when in need of a good fuck. He’d have to shower before calling Odette over, though.

“Eat,” Simone insisted, shoving a chunk of some sort of semi-sweet bun with raisins in it near Maier’s mangled mouth. He was naked but for the metal she’d left him in, his arms bound together in front of him in chains, his wrists held in the very same handcuffs he’d undone to better suspend her
from the rope in the ceiling. His legs were similarly hobbled and tied to the iron collar from his ankles with a chain that kept him bent, making lying curled on his side the most sustainable position. This was how she’d left him, the only difference now being that he was conscious enough to hold his privates in a show of modesty she thought so odd. There wasn’t much else he could reach with his hands, though, and she knew the body’s want to do anything when so much had been limited to it. She knew that too well.

“No, thank you,” he responded, his words slightly mumbled by how still he kept his mouth as he spoke. Whether that was due to the tremendous swelling of the extension she’d made to one side of his mouth or to the pain of it, she couldn’t tell. This man did not react to pain as she was accustomed to witnessing in others. His dead eyes, the whites of them red and the skin around them pink and puffy, flicked to her before he offered, “Perhaps after you’re done with me, should you still be so generous and I still be alive, I would like to eat. Whatever I may consume now would likely be vomited in the meantime and this wound needs no further encouragement towards infection.”

She grunted her acknowledgment and took the morsel into her own mouth. Living with Henrik had brought her out of practice in starvation and she’d since found herself growing hungrier in even shorter times than before Vermont, so she ate the bun quickly as she watched Maier’s vacant expression interrupt with the occasional blink.

“You’re not as talkative as you once were,” he mentioned, then just as airily continued, “It’s not an uncommon trait in victims of sexual abuse. Does your resentment of your uncles’ entitlement to your body cause you significant emotional distress when they address you as ‘slave’ and rape you?”

Ash filled her mouth and soured her belly. She placed the remainder of the bun in its plastic wrapper as she calmly threatened, “I can show you how it feels.”

To her revulsion, an intrigued glimmer shined in the flat space of his eyes as he asked, “Is that why you’ve chained me and left me nude? I didn’t know you felt that way for me, Ms. Valstad, and I must say I’m surprised. I’m not even related to you.”

Disgust and aggravation simmered over her reluctance to what she had to do to break this man. She let it fuel her will to open the box containing the soap bar and lather her hands with a bit of bottled water before reaching her sudsy fingers to his face. He flinched, more at her touch than the pain it caused, then gagged at the fingers she shoved into his mouth.

“If you keep saying that shit, I’ll have to keep washing it from your mouth,” she warned as he jerked and groaned.

In truth, she knew that his wound did indeed need no further encouragement towards infection, and though it was almost certainly infected, she’d already gone through the trouble of stealing soap. The tissue in his mouth was soft and slick in a way she didn’t expect from this inhuman man, disturbing her that any part of him could be so yielding to her intrusion. And yield he did, opening his mouth to her even as he shuddered and groaned against the agony of burning fingers rubbing stinging soap into that elongated grin. Her stomach turned at his debauched submission to her hateful touch, curling her lip in a sneer of disgust at what she had to do.

There was no need to feign the loathing in her tone as she said, “I wish you didn’t deceive me, Maier. It really hurt my feelings, what you did to me here. But I’m a forgiving person and I don’t hate you for it, so I’m going to give you the opportunity to buy your life back. All I want is your honesty. Do you think that’s a fair price?”

She slid her hand out of his mouth and the suds still clinging to her skin were stained pink. A shaky sigh crawled out of his gaping, wet mouth and he nodded.
“Thank you,” she muttered as she opened one of the water jugs.

He flinched and choked when she poured it into and over his mouth, rinsing off her hand over his face before rising from her knelt position. The cart was still stocked with its gruesome array of tools and instruments, but she was only there for the box of nitrile gloves. She glanced at the syringe, its astonishingly long needle more menacing since watching it sink deep in her abdomen, and she wondered again at what Maier had extracted from her. The little vial was nestled in a liquid nitrogen cryogenic container on the floor, a thing that looked more like a large thermos if she didn’t know better from the advanced biology class of her brief high school experience. She decided to ask him about it if she got what she needed from him and he was still conscious enough to answer. As she opened the sewing kit and fortified the end of the thread by dragging it between her sucking lips, she hoped she maintained this clarity enough to remember to ask. She could feel his eyes on her as she threaded the needle, his taunting amusement and delirium rolling off him like heat radiates from an open oven.

“You are putting a lot of effort into fixing something you are just going to break,” he rasped through a throat thick with pain and laughter.

She bent the needle into a curved hook, her limited focus on bending it into the proper shape distracting her enough to speak her mind without filter as she muttered, “I put a lot of effort into making that mark. It’s mine. I will take care of what’s mine if I want to. I will take care of what’s mine and I don’t need your cracker-ass opinion on it, haole.”

She forgot to feel unsettled by the surfacing of her silent inner narrative, only blinking in mild confusion at the unmonitored words leaking freely from her mind. Her control was already slipping. Maybe it had to slip for her to get through this.

“Don’t fidget,” she scolded, her mother’s voice coming from a place and time far away from here as she pulled his head into her lap.

His wet hair clung over his eyes, but she could see his discomfort and nervousness from this intimate contact between the cracks. He did not fidget and barely winced as she put her gloved fingers in his mouth to guide the needle she sank into his cheek. The hook curved easily to meet the flesh on the other side of the jagged and swollen divide, but it was slow work from the strangeness of this scenario. She couldn’t put any stock in her judgment on strangeness, however. Things that had seemed strange did not appear to bother others and things that seemed perfectly natural or rational had made others balk. What was happening was all necessary and all necessary things contained their own merit for being. Maier, ever polite even when rude, remained obediently silent and still as she steadied the side of her hand against his face and sewed shut what she had opened. It was not a pretty suture, nor would it heal prettily if he got the chance to heal at all, but it was hers and she hummed a song into it as she worked. Like the crack in the mirror in Vermont, like her teeth marks still engraved at the base of his neck, this was her creation and it held something of her in it. The gaping gash held a moment of her vengeful wrath and the jagged line she now sewed together held her song. Knotting the thread at the edge of his natural mouth, she trimmed off the excess with the tiny scissors from the kit and inspected her mark.

“Your face has some character now,” she smiled. He blinked from under his veil of hair in response. There was something eerily familiar about a silent head cradled against her. Something eerie and unfinished. “You can talk. There’s a lot you need to tell me. Will you need any encouragement, or can I count on you to answer with the honesty your life depends on?”

“What would you like to know?” he asked.

She frowned at his avoiding her question, her heart and stomach sinking under the heavy weight of
“You’re all going to rot in Hell.”

Vidar sighed, pressing two fingers to his throbbing temple as he leaned against the car window and bit his tongue from saying anything that might get him ejected from the vehicle.

Odette glared at the road, but her vitriol was aimed solely at him as she spat, “You’re a god-damned stack of shit and you deserve to get murdered in your sleep for what you’ve done. All of you.”

“Good thing I don’t sleep too often, then,” he muttered.

“How the fuck you just say?”

“Thank you for driving me out here,” he answered instead.

“God, fuck off,” she sneered. “If you think Henrik has her, you should just let the police handle it.”

“I don’t know that for certain. His new apartment is just in the area she was seen at yesterday and I want to follow up on a hunch. Besides, I don’t want the cops booking her for assaulting that guy.”

“So… that was really her?”

Vidar shrugged. He hadn’t watched any of the videos the gawkers had taken nor had he read the tabloids that swarmed to it like flies. There was a hesitance in Odette’s question that betrayed the same depth of guilt that he had used to manipulate her into helping him. Her sense of personal failure to a girl she’d never even met was ridiculous but convenient and the opportunity to improve his image in her eyes was not lost on him either.

“She needs help, not condemnation from the law,” he said, measuring out the right amount of sentimental value to his words. “I can’t change what I did when I was needing more mental help than I was getting, but I can at least help her get what she needs to heal. We just have to find her.”

Odette was silent at the wheel, but he was patient to let his lies work their way into her guilt. He had to rub his mouth in a feigned itch to keep from smiling when she finally said, “I hope we find her soon.”

Success relaxed him. For all that had gone so wrong, there was much that had gone unexpectedly right. The receptionist at Henrik’s job was surprisingly forthcoming about providing his new address, right down to the apartment number, and Odette was prepared to sacrifice her entire weekend just to give him rides while she believed his car was being repaired. He couldn’t push his luck with her too far, though. She had an annoying habit of using her impressive intellect and perception. The area around Henrik’s building was commercial and crowded, making Vidar’s suggestion that she just drop him off to go in and handle this alone more reasonable than he was sure it otherwise would have seemed to her. Seeing a young woman struggle to handle the door with her large stroller in tow, he rushed over and held it open, following in after her without needing to be buzzed in through the electric lock. Unnerved at the idea of being stuck in an elevator with a young mother and baby and not wanting to confront the source of that discomfort, he climbed the stairs up to the sixth floor. It was difficult to not get his hopes up. If Simone wasn’t there, he truly had no idea where she could be. He blamed his hammering heart on the stairs when he finally stood in front of Henrik’s door.
When he raised his hand to knock, he noticed the extra lock on the door, the latch of it facing the outside. It didn’t take more than a second for this oddity to click in his mind.

“So that’s how you kept her, you rat bastard…” he mumbled, a crooked grin pulling at his mouth.

He didn’t want to acknowledge it, but there was a strong relief in knowing she was kept there by force rather than by choice. Chalking it up to pettiness, he pounded on the door three times and waited, listening for any movement within.

“Henrik?” he called, knocking again.

Satisfied that his brother was not home and not particularly caring if he was, Vidar picked the lock with two bobby-pins and a screwdriver from his pocket. A lifelong interest in restraining his sexual partners had taught him the value of lock-picking in a pinch and this one was not so different from the locks he’d used to affix chains and collars. The apartment was silent within, his steps reverberating off the walls in how sparse the furniture was in the open space. Not a lot of places for their cunning little slave to hide. The living room had a new-looking sheepskin rug spread out before the solitary couch, a sketchbook open on the white wool displaying Simone’s artistic talents in smudged charcoal. He glanced at it to quickly become disturbed at the unfinished yet distinctly recognizable image of his uncle Bjørn’s disembodied head cradled in the arms of a terrifying demonic creature. Terrifying, but mesmerizing in its intricacy and extravagant detail, like a baroque torture device. He shuddered at wondering what went on in the maddened mind of his beloved slave that she would find crafting such grotesque works to be soothing, then brushed it off to search the rest of the apartment. The hopes that he had tried to fend off fell at finding only evidence of her recent presence, but not recent enough. The clothes in the hamper only contained one outfit of Henrik’s that reeked of the same gin he’d smelled on Simone last night and her toothbrush next to the bathroom sink was bone dry. He milled about after confirming his failure, rifling through the drawer of embarrassingly girlish clothes that made him uncomfortably concerned for his brother’s preferences, before giving up. No Simone to drag back to him, no sign of where she might have gone, not even Henrik there to yell at until he felt a little better, this was all so dissatisfying. Vidar was about to leave with only a heart heavy in worry for his runaway slave when he heard the slam of the front door and Henrik’s heavy steps.

Rust and meat and bittersweet filled Simone’s nose as she bent close to Maier’s face and wiped the blood with a dampened edge of the undershirt she’d torn off him last night. The bob of his throat swallowing nervously and his rapid blinking as he avoided her gaze drew the attention of something predatory behind her mind. What runs away must be prey and, by running, begins the chase. She followed the trail of his fear, tracking it through the noise and distraction of her own.

“Have you already had your fill of causing me pain?” he scoffed in the subtle change of his tone, still not meeting her steadfast stare. His breath hitched and shuddered as she dragged her bare fingertips through the veil of his hair, pushing it out of his face and running her nails gently over his damp scalp.

“Causing physical pain is easy… and nothing worth having comes easy,” she said, speaking softly just above a whisper as she smoothed his hair back. It was greasy, limp, the same grayed day-old black coffee color and quality of his eyes, and she focused on the effect her touch had on him rather than the revulsion it caused in her. “Aversion to touch and physical affection is not an uncommon trait in victims of sexual abuse. This hurts you far more than the smile I carved into your face, doesn’t it?” His white skin turned gray and pallid, providing the answer that he did not voice, and she forced
herself to grin and chuckle past the sting of it echoing in her. “I guess we have more than a high tolerance for pain in common. Well? Mommy or daddy? Who did it to you?”

Another bob of his throat, then his even, clinical tone returned, “I hardly see how that applies to your plans, Ms. Valstad.”

“I no longer have plans,” she frowned. Though she wanted to drag her nails down his forehead and burrow them into his eyes until the plump balls popped under her thumbs, she kept her touch gentle and settled for the queasiness so clear in his features. “All my plans were based on what you told me, but apparently, I can’t trust anything you’ve said. It’s hard to trust anything, isn’t it?”

“I did not lie to you,” he said.

“It’s been months, and nothing has happened. I don’t even know if my father is alive or if that was a lie too.”

“I did not lie to you.”

“Don’t tell me that when your lies are what got me collared and fucked!” she snarled, an unexpected and hot flash of rage bubbling up past what control she had gathered. “You said you had Vidar working for you, that he knew the truth, but he doesn’t, he can’t know the truth and still want what he wants! You never told me what Papa did, what he gave me and changed me! I’ve remembered so much and I…”

Her other hand came up to sink into his hair, those slick strands so unlike her thick unruly waves, that white skin turning chameleon colors, that thin mouth with a tail curling up his swollen cheek, and she slipped a little further into herself just for the distance. When she spoke, it wasn’t to him, but she couldn’t stop the words that flooded up from these months of misery and confusion.

“It’s like… It feels like my life is a shipwreck and I’ve been waiting on a beach, watching the tide bring in the wreckage,” she said, weary and ragged. Her fingers slid down to wrap around his neck, feeling the rapid tempo of his pulse, but there was no intention in her hands. She couldn’t feel him or see him anymore as her silence broke and her voice birthed the hurt that had been gestating for so long. “It’s too much. The world is too much. But men… men don’t know when to stop. Even when they’ve taken everything from you, they reach in and grab and grab… They told me he’s evil, but they never told me why. Maybe because if they did, they might have to look around and see that their rules are just lies they tell themselves to feel safe. When I stripped away everything society told me to believe, I saw what we were under the masks and I can’t go back to wearing mine again. Nothing worth having comes easy and truth is the hardest thing to come to. I still love it. I still love Papa for showing me the truth and I still love my uncles for splitting me open to receive it… even if it hurts. It hurts, oh… oh god, does it hurt… but… I’m supposed to do something with it. Right? I need to find out what that is, I need to find him, I need to find him again… and then I’ll know what to do.”

She slowly came back to the concrete room and the chained man under her hands. He watched her behind those flat eyes and she remembered what she needed from him.

“Where is he?” she asked. “Why didn’t you take me to him like you said you would?”

Maier hesitated, his pale lips drawing in a breath and holding it before saying, “Leif Valstad is still a captive of the Marceau estate. I did not take you to him simply because I could not find you when the time came, but in the weeks that you were made unavailable, the circumstances of his captivity have… evolved. It is no longer in my interest to see him freed. I realize this is a sensitive issue for you and I don’t mean to upset you, but I’m afraid I cannot expose him to you in your current
mindset.”

She leaned back on her haunches, her hands limply sliding away from his neck as she tried to identify this feeling his words stirred in her. She’d felt this before, this strange calm where she expected frustration, rage, and despair at her helplessness against these unseen forces that moved her and her family like pieces on a chessboard. Her feet carried her to the cart and she examined the stainless steel set of blades, knowing what she wanted only when the scalpel was in her hand. Maier’s knowledge was not enough. It would not help her to be told that she was now alone in wanting her father’s freedom, and therefore her own freedom.

“If I’m not to be with him, where am I to be? What do you want from me?” she asked as she tested the sharpness against her palm. The blade was honed. The cuts would be exact.

“You are to remain in the captivity of his brothers. If I can be certain of your compliance, you may be granted visitation with him.”

“Generous,” she seethed.

His bound hands were still clasped over his genitals and it occurred to her that it wasn’t out of modesty, but preservation. She smirked at that, amused at how sex-driven her thoughts had become, and lowered herself to straddle his thighs. Her bareness beneath her sagging skirt was made apparent to him in a direct method that repulsed them both, but these mild discomforts were necessary for her task. His skin wasn’t lovely, nor unblemished and unscarred, but it was an open canvas nonetheless and she leaned over it to survey where to begin.

“I thought you were different,” she said, dragging the flat edge of the blade along the width of his chest. “I thought that just maybe because you wanted something that wasn’t sex and wasn’t a lie from me, I could trust you not to use me for deceit and in deceitful ways. I should have known better. You’re just a man, made of the same selfish flesh. Deceit is as much a part of you as your skin. I wonder if I made you mine like I made that smile in your cheek, you would be something more than just a man. I could change you, Maier.”

“I am satisfied with my selfish flesh as it is, thank you,” he said, and she could hear his nervous anticipation. She let it stretch until he broke, asking, “What were you thinking of doing to me, if you don’t mind me asking?”

She swallowed her uncertainty and answered, “Art is a response that can be felt even through centuries by the conductivity of human connection. I’m going to make you my conduit.”

It was a longshot, but if Maier was ever in Leif’s presence to be seen, her father would be the only person in the world to understand the meaning of the art she would carve into this man. As she held his head down and dragged the thin blade through the side of his face, she let herself miss her father. He would understand. He was the only one who ever did, even when she didn’t understand herself.
Henrik’s feet dragged and his thoughts ran together in a bleary hum too big for the stuffy confines of his skull. Whatever trail Simone had left in her ferocious wake had cooled after the clown-masked man had escorted her swiftly from the café, leaving only puzzlement for the police, fascinated intrigue for the public, and dreaded knowing in Henrik. In the dozens of times he’d scoured the videos on the tabloid sites, he tried to search for any clue he could gather that might lead him away from the suspicion he did not want to confirm into fact, but there was no doubting that the clown was a man of Leif’s and Kyun’s ilk. If not by the use of a mask when any normal man would not have need to hide his identity, then by the chilled recognition that fell over her aggressive behavior when she took notice of him. Henrik had seen that tense stillness in her only a few times before: in the moments he could now identify when Leif’s intent turned deadly and in Edward Kyun’s car shortly before the chaotic wrestle for the gun. She’d regarded him with that distinct stillness once before, too. He shook his head, his brain sloshing around painfully with the motion as he chased that memory back into the depths.

He dragged his coat from his stiff shoulders and shuffled out of his shoes, leaving a trail as he discarded them from the entryway to the living room before collapsing onto the couch where this disaster had begun. In his desperation to avoid making a mistake, he’d made a worse one and let her slip away. It hadn’t been until several minutes after, as he sat on his bedroom floor with his back against the door with the physical manifestation of his need still wet in his hand and his breath panting out of him hot and ragged, that he’d noticed the key’s absence from his neck. Since that terrible realization, he’d been out on the streets, searching and calling for her until his throat felt stripped and his legs began to shake. When he saw the videos on social media, all hope in him withered, but he wandered aimlessly to avoid the dread of returning to this empty apartment. He unbuckled his belt and leaned his head back into the couch cushions with a deep sigh.

“Welcome home, asshole.”

He jerked up in a sudden flinch at the shock of the voice even as he knew who that sardonic drawl belonged to at once.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?!” he snarled, on his feet in an instant.

Vidar leaned against the wall leading down the darkened hallway, his posture relaxed in the detached way he became when deeply angered, and Henrik realized then that he knew everything even before his brother spoke with a false nonchalance, “Oh, just thought I’d drop in and see where you’ve been hiding the little bitch. Nice place, by the way.”

Henrik swallowed the sour ash heavy on his tongue and squared his powerful shoulders as he ground out, “You need to leave. Now.”

His younger brother’s smirk was as sharp as his glare and at odds with his casually asked, “Does Camilla know what’s been waiting for you at home at the end of your dates? I always did think it was sort of odd that she never posted any of those stupid cutesy couple pics from your place. I bet it wasn’t for a lack of trying on her part, though. How many excuses did you give your girlfriend before she stopped asking to see your new apartment?”

“Vid,” Henrik growled warningly, ignoring how his fists trembled. This couldn’t be happening. Of all times and all people, it had to be now and him. There would be no end to the punishment with this sly, spiteful man holding this horrid knowledge.
“Or was she in on it?” Vidar grinned. The sleaziness oozing from that smile made Henrik’s stomach twist in anger. “She never struck me as anything but the conventionally annoying clingy type, but maybe she liked having a girl in the bedroom. I have no doubt that Simone eats pussy as good as she sucks dick. For someone who speaks so little, she has a deft tongue, doesn’t she?”

Henrik’s skin flashed hot at the abrupt memory of Simone lapping at his come popped up at the front of his mind, tearing out from where he’d locked it far away from his thoughts, and he was certain beyond reason that Vidar could see every depraved detail of that pink tongue dragging slick and soft along his palm. He shoved that hand in his pocket, his other tugging through his hair nervously as his glare darted away from his brother.

“I never touched her. I was keeping her safe. I was keeping you all safe from that… sin,” he muttered, wincing at how the lie fell flat no matter how true he tried to convince himself it was. He’d touched her countless times; chaste, innocent embraces and caresses that imparted only a mutual comfort and affection. She was the one who tempted, her want so constant and calling to him like a silent siren’s song. One mistake, just one drunken moment of weakness after so many nights of temptation was all it took to shatter everything. It wasn’t fair.

Vidar’s snort and chuckle tightened his fist in his hair with frustration as his younger brother scoffed, “You expect me to buy that load of bullshit? Henrik, you’re not an idiot. You had everyone—the whole fucking world—convinced she was chopped up in some lunatic’s freezer, or shackled in someone’s basement, or anywhere but sleeping in your bed every night. You weren’t keeping her safe. You were keeping her to yourself!”

“I don’t care if you don’t believe me. I never touched…” Henrik started, then corrected himself loudly, “I never fucked her! She’s sick, remember? She’s had a fucked-up life and it’s made her think she wants or—or deserves things that hurt her. But you… There’s nothing that excuses your behavior, but there’s something wrong with you and Anders. This was the best solution for everyone; I had no other choice!”

“So, that’s it? You choked me out, let me believe I’d allowed my niece to get dragged off and murdered, let Anders drink himself to fucking oblivion, all for the sake of what, exactly? Keeping us safe from sin? Did it keep you safe from yours?”

“I never fucked her!”

Vidar’s smirk twitched into a snarl and he slid into a slow step towards him as he spoke with an anger that simmered quietly, “It doesn’t matter. Do you think that makes you any better? You held an innocent girl prisoner against her will. You were sleeping together. Don’t deny that; I’ve smelled her on your bedsheets.”

He stopped in front of him, close enough that their toes nearly touched, and Henrik swallowed that thickness weighing down his tongue before repeating, “I never fucked her. I did what I had to do to stop what was happening.”

Vidar’s cold eyes narrowed in disdain as he said, “You didn’t fuck her because you didn’t let yourself, not because you didn’t want to. If you wanted to keep her safe, you would have reported what we were doing to the police, but you didn’t do that. You kept her close, all to yourself, all alone in secret, waiting for an excuse good enough to justify giving in because you know, even if you’re too much of a coward to admit it, that she was made for us to take. All those times you didn’t fuck her were just buying your conscience some comfort for when you finally do it so you can tell yourself that you tried.”

Henrik felt a hollowness well inside him like a drum, digging out a hunger for something he wasn’t
sure of until the sour truth of his brother’s words hit it with a nearly audible sound. The want for fulfillment only blood could satisfy reached up from the bottom of that hollowness, begging for the sweet, hot, consuming rage that only lived in the taking of life. He’d gotten a taste just that once and ever since, there was that hollowness in him, opening wide at every anger and every hate. Meeting the knife-sharp glare of his brother’s eyes, those cruel eyes that could seemingly cut through any man to the core of his truth, he wondered if he could see it now. The slight tick at the corner of his thin mouth was the only clue that he might, but still, Vidar did not back away.

“And you? What was your excuse for beating, choking, and raping our niece? Did you think you could get away with it forever?” Henrik asked, that nervousness now gone from his anger. The hunger purified him, brought strength and certainty where before there was fear and regret.

“Forever isn’t something I worry about. Forever could end at any time,” Vidar answered, then that sly smile slid back over his weary features. “And I’ve never needed an excuse to take what rightfully belongs to me. Neither do you, brother. When we find her—and we will—I can help you to accept her purpose to us.”

Henrik let his eyes close and inhaled slowly through his nose, letting his breath leak out even slower as he counted in his head. 1, 2, 3. This was his brother, younger than him by a mere two years, the person he’d been closest to throughout his childhood and remained close with through adulthood. They knew more about each other than anyone else ever had and might ever will. 4, 5, 6. This was the man who had given his niece bruises so deep they took nearly a month to heal, but worse were the scars on her mind that had made her tense up and tremble every time he’d hold her too close from behind or touch her neck with a reaching hand. There was no remorse in this man, not even the anticipation of remorse. 7, 8, 9. That sweet heat thrummed through his bloodstream, enlivening every sore and tired muscle with an electric energy and he felt aware of everything within and around him. The slow sailing of dust motes catching the morning sunlight, the faint ticking of his late father’s watch on his wrist, and the slight widening of his brother’s eyes as realization took root were all present within his range of awareness before it was all enveloped in black. 10.

An irritating burn bloomed in the left side of his chest and something wet spilled down his torso, clearing that black from his vision to see his large hands wrapped around his brother’s neck like iron bands tightening through the resistant muscle and ligaments. Vidar’s face was as wide with surprise and pinched with pain as his own, that mirrored expression causing his hands to fly away from their deadly grip as he stumbled backward. That burning sensation flared abruptly as he stepped away and he looked down between them to see the screwdriver in his brother’s hand, its shaft wet with blood. His blood, he realized when he saw the wide stain on his shirt still spreading at an alarming rate.

“Oh…” Henrik murmured, pressing his chest, trying to feel where the blood was coming from.

Vidar helpfully moved Henrik’s hand to the wet rip in his shirt and both men were quiet as he pressed against that curious lack of pain. He knew it was shock that prevented him from feeling it, but it was hard to comprehend that he’d been stabbed even with this knowledge. It was hard to comprehend much of anything in that moment.

“Sorry…” Vidar croaked, breaking the tense quiet that had fallen over them. “I should call an ambulance, right?”

Henrik frowned, bewilderment briefly overtaking his muffled thoughts as he tried to figure out why an ambulance was necessary, then saw the blood pooling around his shoe. That was an awful lot of blood and it didn’t seem to want to stop.

“No, no… I’ll call,” Henrik said. “You should go.”
“Are you sure? I can at least wait with you for the ambulance,” his brother offered, his voice raspy and quiet from being choked.

Henrik shook his head slowly. He felt tired, far more tired than when he’d first dragged his feet through the door, but he didn’t want to dirty the new sheepskin rug to sit back down on the couch. He shuffled over to the small dining area and sat in his chair, the dishes from last night’s dinner still littering the table. It had been his turn to cook, which had meant it was Simone’s turn to clean. She’d left him instead. He took out his phone and his hand shook as he dialed.

“You’re losing a lot of blood…”

Henrik looked up to see his brother still standing there, his pale skin somehow impossibly paler as he stared at the red puddle on the floor. “I told you to leave, Vid.”

“Sorry…” Vidar murmured, then hesitantly walked out, muttering, “Sorry… sorry…”

Henrik hit the call button and explained to the emergency operator, in the briefest terms, that he’d accidentally stabbed himself, then clarified that it was a rather nasty stab. The operator wanted him to stay on the line and talk to him until the ambulance arrived, but Henrik was uninterested in holding a conversation with a stranger. It was easier to watch the dust motes sailing through the golden sunlight, their aimless drift carried on air currents too subtle for him to detect. The weather was beautiful that weekend. He should have taken Simone out to the countryside like she’d wanted, far away from anyone else so that his would be the only set of eyes to watch her stretch out on the grass and let her golden skin eagerly brown in the sunshine. That strange girl was always begging for sunshine and she seemed to hold it inside her for days afterward, making her smiles brighter and her touch warmer. He hoped her baby had her smile. He reached up to grab a speck of dust that he’d watched, but it danced away in the air he stirred with his hand and he lost track of it. He should have done so many things differently.

A powerful thirst nagged at him, but his body was far too heavy to move, drawing him to slump against the table until he laid his head next to the dirty dishes. He was just so tired; a little rest would help. A blackness far calmer than the one earlier enveloped him before he could recall how to tell Simone to wash the dishes in English.

Rupert never made it back to the ship. Leif had waited in their storage container, away from the port workers’ inspections, until the ship lurched back to sea and the captain had cleared him to come out, but the old Englishman hadn’t been heard nor seen since departing on his errand. There was a stern lack of concern on the subject from the captain, imparting an unwillingness to know or speculate on anything regarding the smuggled passengers he carried aboard his vessel. That authentic adherence to ignorance was what had kept Leif from killing the crew and commandeering the ship, as any excuse or interest in providing one would have inferred some nervousness or personal investment on the subject. It had seemed the captain truly had no stake in the matters of either him or Rupert, leaving the possibility for sabotage to await Leif on his long-ago home shore since it appeared none would occur at sea. He should have offered to accompany him on his errand to see if he refused, then he would at least be able to more assuredly confirm that a trap was in Rupert’s plans. Either way, Leif had drifted lightly along the edge of sleep under the overwhelming vastness of the stars on that moonless night, his nest atop the highest container now feathered with a sleeping bag. The barking conversations of the crew was lost to the waves, along with the screams of his nightmares as he dreamed in the ocean’s roar. It was in the depths of a nightmare that he was carried to his daughter’s lifeless corpse at the end of this journey and the only screams the ocean drowned were his own.
“Coming up port!”

The crewman’s call slipped Simone’s limp and meager weight from Leif’s grasp like sand through his clutching fingers and the nightmare faded back among the rumbling worries that murmured constantly at the bottom of his thoughts. Bleary half-sleep clung heavily to his motions as he lifted himself and saw the mountaintops of his homeland cut a dark divide between the glittering starlight and the glittering city lights. He was sure he’d seen this view before as a boy, but he could not pull the memory up from two lifetimes ago. He wondered what he’d thought of it then, what sentiments this view of his homeland had brought him. Had he learned to value its veneer of safety, simplicity, and familiarity, or was that something that could only be cherished once lost? He could not remember and it didn’t occur now. Looking out at the small seaside city, he only felt what had been in his heart for the past twenty years with increasing awareness: yearning for his daughter’s safety in his company.

Whether Rupert had been guiding him into a trap or whether he had met an inconvenient end in the deadly work they did, Leif did not care to find out. He dove over the railing into the black and foamy brine, the shock of cold expelling the sluggishness from his body in shudders as he pushed through the waves. The city lights drew closer in imperceptible increments, as imperceptible as the pace at which his daughter had turned his continued existence into life and his mechanical heart into red flesh. Soon, in hours or days or weeks or months, he would find her and his return from death would become life again, even if he had to stain these waters red with the blood of all of Norway. When he finally dragged himself from the lapping waves and onto the stable firmness of land, the sky was just beginning to lighten in pre-dawn. It was going to be a sunny summer day, but in the early morning chill with the saltwater having sucked the warmth from his body, it was freezing.

His first victim was by necessity and pure good luck. The yellow squares of light amid the dim gray dawn drew him to a large house that had been divided into apartments; a common arrangement even for larger families, but only a single young man seemed to occupy that little section of the building. As the capricious nature of luck had so often favored him amid the dreadful events of his life, he noticed that this young man, alone and unsuspecting in his single-serving apartment, was also roughly his size. Leif scratched on the window next to the door; arrhythmic, animal scratches that drew the young man’s curiosity to crack the door open and see what the noise was about. Leif had always preferred to hunt single men, especially young men who did not yet acknowledge their vulnerability to the horrors of the world, because they were arrogant and far less likely to call the police even when a threat was known. He could taunt and draw out the hunt before they were ever aware of being hunted, coaxing fear past their ignorance but allowing their disbelief to contain it until he chose to shatter that delicate bubble. However, this was no time for fun and games. Leif forced his way through the door, grabbed the young man’s face before he could think to cry out, and held him against a wall as he strangled him. It was a perfunctory, simple, clean kill that ushered in a swift and silent death, not typically Leif’s preference, but he wasn’t here for sport. He was here for a hot shower and a change of clothes.

The distressed jeans were a little tight and the black t-shirt that clung revealingly at his torso displayed the garish iconography of a band his daughter might have known, both items far from his typical fashion and exactly what he needed to disguise himself. He finger-combed his overgrown hair into a small knot high at the back of his head, the stringy strands that escaped it giving him a calculated dishevelment that he tipped more into the impression of calculated after trimming his beard into a refined shape. Completing his disguise with a cheap pair of sunglasses to hide his distinct eyes, he examined himself as though through the perspective of a stranger. Gone was the cultured, sophisticated professional killer the public knew to look out for and gone was the savage bronzed king of a blood cult Francis had tailored for him. The man in the mirror was simply, as his daughter might put it, a reluctantly aging douchebag trying to prey on a much younger dating pool. Not that it had stopped her from using and then discarding exactly this type of man in the past, so it must not
have been as repugnant as she had claimed. Nevertheless, he was unrecognizable from the image the public held of him, so he folded a few outfits into a bag to take and doubled his socks to guard against the damp of his shoes.

After rolling his young benefactor in a thick duvet and stuffing him under the bed, he walked out to find which car responded to the remote key he’d taken along with the wallet from his pockets. Fortune continued to smile upon him when the click of the remote prompted a chirp and blink of lights from a Lexus SUV that had the back windows conveniently blacked out. This would serve his purposes quite nicely. Sliding into the plush leather interior, he considered the logistics of his journey and decided the best route to begin his search would be from his own beginning. It had been quite some time since he’d visited his mother, after all, and Astrid might be able to fill him in on what had happened to their family since his brothers had absconded with his darling girl.

His brother’s blood smeared on Vidar’s hand when he remembered to shove the screwdriver back into his pocket. He wiped it unthinkingly on his pants where the dark material disguised the nature of the stain, but the tacky fluid stuck in every crack and wrinkle, mapping his skin in thin lines of bright red. Standing outside the apartment building under the too-bright sun, he rubbed his hand on his thigh over and over, the rough weave of his pants scraping away the red until finally all that clung to his skin was the pungent odor. Sweat seemed to bead out of every pore on his body, collecting in the folds and creases at his joints and soaking his hair before forming fat drops that slithered down his skin under his clothes. He couldn’t think. He didn’t want to think. Somewhere beneath the deafening sound of his own labored breathing, a noise not quite heard drew his wide stare to Odette calling him from her car.

She was asking something, or berating him, he could not decipher the sounds coming from her frowning mouth, but whatever it was, he could only stammer out his imperative need to go home. Her noise continued with questions that could not penetrate the locked fortress of his mind, but the car was moving. He was moving, and he would keep moving through distance and time. Henrik, however, had stopped. Vidar could not unknow what he had done as much as he could undo it, so he did what he could do and moved away from it. His sweating body trembled and tensed, his breaths stuttering out of him as he tried to contain the overwhelming need for distance and time away from that knowing.

The minutes stretched and warped until at last the car idled in front of his house and, with a little convincing of his muscles to unlock, he staggered out and waved dismissively to Odette until she stopped trying to follow him. Or at least he figured she’d stopped. Either way, he shut and locked the door behind him, leaning against the solidity of the wood before shoving himself off it and walking toward the kitchen. He had to wash his hands, had to get rid of that reek, had to quench the thirst that scraped his bruised throat, had to keep expanding that distance until what he’d done was a speck on the horizon of his life. Memories of red splattered on white crowded the corners of his narrowed vision as he washed the stench from his hands until his skin stung pink and clean from the dish soap and hot water, but he was already further away when all he could smell was the lemony soap wafting up from the steam. No, it was still there. He scrambled to tear out of his pants, sending the screwdriver clattering on the kitchen tiles, and he shoved both into the trash bin before turning to walk out of the kitchen. The figure standing and watching from the doorway froze him in place. The initial shock at finding himself not alone as he’d thought burst into a frenzy of feeling when recognition made its way past the wall.

“Where… Where…” he stammered weakly, then in a flare of rage, he found himself quickly
advancing on Simone. She shrunk under his hands grabbing her by her shoulders, her fear of him displayed so openly in her cowering expression, but she did not move away from him even as he shouted, “Where the fuck did you go?!”

“I’m sorry!” she pleaded. “I’m sorry, I… I can’t…”

His panting breath was hot as he glared down at her, his teeth bared in the anger that ate away at his panic while his mind expanded beyond the walls it had erected to protect him from seeing and knowing what was around him. Her hair was pulled back in a thick braid, still damp from the shower that had washed away the sweat and grime of their horrid night, and she wore one of his t-shirts, the hem reaching low enough to be a short dress on her much smaller frame. She’d been here while he’d been there, searching for her and finding only his brother’s end. The outrage of it nearly made him laugh, and then he did, his grip crushing her shoulders as a strange chuckle bubbled up from the din of his rage.

“Vidar, what-” she started to ask, her voice tight in pain until he cut her off with a backhanded slap across her face.

“You LEFT!” he yelled, grabbing her chin and jerking her up to face him as he snarled, “You are not supposed to leave! You are not supposed to do anything unless I tell you to do it! Do you understand? Do you?!”

Her tears crawled down his fingers as she nodded and he calmed at seeing her endure suffering to be good for him. That rage fizzled out as abruptly as it had come, leaving that treacherous tenderness to grow in its wake. He allowed it. Anything to build a wider gap between his mind and what he had done. The fearful hesitance to open her eyes as he loosened his grip into a caress that brushed away her tears amused him, but when she looked up at him with confusion glimmering in her wet gaze, something in him that had been wound so tight for so long finally snapped. He wanted her. Not just his slave, not just his pet, not just his niece. He wanted her. His breath held suspended in his aching throat at the very idea, the impossibility of it, yet it reached for her and he reached with it, cradling the base of her head in his hands and leaning down to kiss her before stopping himself.

“Simone…” he whispered, needing to know and dreading to hear it. She watched him, fear still swimming in her glittering tears, as she waited with the clear anticipation of expecting an order to fulfill. There was no chance she would tell him the truth, but he was always able to see a lie when spoken. “Why did you come back?”

Her teeth briefly nipped at the plump, tempting flesh of her bottom lip before she gathered the nerve to answer, “This is where I am expected to be.”

It was not a lie. It was also not the truth he had expected her to hold. His brow furrowed as he deciphered what her response could imply, only taking a moment to come to the awful conclusion. It couldn’t be, though. Even ignoring everything that had already happened, she couldn’t want that.

“Where Leif’s captors expect you to be?” he asked, his frown hardening when she responded with a silence that confirmed the most obvious fact of it all. Irritation growled into his tone. “Do you not know what they will do to you? Why they want you here with me?”

Her mouth opened, her reluctance to answer closing it before she tried again and meekly whispered, “You… You’re training me to, uh…”

His frown twitched into a humorless smirk at just how clueless this clever girl could be when blinded by her devotion to that sick freak who conditioned her so well. It was revolting, how much she still loved him. Vidar was no longer too perturbed to admit to himself how much of his hatred for Leif
was mere jealousy, though his hatred ran deep enough to suffice itself even without it.

“I’m training you for myself,” he corrected her, then added, “They only want what you can create for them. What we can create, or you and your father.” Her expression of utter bewilderment and worry gave her such an innocent look, he allowed it to build just to watch it shatter when he finally said, “They’re going to take your baby, Simone, and they’re going to want more.”

Her mouth twisted in disgust, yet her bewilderment did not lessen. “But… I was on the shot… I’m not even sure I can get pregnant, not for at least a few months. There’s still time to… to do something.”

“Oh, sweetheart…” he said, his false sympathy making her tense under his touch as he rubbed at her neck and slid his other hand down over the barely perceptible curve of her belly. He watched closely as her wavering stare widened in disbelief when he told her, “You’re more than two months pregnant right now.”

“No… n-no, that’s not possible, I-I can’t… I can’t…” she stuttered, her eyes darting around to chase the thoughts spinning through her mind before the color drained from her face to a sickly gray-yellow.

Vidar only had a second to realize what her reaction to this news would be once the denial passed and he hurriedly stepped away right before she lurched forward and vomited on the floor. The display of her emotional turmoil being processed so physically brought him an odd comfort to the turmoil of his own, and through this strange secondhand vengefulness, he understood how to better increase his distance. Despite his skill in tormenting her, there was someone much more suitable for this particular circumstance, someone who could relish in it with a fervor he could not bring himself to supply.

As he picked up his phone from the countertop, he ordered her, “Clean that and then clean yourself, sweetheart. Your dear uncle Anders is going to come over soon.”
Chapter 68

The accumulation of three generations’ worth of clutter had amassed detritus to clog and gorge every surface in the farmhouse. Paraphernalia, curios, books, and baubles of all sorts were retained by the ever-saving grace of not yet having broken and by the value of constantly looming preparedness, although Leif could not construct any feasible situation that would require the owner’s manual for a 1986 Dodge Daytona or a dubiously functional watercooler that ran on Freon. His familial home was an archeological site that told the story of the many who had lived there through only the most peripheral of perspectives. Vague memory of his grandmother’s nervous hands haunted the cross stitch hanging on the wall, but he only remembered the thousands of tissues she’d compulsively and ritualistically torn apart towards the end of her shorter and shorter days. The chipped wood of a croquet mallet stirred recollection of a particularly active summer with neighbors he could no longer recall anything of save for the sound of their honking voices muffled through the walls. There were no meaningful memories for him here, only recollections.

The house held the physical remnants of the everyday lives of many, except for his own. The places where the photos containing him were once hung were marked by squares of discoloration from the wooden frames having preserved the patterned wallpaper behind them. The award ribbons and trophies of his prepubescent youth were nowhere in sight. It was as though he had been erased from the history of the house, which he knew his mother would have herself believe, but he did not fault her for it. That dedicated denial of hers had been a useful tool to his family for decades, but like the Freon-running water cooler, its usefulness had become obsolete. His secret was out and, soon enough if not already, her husband’s and brother-in-law’s would be dragged out along with it. Einar and Bjørn had the advantage of being dead for this inevitability, though Astrid had no such benefit. To bury that past, she would have to bury herself with it.

He had excavated the drawers of a large hutch in the receiving room to find a machete Bjørn had brought back from Honduras when he heard the squeal of the front door swinging open on its antique hinges. The simple sound of the regular comings and goings through the heavy door invoked a nostalgia that the decaying viscera of past decades had not. All at once, part of him was pulled back to that other life and he could detect the assured level of safety and comfort within the world that had permeated his childhood. It was a faint brush along the outskirts of his mind, something he couldn’t know again but knew of as one is reminded of the sun in a dark winter night when next to a fire, and he rose to his feet to greet the one as responsible for bringing him into that charmed life as she was for expelling him so readily from it. The shock freezing her at the threshold widened her narrow pale blue eyes was one of seeing a person where she’d not expected, then recognition drained what little color was left in her skin.

“Hello, Astrid,” Leif said, the deep timbre of his true voice striking an old fear in her. He knew who he sounded like beneath the light, friendly inflection he’d worn to disguise it. He’d taken after his father in many ways, but she’d seen Einar in him far before he had ever known what that fear in her drawn face had meant. As with the machete in his hand, the horrid truth was always there underneath all the distraction and denial she’d heaped upon it.

“Wh-wh-wh-why…” she stammered, her mouth twitching as she tried and failed to form the words.

“‘Why are you here?’” he finished for her, then smirked, “‘My brothers took something precious of mine. I’m only here to take her back.”

Those widened eyes shrunk back into the folds of her aging face in a deepening despair and she sputtered out a sound that was somewhere between a wheeze and a cough before rasping, “I see.
Well. They don’t have her, so you can just… just stay away.”

“Once I have become certain that she is no longer in their company, I will be on my way,” he acquiesced, then lifted the machete, testing its weight and balance as he spoke, “You’re looking rather wan, Astrid. You must be more careful not to overexert yourself at your age. Might I suggest you have a seat while I pour us some tea?”

She wavered, almost literally, leaning back and forth in an indecisive rocking motion before shuffling to sit on the worn sofa, her back bent and gait shortened by the weight of grief. He watched her, seeing the way this life had aged her beyond her years, and felt a brief and passing sympathy that he dismissed as he stepped into the kitchen. These were the lives that they had been thrown into; him by birth and her by negotiation. If things had progressed differently, he could have felt sorry for her, perhaps even forged a bond of fellow victimhood, but that had not been the case. Their animosity towards each other had been mutual and neither of them could claim victimhood after how complicit in their own suffering they had quickly become. As such, neither could blame the other for the consequences that complicity had wrought. While he spooned the sticky sweetened condensed milk into the bottoms of two mismatched glasses, he came to the same conclusion he had when he first came to know what their respective roles were meant to be in this life: survival was the only true morality and what was done under that cause was always justified, even if it required terrible sacrifice. In sacrificing his innocence and her freedom, she had ensured the survival of herself and his three brothers. It was not wicked, immoral, or destitute; it was simple math. Three lives had been spared at the loss of two. The hot tea ate away the ice in the glasses as he stirred the heavy milk to a color that reminded him of his daughter’s creamy skin, a reminder that needlessly and insistently deepened the ache and anxiousness in his heart. In coming to know himself as a father, he better understood the weight of the price Astrid had paid to save her other sons. Sacrifice wasn’t at all so difficult when he knew the value of what he had to sacrifice for.

“Sweet iced tea was among the best of things one could encounter during a hot summer in New York,” he mentioned conversationally as he handed a glass to Astrid, who accepted it without looking toward him. He sat in one of the two threadbare armchairs across from her, purposefully taking what was once his father’s favored seat, and wore his business smile. It tugged oddly on his face from lack of practice. “We—that is, myself and Simone—lived around the corner from a Thai restaurant that, despite its unpretentious appearance, served some of the best iced tea I had encountered outside of Southeast Asia. They were open late enough that I would often purchase one to take through the humid evenings I’d follow my little girl on her mischievous jaunts through the city nightlife. Teenagers can manufacture all types of trouble, can’t they? Not that I’d known what to expect, considering my own adolescence. Tell me, were my brothers very difficult to raise, or did the remote country life not provide many avenues for promiscuity and destructiveness?”

The condensation forming on the glass gathered until it slithered down her bony fingers, the fat droplets clinging to the edges of her knuckles and quivering with her tremor. He tipped the cold beverage to his mouth, letting the sweet liquid touch his pursed lips without passing them as she mechanically mirrored his motions. He watched her swallow the brew before lowering his glass. With the tea having cleared her throat of the alarm that had clogged it, she cautiously said, “No one has seen her in months. I would tell you if one of them had hidden her somewhere, but they’ve been worried out of their minds about wherever she’s been. They aren’t involved in your kinds of schemes, Leif. I beg of you to just let them be.”

He glanced to the side, seemingly considering her case, and asked, “In what manner do you mean ‘worry’? How have they been conducting themselves?”

“Oh, it’s… you know…” she muttered nervously, taking another sip of the brew before starting over,
“They’re common people, Leif. Their niece was kidnapped, so they’re worried like common people would normally worry. It was your kind, wasn’t it? That took her? Why don’t you ask them where she is?”

Leif’s business smile hardened into a cruel smirk. He could tell her just how uncommon her sons really were, especially her most cherished youngest, but it amused him to see a genuine ignorance in her for once instead of a forced one.

“Would I have come here if I hadn’t already exhausted that possibility?” he asked instead. She was wise enough not to answer and knowledgeable enough not to press her request further. Her experienced subservience brought him no satisfaction, no hint of pleasure where he would typically find it in such fearful manageability. Her caution was orderly, conformed, fortified by the decades under her husband’s rule, and though Leif had never addressed her from his role, she had regarded him with compliant servility and quiet disdain since his apprenticeship. It irritated him. His smirk withered and he looked down at the creamy fawn color of the iced tea, dropping these unnecessary pretenses with a sigh. “I’m not here to do anything but retrieve her. I have come to you first to avoid alerting your sons to my presence, for I would rather avoid them entirely if I can, though I have no alternative should I find your information inadequate. There are many who would harm my daughter, but many more who would harm those around her just to deliver her to me. If you know anything, you might prevent that harm from occurring by telling me now.”

Her wheezing stretched on for several turns, inflating his hopes until she rasped, “I don’t-”

The house phone ringing in the kitchen startled her into spilling a bit of her tea on her lap as she fumbled at setting it down on the coffee table in her hurry to rise. With eyes widening again at realizing her misstep, she looked to him for permission and he waved her off dismissively. It would be inconvenient to have any concerned neighbors come seeing why the aging Mrs. Valstad was not answering her phone that morning. Leif rubbed at his aching forehead as failure crept unpleasantly over his mood, his certainty that there would be no secrets to rend from this woman all but confirmed. The hyoscine he’d put into the tea and the time he’d taken to get here were to go to waste, but those losses only seemed more significant by how tauntingly close he felt to finding Simone. In his self-admitted impatience, he turned in his seat to rise and take leave of this waste, but the sight of Astrid wielding a kitchen knife in one hand while the other was held tight to her shoulder across her chest gave him pause. He squinted at her, trying to decipher what exactly she was doing with her face twisted in pale rage and wheezing like a dog with a collapsed lung as she stumbled in short steps toward him.

“You… you killed him…” she croaked. The blade flashed in her trembling fist. “… You killed my Henrik…”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, eyebrows raised in sudden understanding. He was sure he did not kill Henrik, not by any direct or purposeful means, but it was a very curious coincidence. As he thought on this, she hobbled closer and he could see the sweat that shined on her pallid face. With a lighthearted interest, he asked, “Are you going to avenge your dead son, Astrid?”

Her grimace grew slack, or at least half of it did, her face sagging on one side before she collapsed. He leaned over the edge of his father’s chair, waiting for his father’s widow to move, though the crumpled pile that was Astrid Valstad did not so much as breathe. A stroke, perhaps. A heart attack, just as likely. A bad batch of hyoscine, a considerable possibility. He tucked the machete into his belt as he finally stood and proceeded to the tool shed. The jug of gasoline was old enough to have crusted under the screwcap and emitted a foul stench as he poured it over the paraphernalia, curios, books, and baubles of all sorts, leaving a wet trail as he exited through the heavy antique front door. It was time to let outdated memories and traditions die with the last generation who had use for them.
As flame raced up the path he’d left, he looked through the threshold to the body that had once been his mother and accepted his grief. If things had progressed differently, he would still be shackled to the obligations of his bloodline, training his child to wear those shackles herself and continue the cycle. How close he had come to repeating the atrocities of his parents was the source of his grief, and in knowing that, he released it into the fire and forgave them. He had broken the cycle, and now he needed to free his daughter from it.

In the habit of hope, Anders had come to confront heartache with a regularity that bred familiarity. Heartache had provided a neat house for the inevitable fallout of every hope inflating only to burst in a splatter of anguish. Standing outside the café, he wondered when the thin and delicate expectation of hope had stopped coming entirely, finding only the deep dull ache of disappointment already settled in its place as he sat in the room where Simone was last seen. Hope had skipped him. He’d come to confirm what he already knew: she was out there, alive, and staying away from him. As she should. Still, he couldn’t even respect her wishes enough to resist the ghost of her presence, but that was who he was. There was no use in fighting it; he never could, never will, and though he loathed himself for that especially, he was no longer deceived into thinking he was capable. At least he was an honest man now. Staring into the dark reflection of the haggard man in his coffee, he was only what he was: an honest, self-aware beast.

The people walking past the café looked through the windows, eyes scanning the interior that had been broadcasted in the videos of Simone thrashing that man. Hugo Jakobsson, a Swedish tourist who had no prior involvement or relation to the case of the missing-person-turned-fugitive Simone Valstad, was now enjoying his fifteen minutes of fame in the tabloid spotlight since his release from the hospital. That Anders could envy the two broken ribs, dislocated shoulder, and bloodied face she’d given Jakobsson was a point so low that he couldn’t help but laugh at his own desperation. The punishment should have been his.

“Mr. Valstad?”

Anders looked up from his hollow-eyed reflection before he could think not to, his regret doubling at the sight of the young intern smiling at him amicably. He managed to keep the distaste out of his tone as he forced himself to return the smile and say, “Hello, Trygve. Strange seeing you out of the office.”

“Yeah, I almost didn’t, um, recognize you,” Trygve chuckled nervously, his awkwardness reminding Anders that he was wearing a grimy hoodie from his university days and jeans that were half as old as the intern himself instead of the business casual fare their workplace mandated. He wasn’t embarrassed so much as annoyed at the boy’s expectation of his embarrassment. There was always so much expectation regarding his emotional state, he was both used to it by now and oversensitive to it. “Uh… You, um, you come here? I mean, regularly?”

Anders felt the control over his expression slip from friendly to guarded, his annoyance at the intrusion of human interaction shifting into suspicion. “I think we both know why I’m here. The better question is, what reason do you have to be here?”

The boy’s fascination with his niece was not unknown to him, nor was it even especially remarkable by how many others shared an interest in the tragedy surrounding the daughter of the famed killer. It was fame rather than infamy due to the media’s swift realization that the story of a handsome family man with a dark compulsion sold much better than simply reporting on an irredeemably coldblooded killer; that family focus encompassing the rest of the Valstads by proximity and implication, although
Simone’s public image had borne the brunt of it. Still, he either exuded enough surliness on the topic or Trygve had possessed enough tact not to bring it up as much as he’d very obviously wanted. Encountering him here in the café the day after the event was catching him in the act of fascination and, by the way the boy’s brow raised halfway up his smooth forehead and his cheeks reddened, there was no hiding it now. Still, he tried.

“Oh! Um! Well, I was, uh, I’m meeting a friend.” Trygve answered lamely, shoving his hands in his pockets and making a show of looking about the café. “I don’t think he’s here, though, so I should, um. I should go?”

“What’s your friend look like? Maybe I’ve seen him pass by,” Anders offered, his smile now genuine at the suffering of this polite underling. It was mean and unnecessary, but it felt good to watch him squirm. It felt good to punish him for looking at his niece like so many of the sick and depraved gawkers who helped themselves to their personal lives like they were meant for public consumption.

Trygve was already backing away as he stammered, “You know, I, um, I think I’m at the wrong café. Heh! Okay, Mr. Valstad, I’ll see you at the office! Bye!”

Anders glared at the back of the retreating boy, the taste of such short-lived cruelty having only whetted his appetite for a vengeance that could not be fulfilled and ignited his hatred into an anger that burned and consumed. It didn’t matter that Trygve wasn’t the cause or even the target of his hatred but hating himself wasn’t enough anymore. He needed to see his pain manifested upon those guilty of finding pleasure in it, just as Simone had manifested her pain onto Hugo Jakobsson. He wanted to take back the pain he’d caused her most of all, devour it, feel it tear him apart from the inside like he deserved.

“Filthy rapist…” he muttered under his breath, rubbing his scowl from his face.

He drank his coffee to give himself something to do with the hateful energy that yearned for action, grimacing at finding the bitter drink had gone tepid from how long he’d sat there waiting for a girl who would never return here or to him. His dour contemplation of the cold coffee was interrupted by his phone buzzing in his pocket and, seeing it was one of the few people he would bother responding to, he answered it.

“Hey, Vid.”

“You home right now?”

It was a question Anders imagined was only asked to be polite, but for once, he wasn’t at home. “No, I’m, um… I’m at the café Simone was…”

He’d stopped being embarrassed at how pathetic he could be in front of Vidar after baring his soul in wretched drunkenness so many times now, but the brief pause on the other end reminded him that he should perhaps be a bit ashamed for his brother’s sake if anything.

“You should come to my place,” Vidar’s voice came through slightly distant and muffled, as though he was doing something that required him to balance the phone between his cheek and shoulder. His chuckle brushing air over the receiver blew static through the line. “I have something to show you. Come quick.”

“Sure,” Anders answered. He was about to ask what it was when he heard a distinctly female gasp in the background of the call before it abruptly ended. It was fleeting and distant, but the sound struck him with a wave of goosebumps as though that sharp breath was taken right next to his ear. The
high, girlish pitch, the fear so present, the strained resistance of it was hauntingly familiar in a way that stirred the worst parts of him. He shoved the phone back into his pocket as he stood, shaking the encroaching arousal off his mind before it became a problem. It wasn’t outside of his brother’s range to call him while he was watching the creepy porn he was into.

The drive back to their neighborhood wasn’t a route he enjoyed taking, being the same route from the hospital Simone was taken. If she was taken. Since seeing the video, he wasn’t sure if she was kidnapped or if she had simply found an opportunity to escape them. The possibility that she had pursued escape should have felt better than the idea of her being captured, but no matter how much he tried to convince himself that she was far better off running away from him, it didn’t feel better.

“Sick, filthy rapist whoreson…” he muttered at himself as he slowed to a stop in front of his brother’s house. He sat in the thick quiet that filled the car after shutting off the engine, collecting the wide scatter of his thoughts and emotions to make himself more of a human again until he could unravel in the privacy of his own home. These moments of collection were getting longer instead of shorter, disproving the dreadful lie that time can heal all wounds. Perhaps that adage was true in the longer run, but there was not enough time in mortality to heal wickedness. Before he could wallow any further down that line of thought, he trudged up the grassy incline to Vidar’s flat and knocked on the door.

“About goddamn time,” Vidar greeted him in his typical acerbic regard, though there was an excited tilt to the words. He retreated from the light pouring through the threshold, vanishing in the darkened interior as he ordered, “Get in here already. And lock the door!”

Anders, no longer one to have his hackles easily raised by his surly brother’s attitude, did as he was told and followed after him. He blinked in the darkness, waiting for his eyes to adjust and depending on his knowledge of the layout and the sound of Vidar’s voice to guide him.

“I would have told you over the phone, but I didn’t want you to go batshit in public. Fuck knows our family’s done enough of that.”

“Told me what, Vid?”

“You know, it’s best you find out this way. Not that I’d hide it from you. I wouldn’t want to do that. I don’t want to hide things from you, Anders, you have to know that, remember that I don’t want to. We can’t always have what we want, right? No, I’m just glad you’re here, physically here to find out.”

Vidar was acting strangely. They were all acting strangely since everything had happened, but this was strange even for him. Anders had adjusted well to the more relaxed, patient, thoughtful version of his brother and seeing this nearly manic oddness in him was uncomfortable. Vidar’s speaking was rapid, his excitement almost desperate, but he wasn’t really saying anything.

“Find out what, Vid?”

Vidar stopped and pivoted in the middle of the hallway, a mad gleam in his eye catching the low light as he glanced nervously to his bedroom door and whispered, “I took some of those little blue tablets. The ones Maier gave you in Vermont. I mean, I didn’t take them, except for one to see how effective they were and… a few just to sleep when nothing else worked. It’s what Leif would do to calm her down, keep her docile as a little lamb or make her sleep so he could… It’s not really my thing, but it’s closer, closer to what you like. I gave her less than half a tablet, a quarter really, just enough to make her easy. You like her sweet and easy.”

Anders’ lungs constricted tightly as something in his middle seemed to twist with the uneasiness his
brother’s words and behavior wrung in him. While nothing he said made any sense, there was a vibrant wrongness it all painted as he went on and the suggestion that there was a woman involved in that wrongness welled a sour misery within him. He knew about Vidar’s proclivities with his women all too well, both from his boastful recounting and experience through their shameful affair with their niece, and he’d long dreaded the day he’d go too far.

“Vid,” he said, grabbing his brother’s arm, feeling the stiff tension of the muscle beneath his shirtsleeve. The older man did not like to be touched without his permission and communicated that in a glare, but he didn’t jerk away and cuss as he would have in the past. Anders forcefully disregarded his dread of the answer to ask, “Should I call your lawyer?”

Vidar’s glare widened in a shock that told him a different story than his incredulous smirk. “What!? No! No, no. Why would you say that? I didn’t… No one knows what I did and they’re never going to know. Not about that, not about… Ha! You mean her. You wouldn’t tell anyone about what we have going on with Simone. Would you?”

He should. He should be rotting in prison for his hand in what he did to her and what he made her think she wanted.

“What did you call me out here to see?” Anders asked gravely, to which his older brother brightened in stark contrast.

“Right! Right. Well, let me show you,” Vidar answered, that gleam in his eye unnerving above his rictus grin.

The door opened to a deeper darkness, what little light peeking around the edges of the blackout curtains revealing the bedroom in gradients of shadow. He could make out a petite female figure on the bed, the dull shine of the metal chain tied around a bedpost and leading to where she lay curled in passive defensiveness causing a cold pit to form in Anders’ gut.

“Vidar… What have you done?” he whispered, his breath wavering in fear. He didn’t want to wake the woman, if she could wake at all.

“I brought her back here. For us and no one else,” Vidar answered, stepping around him as he stood frozen in the doorway. His older brother sat on the edge of the bed, and though his face was hidden in the darkness as he looked down at the woman, his voice was softened with a warmth that rarely touched it. “She belongs to us. Come here and take what’s ours, littlest brother.”

Anders didn’t want to enter that room, didn’t want to find out what his brother had done to that person on the bed, but he had to confirm it. His shoes felt weighed down as he stepped across the hardwood, his soles muffled when they came into contact with the rug under the large bed until he stopped to bend over it. With one hand splayed on the bedding, he reached through the dark with the other to gently land on her shoulder. The bare skin under his hand was warm, soft as a young rabbit, and springy with supple and touchable flesh, stirring that animal part of his brain with abrupt and unexpected interest. He followed the curve of her shoulder up to her neck, that softness sliding under his palm sparkling along his nerves delightfully despite his horror, and slid his touch over the leather collar wrapped around it to press his fingertips to her pulse. She was alive, her heart rate strong and steady, not racing in terror or weakly near death. He exhaled a deep breath of relief he didn’t know he was holding, the worst of his fears expelled along with it. A gentle brush against his wrist startled him, cutting off that brief relief as Vidar pushed his hand up, and he humored his older brother by touching her face just to buy time in which to think. He had to assess the exact nature of what had led to Vidar wanting to share an apparently unconscious woman with him so suddenly. There was no hint of this having been premeditated and his behavior was alarmingly erratic. Even if this was a consensual sex game between her and Vidar, there was no way of knowing she’d agreed to
accepting a stranger into it. He should just ask. It wasn’t as if this was entirely uncharted territory for
them.

“Vid, did you-”

“Hnn…?”

The quiet groan from the woman nearly made him leap away from her as he snatched his hand back.
She wasn’t entirely unconscious, but that sound wasn’t entirely awake either. Adding to his horror,
he couldn’t ignore just how young she sounded.

“Shit!” Anders muttered under his breath, shaking off the shock and trying to circumvent where his
agitated thoughts were headed. “Shit. Shit. Fuck! Vidar, what’s going on here? Who is this?”

“Hmm… ah-what… what’s happening…?”

The soft, quiet voice stole the breath from his lungs as that constant tightness he’d felt since
following Vidar down the dark hall crushed inward and squeezed his heart to a brief stop. That was
Simone’s sleepy, confused voice. Anders’ hands lashed out at the girl, gropping at her face, mapping
those familiar features by touch but not yet daring to believe that these were the same thick eyelashes,
sharp jawline tapering to a narrow chin, or plush lips. Her movements to twist away from his
desperately wandering touch were lethargically slow, her slight grunts growing in confusion and
alarm, but he needed to be sure. This couldn’t be another false hope. He couldn’t take it. It was her
scent that gave his hope purchase to grasp him in its torturous clutches.

He managed to speak past the pounding heart lodged in his throat, uttering a prayer in the form of a
plaintive, “Dear?”

“Hmm…? Anders…?” she mumbled, voice thick and slurred with sleep.

A cacophony of emotion burst open, overfilling him as he got in the bed and gathered her limp,
warm, living, breathing body against him. This couldn’t be real. This was another dream or trick of
his rotted brain and he’ll wake up alone and hungover. He ran his hands all over the endless softness
of her bare body, too greedy to let this brief illusion pass without taking as much as he could get, and
kissed her wherever his mouth paused its desperate begging for this to be real. She squirmed in his
hold, grunting in protest as he held her too tightly, touched her too roughly, but he couldn’t stop or
lessen his assault. It was the hand grabbing his and pushing it down to hold still over her navel that
broke his frenzy and he looked through the darkness to his brother’s shadow.

“How? How is she here?” Anders rasped, his throat still tight in joy and shock. “How is this
possible?”

“We can talk about that afterward,” Vidar said. His hand moved to press over his, pushing his palm
harder against her belly as he added, “She brought someone with her, littlest brother. Your wish for a
child is coming true.”

A hot flush spread from Anders’ chest to tingle at the edges of his body as he comprehended these
mere words that meant something so much larger to him. A shaky breath escaped his smiling mouth,
the huff growing into a laugh of pure and bright joy.

“We’re going to be a family?” he asked, the question alone making him giddy to speak aloud.

“Yes, we are,” Vidar answered.

His response startled Anders. He hadn’t meant to include his brother in that question. However, now
that he was there in the dream Anders had envisioned countless times before, Vidar fit into it so naturally. It was a mad, strange, controversial idea, but that was them. His older brother had been so caring and supportive, bringing him back from the brink of despair more times than he could recall, and now he had brought Simone back to him. To them. Vidar’s fingers fit in the spaces between his own over where their child was growing in their beloved, and it felt right. They were family, but now they were a family.

Anders felt his eyes sting with tears of gratitude, joy, and relief as he leaned down and held Simone’s chin to still her drugged struggling as he kissed her panting mouth. His tears fell to mingle with her own on her cheeks as Vidar pushed their joined hands lower, down into the softest and warmest parts of their dearest love.

Simone tried to call out for her father in the delirium of the drug and panic, but her weakness wouldn’t allow her to scream and her pathetic cries for Papa only seemed to excite the fingers eagerly intruding in and on her vagina. The callouses on Anders’ hand pushed her out of that delusion of home that kept pulling her under, the illusion of her bedroom in Brooklyn shifting and melding with her bedroom in Los Angeles as she tried to cling to whatever reality this dark world was. The lips at her mouth travelled down to suck at her neck and she called out for this to stop, just please stop, but another set of lips sealed her words with a fiercer, hungrier kiss. This wasn’t supposed to happen again. She was stronger, faster, less paralyzed by her fear, but that little shard of blue Vidar had forced under her tongue took all of that away. The darkness was spinning around her, the touch and sounds of her uncles all that tethered her to this reality, and it wasn’t enough as time and space bent and bled into another moment. A bright room, the slatted shadows of window blinds cutting across her father’s powerful back as he thrust against her mercilessly but kissed her with so much love. The lewd squelching sounds of her wetness straddled both realities, tying them together by the lust that fogged her mind and transmuted her pain into fuel for that burning drive to submit, to please, to pleasure. This wasn’t supposed to happen again.

Those hands and mouths pulled away from her and she turned onto her side, squeezing her legs shut and curling into herself as the sounds of clothes moving over skin and dropping to the floor echoed across countless memories to this moment. She couldn’t tell who pried her thighs apart and licked into her cunt and who grasped the sides of her face and licked into her mouth.

The soft, sweet tenderness of the kiss had her believe it was Anders, but his husky whisper of “Fuck, kjære! Jeg har savnet deg!” from between her legs corrected her.

Confusion boiled up along with her panic as she tried to reconcile Vidar’s cruelty with how he was kissing her now. The gentle, slow slide of his tongue persuading her to respond instead of overpowering and taking pleasure in forcing her was too confusing for her to understand. Frightened of displeasing him in her helpless condition, she returned his kiss shyly, her insides clenching in terror when he purred out a small sound of pleasure and moved his hands down her neck. She breathed in as much as she could through her nose, preparing for him to choke her, but his hands kept sliding down past her neck, even past her breasts that she was sure he would crush and twist to mottle with bruises, stopping only to gently fondle her belly. The reminder of her pregnancy hit her harsher than any physical pain he could have dealt her, refreshing the flow of tears down her face and ripping a sob out of her that she felt him smile at. His cruelty hadn’t eased, it had only evolved.

“Can you feel our child growing inside you, sweetheart?” he whispered against her swollen lips before pressing another heartbreakingly sweet kiss to them. She could only shudder in response.
Anders’ tongue laved over her clít in a long, slow lick that arched her back and expelled a quavering moan against Vidar’s mouth. He repeated the move, extending the slowness and pressing harder against that little bundle of nerves to bring her so close to the edge of orgasm already. Her shame and fear were washed out in the blinding glare of that promise of release, but he pulled back, left her desperate on the edge as he teased her with small, light licks. The dull ache of denial throbbed at the end of each eager pulse of her cunt begging for relief until it began to physically hurt in a way his teasing hadn’t before. She needed to come and that need steadily encroached over all thought and feeling, overwhelming even her sorrow at how easily they could debase her to this point.

She only became aware of the high-pitched whines she was making when Vidar pulled away from her pleading kiss to laugh and whisper, “The little bitch wants a bone, doesn’t she?”

His mocking tone reignited her frustration and she tried to twist away from him, but he grabbed her by the leather collar around her neck and yanked her back into a crushing kiss that was more like the cruelty she’d dreaded. There was no point in fighting. Her head swam with both the drug and their tongues working in tandem to drain the will to resist out of her, proving what she already knew: her body did not belong to her. If they wanted, they would fuck her. If they wanted, she would beg. It didn’t matter what she really wanted; that was already decided for her. It had always been decided, far before she was ever aware of it, far before she was even born. This was the cycle they were all born into, after all.
Soft, shivering flesh writhed languidly beneath Vidar as he kneeled over his slave’s prone body and slid his cock in the cleft of her ass. The sounds of his shaft rutting between her cheeks were sloppy with the wet slick he’d dragged up from her cunt, but the sounds of her sucking Anders’ cock were outright lewd. His eyes now fully adjusted to the darkness, he watched as the younger man helped her drugged weakness along with his fingers deeply tangled in her hair, much of those wavy locks now loose from the thick braid since they’d begun handling her with increasing roughness. It calmed the chaos of Vidar’s mind to see his little brother so happy at last with their darling slave nestled so lovingly between them, like nothing else in the world mattered. Nothing else had to matter, not anymore.

“Oh, God, dearest…” Anders muttered breathlessly, his hips driving up into her faster to fuck her throat with an increasing urgency. She grunted and flinched as she fought her gag reflex with endearing dedication, but he seemed too far gone to notice her struggle. “So good… shit, you’re such a good girl… Good girl…”

“Don’t come yet, dipshit,” Vidar warned him scoldingly. “Where are your goddamn manners? We haven’t even fucked her yet.”

To his dismay, Anders held her mouth sealed around the base of his cock, forcing her to swallow his come as he groaned out his climax above her. Simone’s body tensed under Vidar’s hands as she tried not to choke on the warm semen gushing down the back of her throat while he glared at him, annoyed at his little brother’s impatience. It was easy to forget that Anders had little experience in this type of play. Perhaps it would have been prudent to speak on the unspoken rules of their engagement beforehand, but the younger man had bristled in the past at each mention of their joined trysts with Simone. There was much to discuss, later. Every wandering of Vidar’s thoughts to anything outside of this room and this moment threatened to shatter what fevered peace he held together within him, so everything else had to be later, or even better yet, never. Some things were better left outside of the mind.

“S-sorry, dearest…” Anders mumbled between panting breaths as he lifted her mouth off his cock. Lost in his own drunk affection for their girl, he seemed to have not heard Vidar’s reproach as he bent and nuzzled her lovingly before kissing her wet lips. The honest and easy love the younger man could wield for her stirred a familiar and strange frustration in Vidar that he counted on the darkness to hide from his scowl. “You are too good at this… Hmm… don’t worry, we will take care of you too. You want to come, yes, dearest?”

The soft and warm way Anders whispered to her between lingering kisses both irritated and enticed something in Vidar, prompting him to lean forward and whisper close behind her ear, “We’re going to keep you fucked and used, just like I promised. You’re going to love your new life, sweetheart.”

“P-please, I can’t- I can’t do this, just please let me… let me wait in peace.”

Her shivering and whimpering response wasn’t quite what he’d hoped to hear. Not that her fear or her sorrow weren’t what he wanted, but for whatever reason, he wanted her to desire this as much as her body very obviously told him she did. He was sick, his mind was poisoned, and his self-identity was mutilated beyond his recognition, but he wasn’t deluded. He knew it was unforgivable to even want another living, breathing human being this way and if he had any conscience at all, he would have eaten a bullet before ever touching his niece. But she wasn’t quite his niece and she wasn’t quite a living, breathing human being.
“Don’t be so shy,” he jeered, rubbing the ridge of his cockhead against her tender pucker. Her shiver grew into a tremble and she gasped sharply as he pressed harder, feeling that tight muscle bend and flex as she instinctively clench to protect that delicate hole. Still sore, no doubt.

“We will make it good,” Anders assured her, his words muffled against her panting mouth as he held up her chin. “Please, dearest?”

She whimpered like a nervous puppy as he kissed her again, but those deep, wet kisses relaxed her almost unconsciously. It was fascinating how easily she bent to a little love and affection, no matter what it was that was asked of her in exchange. Vidar had observed this phenomenon several times before, though this was the first time it had struck him as something so transactional and shallow. Whatever love the girl may have had for Anders before was now reduced to what comfort he could offer her, and in seeing it acted out now, Vidar recognized the same pattern had formed between himself and Simone. The true devotion and unconditional love he knew she still held for her bastard father was as far from his grasp as it had been when she’d confronted his desire with that damning question.

Is this what you really wanted?

He wasn’t so sure anymore. He wasn’t sure about anything. He had what he had set out to obtain; she was his slave, in his possession, serving his pleasure. That’s what this was and that’s all this could be. There was no room to want for tenderness in the vice of his heart, so there was no point in envying the place Leif had crafted in the heart of his creation. But what was the point in having a slave if he could not do exactly as he pleased with her? She was his to love if he wanted, so he was entitled to enjoy her love in return if he wanted it, just the same as he’d enjoyed her fear and her suffering. The normal rules didn’t apply here, and maybe they’d never applied anywhere. So little mattered or made sense anymore.

“Ah-HAH! W-Wait! Stop!” she cried as he gripped his cock and pushed against her asshole with clear intent.

“Shut the fuck up and take it,” he growled out.

He began to squeeze into the soft heat beyond that band of tight muscle, the friction adding an uncomfortable warmth as he pushed past it. The lube was right there in the nightstand, but he wanted her raw and aching from this and, from the sound of her strained gasps and the trembling in her haunches, he grinned and licked his teeth in the thrill of his success. When he reared back, he spat a glob of saliva onto the base of her tailbone and watched as it slithered down the valley of her cleft to where he stretched her hole wide around his half-sunken shaft. With a few short pumps, he had her just barely lubricated enough with spit to drive forward and shove a startled cry from her as he pushed until he’d hilted. He lingered in this moment, savoring how she hugged every part of his cock in that snug heat, her muscles throbbing to adjust to the unwelcome intrusion while she panted to fight the impulse to resist.

“Does she… enjoy this?” Anders asked in a hesitant whisper.

Vidar broke from the marvelous sight of his tiny slave’s body fully impaled on his cock and smiled at his brother. His only brother. It was just them from now on, but that was a topic for later, or maybe never. It didn’t matter. He reached over to where his brother sat on the other side of their girl and squeezed his shoulder in friendly reassurance, noting with an odd pride how the younger man did not tense or react negatively to his touch as other men in such circumstances might. Save for the manipulation it had taken to break Anders’ moral conflict, this arrangement had come together seamlessly, almost naturally. Maybe it was natural. Vidar could no longer state with any certainty that he knew their true nature under the compulsory morality and conditioned thought that society
had cluttered it with. Chasing that thought, he moved his hand up to cup his brother’s cheek, watching for his reaction. Confused and a little startled, Anders wrinkled his brow, but he didn’t pull away. Vidar grinned, delighted at the wealth of trust his brother had placed in him, and filed it away as something to investigate further. For now, he had a better idea of how far he could stretch the boundaries of propriety with him.

Grabbing Simone around the front of her waist and shoulder, he hauled her up into his lap as he knelt back onto his heels. Even with the dead weight of her drugged state, maneuvering her limp body to straddle him with her back pressed to his chest was effortless just by how much smaller she was compared to him. With one arm snaked around her front to hold her chin up in the wide span of his palm and the other wrapped around her waist to keep her steady against him, he nuzzled her sweat-damp hair and pressed a kiss to the top of her head before testing this position with a roll of his hips. She choked on her sharp intake of breath, stuttering some wordless rasp of pain as he sunk deeper into her tight hole, and he hummed in gratified approval at finding that snug narrowing at the end of her rectum. It was a good thing he’d come twice already within the last twelve hours or that sweet spot in her would milk him far too quickly. The look on Anders’ face to see his sweet little “daughter” so lasciviously displayed was worth all the effort of drugging her.

“Touch her,” Vidar whispered, and he needn’t say it twice.

Anders was upon her in an instant, his hunger for their darling slave not abated in the slightest by having climax. His mouth ate the whimpering grunts Vidar rocked out of her with each upward saw of his cock into that resistant hole, her muscles pulsing and body shaking in seemingly equal response to the fearsome affection of the younger man. It wasn’t long at all before Vidar could feel her wetness dripping down his sac from his little brother’s fingers searching her cunt for ways to make those shy little grunts become the wanton moans of the whore they knew she was.

“Come on, dearest, doesn’t it feel good? Don’t you want to come for papa?” Anders whispered, one hand busy at her cunt as the other kneaded her breast and pulled at her nipple.

Even when he spoke in the Norwegian she didn’t understand, her body reacted to the husky murmurs as much as his digital manipulations. Her pelvic muscles began to bare down in exquisite tension and she started to groan deliriously, both the drug and the stimulation between two men overcoming her emotional misery. In all Vidar’s experience simulating rape fantasies, nothing could compare to the reality of forcing his slave’s pleasure against her will. He slid his hand down from its hold on her chin and grinned through his panting as she seemed to find the strength to hold her head up on her own to meet the kisses Anders licked from her mouth. The heady combination of her lustfulness and her constant want for love could apparently work miracles to overcome sedation. Vidar buried his nose into her hair and kissed her scalp again, his own affection for this delightful creature flourishing at how sweetly she submitted to their sex. This was perfect. They didn’t need anyone else but each other; they could leave their old lives with no regrets and find a future just for their little family. He slid his freed hand down the length of her body and felt how his brother was roving his fingertips along the hand that pumped two thick fingers into her pussy and curiously avoided her clit. He chuckled at realizing the intention of that.

“You’re still edging her,” he smirked, unable to disguise his amusement. “You’re going to drive her insane.”

“Mm-hmm…” Anders hummed in sly confirmation of both assessments.

Something he did in her cunt just then made her yelp and then shudder, her inner muscles jerking and throbbing with it, still not enough to have come but enough to pull a groan from Vidar. Only twenty minutes in, and he was already sweating to control the urge to hammer her ass to completion. He’d
missed her so much.

“Lie back. I want to join in,” Anders murmured hurriedly.

Vidar paused his rhythm to unfold his legs from under him and mutter, “About time, you quickdraw adolescent fuck.”

“God, shut up,” his little brother groused back as he kept Simone’s shaking thighs pried open while Vidar leaned them both to lie on their backs.

The position made it a little difficult to fuck up into her, but that soon wouldn’t matter as Anders slid over them and pumped his recovering cock with his fist as he positioned it to her unused hole. Her trembling gave way to a terrified stiffness as he shoved his way into her vagina, the crowding in both holes benefiting the tightness of each to a once again uncomfortable extent and causing both men to wait for her to relax before moving. The resistance her body put up each time was endearing, if at times a bit challenging.

“Childbirth isn’t going to be easy on her,” Anders chuckled.

“You’re thinking about that now?”

Through the darkness, he could see Anders shrug and smile a bit sheepishly, making it difficult to be annoyed with how happy the news of her pregnancy had made him. Not that Vidar had much time to be annoyed because the younger man was already thrusting, his motions moving her on both their cocks and pulling a pain-choked moan from her with each rocking slide of them stretching her open. The fluttering shiver of her throbbing inner flesh heralded an ascent to the climax she’d been so systematically denied, quickly working to transform that pain into eagerly-sought pleasure. The switch from resistant reluctance to reluctant participation was subtle, though Vidar knew it wouldn’t be long until the only thing she’d be fighting was the sedative in her pursuit of orgasm. Leaning his head back and shutting his eyes, he reveled in the snug slide of her ass being worked up and down his length, pushing up into that sweet spot deep inside each time Anders’ rolling pace pulled her in.

“Hahh… ah… Ah! No, no, please, stop! Stop! I can’t take this, I’m… It’s…” Simone cried out, struggling weakly between them.

Anders immediately grabbed her wrists, not even faltering in his rhythm as he hushed her with a soothing, “Sshh-ssh… You are okay, dearest… Easy, easy…”

Vidar’s grip on her hips tightened warningly and she calmed, her brief panic descending back into that precarious balance between passive delirium and cooperative fear. It wouldn’t do to have her think she could stand a chance at fighting either of them off, sedated or not. After seeing what she was capable of doing to Maier with her arms bound and fatigue sweating out of every pore, he didn’t want to play around with her aggression too much without her securely restrained. Kissing that same sweet mouth that had savagely torn a man’s face just last night gave him both pause and a dangerous thrill. Seeing how fiercely Anders assaulted her mouth with a passionate tongue, he wondered if he perhaps should have warned him, but he was still undecided on whether or not to reveal how he’d come into that knowledge. The slap of his little brother’s pelvis ramming harder and faster into her flesh tore such distracting thoughts from his mind in a consuming wave of pleasure as her climax began to build with each sucking throb around him. The crescendo of her breathy moans rose pleadingly with each throb until she was almost sobbing in her wordless begging, but that was apparently not enough for his little brother.

“Say it, dear,” Anders hissed. The wet squelch of each push and pull into her sopping cunt was accented with the slap of sweat-slicked flesh and creak of the bedsprings beneath them, her wavering
high-pitched cries ringing above it all. “Say your need. Say it!”

“Beg for your papa to let you come,” Vidar helpfully supplied, his own release rapidly becoming imminent at this increased pace.

“Beg.”

She obeyed, those breathless moans forming, “Please, please, fuck me, let me come, let me…. Ah! Ah! Yes, papa, I need it! Oh, please, oh, oh, oh!”

With a startled cry, she bared down hard and shook through her orgasm. That sweet spot rubbed insistently on Vidar’s glans, her throbbing asshole pulling him deeper with her back arching as much as she could manage between them, and he pressed up into her harshly as it triggered his own climax. The pleasure was intense, bringing an ache along with each shuddering pull of his seed spilling into her and coating everything in a deeply intoxicating relief. Every pulsing tense and release had him choking on his gasp as she milked him into an extended high, his greed for this darling creature gripping him with a fierce need as he bent and opened his mouth to her neck. A primitive need to claim what he could of her body in compromise to what he could not claim of her heart filled him. The mottled texture of her bite wound, healed into pale and permanent scar tissue, fit under his teeth as he sucked her sweat-salted skin to mark her where her father had left his brand. She would be his one day, sometime into the life ahead of them, but for now, he could be content with her flesh and her submission.

With his climax leaving his cock oversensitive and his mind even foggier than before, he slid out from under her and left her to Anders’ passionate sex. Vidar lied on his side, watching his brother tuck Simone’s shaking and weak little body more snugly under his measured thrusts, and let his clouded thoughts drift through the afterglow. Life was a horrific, brief fumbling in a chaos that people spent their entire existence attempting to tame into sense and order. Some achieved that illusion, never knowing how close to losing that idea of success or security they really were, but it was all just luck. This pocket of peace Vidar had found within Anders and Simone was wrought of chaos, something that should have never come to be and existed despite all the fundamental rules and beliefs of a society that should have prevented it. It shouldn’t be, but he had killed to protect it. He had killed. It was no accident.

He had murdered his brother without a second thought.

Nausea descended over him in a feverish wave and he stood from the bed on shaking legs, gripping his head to lessen the spinning sensation within as he stumbled out of the room. The memory of Henrik standing in a growing puddle of his own deep red blood stained his mind as he leaned against the wall for guidance on his way to the bathroom. It wasn’t an accident. The light in the bathroom was blinding and he blinked through the ache in his eyes as they adjusted, staring at his pallid reflection until red drew his gaze downward. A sharp panic pulled him stumbling backward at the sight of the blood coating his crotch, his heart thrashing wildly in alarm. Fresh, bright red painted him in murder and he turned on both taps in the shower to full blast in the urgent need to wash it off. When that spray of icy water hit him, he panted through the memory of that expanding puddle on the pale hardwood under Henrik’s feet, that memory twisting and replaying until he was drowning, drowning in the blood he had loosed from his own brother’s heart. He didn’t know how long he stood under the tepid shower unable to remove his hands from his pounding head to scrub that red off himself, but by the time he had worked up the will to look down, the water ran clear and his skin was white. Uncertainty wormed its way into the tangled wreck of his thoughts, making him wonder if the blood had ever even been there. The hallucinations were never so vivid, but he could recognize his own instability with a clarity that made him wish for the delusion of madness. He could see the wickedness that had infected him and know the sickness he had spread around him because of it but
seeing and knowing weren’t enough to stop him. With the blood of his older brother still pooling in his writhing mind, he knew, with the terrible certainty of experience, that nothing would ever stop him.

A loud bang tore him from his thoughts and he startled, his panic sinking back down when he saw it was just Anders that had burst into the room.

“Why didn’t you tell me she was hurt?!” the younger man demanded.

Vidar, too rattled to care and too exhausted to draw this out, turned off the taps and said, “We... I will tell you, but I want you to do something first.”

Anders glowered at him, a snarl twisting his lip back from his sharp incisor as he spat, “What?”

“Go home, get your passport, pack for a long trip, call someone to mind the dogs. I’ll tell you when we’re on the road.”

No matter where Leif was in the world, from Seattle to Macau, convenience stores somehow sold the same burnt, weak, mediocre coffee. He stirred in a copious amount of creamer to mask the unpleasant taste with the cloying sweetness of artificial vanilla before taking it and a slightly green banana up to the cashier, wanting to get on his way to where he remembered Anders was living before lunch hour traffic hit Oslo. Glancing up from taking the cash out of the wallet he had taken from his victim, he looked for the cigarette display before remembering they don’t make it quite so obvious in this country and was about to ask for a pack of Prince menthols when a black and white printed photo taped to the wall behind the register caught his eye. It was grainy and printed on plain copier paper, but the image of Simone was undeniable in that security feed still of her, rifle slung over her shoulder and Hell carried in her eye, walking through the door not even four yards away from where he stood now. Written in bold marker above the picture was a warning to phone the police if this individual was sighted. That was his girl, all right.

“Excuse me, when was she last here?” he asked, pointing to the picture.

The cashier looked to where he was pointing, then looked back at him with a wary frown. “You mean Simone Valstad?”

Leif put on a smile. That this man knew her name was promising, but apparently so did half of Norway considering the tabloids his family been featured in. “Does she come here often?”

“No... not sure,” the cashier responded tersely, giving him a hard stare before deciding to answer. “She came in yesterday, stole merchandise, threatened one of my employees with a hunting rifle, and drove off like a maniac. Before that, she beat some poor Swedish son of a whore down in a coffee shop. Can you believe a bitch that short could cause all that trouble?”

“Hard to believe,” Leif agreed.

The chime that announced the door opening drew his attention, a distracting reflex he’d lost control of after spending months trapped where the coming and going of people would always demand something of him, but the disheveled man limping through grabbed his focus instantly. In the swollen, deep red gouges carved into the mutilated side of the man’s paled and haggard face, he recognized the work of the artist he was most familiar with. The swooping, curving lines framed the thinner scratches of contoured hatching that gave the ridged texture of the ram’s horn the illusion of
dimension, its curled tip nearly touching the grisly corner of the crudely sewn Glasgow smile. His darling girl had marked this man as one of her sheep.

“Sir! Don’t forget your coffee!” the cashier called after him as Leif grabbed the man by his torn shirtsleeve and pulled him outside before he had the chance to react.

The scarred stranger didn’t put up too much of a fight, too busy stumbling to remain upright as he was dragged backward, but as they drew closer to Leif’s borrowed SUV, he spoke with a clearly American accent, “Pardon me, sir, but I believe you must have me mistaken for someone else.”

Leif threw him against the passenger side of the car, the man recovering from the bodily impact with a curiously detached and weary sigh before looking up at him. The widening of the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut was all Leif needed to confirm that this man recognized him past his flimsy disguise, but the reactions after that were intriguing. That mangled mouth hung open in shock, then twisted into a crooked grin.

“How about we go for a ride?” Leif suggested, glad to be able to switch back to the English he was much more comfortable with for the upcoming torture and interrogation.

“Of course, Mr. Valstad,” the wounded man spoke with a monotone calmness that didn’t match the manic grin pulling at the unmarred side of his face. “Might I suggest a destination?”

Amused at this man’s odd nature, Leif smiled, “Please.”

“There should be something waiting for you at Vidar Valstad’s residence.”

Leif’s brow quirked at the suggestion that Vidar of all people had come into the possession of Simone, then furrowed at the implication that Francis had to have known all along where she was if that were true. This was clearly one of Francis’ men; anyone else having this knowledge would have either tried to kill him or themselves upon being discovered. There were too many unknowns to jump to such conjecture yet, however. He reached under his captive’s suit jacket and removed the handgun from his side holster, tucking it under the waistband of his borrowed jeans at his back before patting him down to find a scalpel hidden in his pocket as well. Keeping the man’s sleeve in his grasp, he opened the passenger door and leaned in to grab the machete sitting on the center console before pushing him into the car. His captive didn’t need much direction, calmly situating himself into the seat and giving no hint to running off. Assured by the man’s cooperative attitude and the loaded gun now in his possession, Leif walked around to the driver’s seat and started the vehicle. This was all coming together almost too conveniently, even for his level of good luck, but he didn’t sense a trap.

“What do I call you?” he asked, tucking the machete between the seat and the door as they turned onto the road.

“Maier.”

The name was familiar, as was the better half of his face. Leif looked at the man again, studying the plain, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant features, the glassy dead eye, the utter mundanity of the unremarkable face beneath those remarkable wounds, and remembered.

“Special Agent Dick Maier,” Leif said. “You were on the case, gathering evidence to be used against me. Is this where you went missing when you vanished?”

“Indeed, Mr. Valstad.”

Leif smiled. “They, that is, the FBI, seems to hold the impression that some fatal vengeance was done to you in my honor. Funny how that relates to your current predicament. So, what brought you
to Norway? Was it the FBI, the Marceaus, or the good Dr. Aguiyi?

“Yes,” Maier answered.

“Yes?”

“Yes to all three.”

“Sounds complicated, answering to three masters.”

“I have but one master, Mr. Valstad.”

“And who would that be?”

Maier turned his steadfast stare from the road and Leif met it in a brief glance, feeling comfortsed by the presence of another hunter and excited in anticipation of killing him. He’d grown spoiled on the challenge of wrenching life from those who were accustomed to taking it to the point where he felt no bloodlust toward the general population any longer. This man, with his empty eyes and steady hands, was almost undoubtedly a true killer.

“I serve only in the interests of the demon king himself. You are the only master I can accept, Mr. Valstad.”

Leif resisted the urge to sigh in exasperation at being attended to by another religious fanatic, outwardly opting to say instead, “I hope your loyalty proves fruitful, Dick. Tell me about those scars.”

“Ms. Valstad carved me just this morning and she gave me this smile last night, sir,” Maier explained.

His flat tone betrayed nothing of his thoughts; no emotion, no pretense, no indication of lying. Leif felt a passing discomfort at having to rely on information from this unreadable man, but at least in this case, Maier had offered up the truth, as cursory as it was.

“You were with her all night?” Leif asked, unable to keep suspicion from darkening his tone. “Have her tastes changed so drastically as to have become a sadist with a preference for brunettes?”

“I am not familiar with any changes to her preferences. However, I am afraid I had done well to earn my scars from Ms. Valstad,” Maier answered. “In the interests of obtaining information on her extended absence, I’d had her whipped by Vidar Valstad as part of an interrogation. The interrogation did not yield a preferable outcome despite the enhanced techniques used, although that is perhaps mostly due to my failure in maintaining control of the situation. As a result of my failure, both she and Vidar Valstad have defected, and I have sufficient reason to assume they may attempt or have already attempted to flee.”

Leif pushed down the urge to pull over and hack Maier down into a quivering lump of gore with the machete as he gripped the steering wheel and sorted his violent emotions from observation of the words. There was a necessity for interrogation, implying that this man didn’t have information about where Simone had been hiding these past two months. Vidar took a whip to his daughter. The use of the word “flee” indicated that she’d been monitored while in Norway, a concept that had occurred to Leif as something Mrs. Marceau had arranged to keep him cooperative. Vidar had whipped his Simone. More importantly, despite the urgent demand that Simone be brought to him, Maier chose to interrogate her first. There was no point in the delay for such tertiary reasons— unless the need to bring her forward was not his primary objective, or among his objectives at all. Vidar had whipped his darling girl and now she was with him.
Swallowing the demand to know how many lashes Simone had taken from the whip, Leif asked, “Who have you been taking orders from?”

Maier silently contemplated his response as Leif ground his teeth in the rising desire to grab his neck and smash his broken face against the dashboard before he answered, “I am under the direct command of Dr. Francis Aguiyi, sir.”

“Then why didn’t you bring Simone to me?”

Another hesitation, then, “That was not among the orders sent to me from Dr. Aguiyi.”

Leif felt a heavy weight fill him at that, his friend’s betrayal clear to him but not the motive behind it. There was no gain to be had in keeping Simone from him. It didn’t make sense. “What were the orders?”

“I cannot answer that question, sir.”

“You will.” Leif kept his hard glare on the road, driving faster towards where he both hoped to find Simone and dreaded to. For now, he could only keep moving forward.
Chapter 70

*Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear.*

The words of James Baldwin floated up from the depths of distant memory in the bold and throaty voice of Miss Peckham. It had been five years since Simone had attended the youth church in Queens, but there in her mind was Miss Peckham speaking of how the light of hope shines brightest in the dark and how sometimes God will put forth that darkness to bring the light out of you. Simone was not brought up in a religious household, she did not nod along with the proverbs, she only went to appease the friend who had invited her, but sitting in the back of the church with her mind steadily falling apart and her future shrinking to fit into her parent’s apartment for the rest of her life, she heard the words of Baldwin and listened. When she was expelled from school, she understood it was because of her broken mind. When the policeman slammed her head into the concrete until her hair was matted and dripping with blood, she understood it was because of her ethnicity. When her best friend’s parents told her they didn’t want her to talk to their son anymore, she understood it was because of her emerging womanhood. There was nothing she could do, it was just the way things were. She tried to understand the inhumanity of a world that so often told her she was inferior for all these reasons, but she couldn’t, so she heard Baldwin’s words from Miss Peckham’s mouth and let them carry her above the fear the world offered.

Lying in the darkness, on bedsheets soaked in the sweat of the sex that was forced on her, wearing a collar that kept her chained there in case the drug wasn’t enough to disable her, she heard the words again, but they didn’t carry her. They weren’t for her anymore. Her personhood had been whittled away until it was almost easy to shed entirely. She was an inferior thing not worthy of humanity, so it didn’t matter that this had happened again, that she’d been drugged again, that she’d succumbed to that need to fuck again. It hurt this bad because she deserved to hurt for the ruin she’d brought into their lives, because she was disgusting, because she was a monster. If that weren’t true, they would not do this to her, and more tellingly, the sex wouldn’t feel so terribly, disgustingly good.

“It doesn’t… matter…” she murmured to the dark.

The sound of the shower running had started up again and Anders had left after the yelling had stopped, so perhaps she had time. She touched the collar around her neck, pulling at the leather and chain, but she didn’t have the key to the padlock on it. The drug made the air seem thick and heavy, making any movement laborious and difficult even to breathe. It took minutes to muster the strength and coordination to pull herself up to the headboard, her fingers clumsily gripping the wooden bars until she found the bedpost the chain was wrapped around and secured with another padlock.

She breathed the thick air, just focusing on the weight of it filling her lungs until the screaming in her mind quieted. She shut her eyes and thought of the outside, of the breeze stirring the curls at the tips of her hair and the sunlight warm on her face. The screaming was now distant murmuring, growing distinct until the rolling rumble of them formed the voices of her uncles speaking in solemn Norwegian. The warmth on her face and the wind moving her hair was so vivid and the drug crawled through her veins pleasantly now, dizzying her enough to feel as though she was drifting along a tide instead of being pulled into a whirlpool. A droning hum blended it all in a smear of drowsiness that tugged her towards sleep, but she couldn’t fall asleep on this drug or she’d be out for hours, completely vulnerable. She couldn’t let it pull her under, she had to stay awake, stay right where she was, waiting for them to come for her where they knew to find her. If they would only come find her and take her to him, she could do something, anything to stop it all. There had to be a way; they just had to find her, and then she could find it.
Simone forced her eyelids to open, blinking away the brightness that blinded her until she found herself looking at the gray interior of Anders’ car. Late afternoon sunlight poured through the open window above her, the wind blowing through it stirring the locks of her hair that had escaped her ruined braid. Dread filtered through the thick fog of her mind to twist in her belly. She was not where she was to be found. Her sluggish heart lurched to flutter around in her chest like a trapped bird when she tugged at the ropes binding her wrists to her ankles, keeping her curled tightly inward on her side. She tried to unbend her legs and the rapid beginning of a panic attack choked her when she found that her knees were tied to the collar still around her neck. Noise and light crushed in, the world blurring in jagged motion and roaring in fury, filling her, stretching her, tearing her apart. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. *She couldn’t breathe.*

A cold sweat crawled across her skin as she tried to force her lungs to work, struggling against the ropes in a frenzy, screaming without being able to push the air past her vocal chords until at last she forced out a sound she couldn’t hear. The spinning world swayed harshly and there were hands prying her jaw open, but she couldn’t see and she couldn’t think to wonder what was happening when she felt fingers crowd into her mouth. The bitter bump they left under her tongue foamed in her saliva. More hands, grabbing, rubbing, soothing voices floated under the crashing din that filled her ears, but she couldn’t feel, she couldn’t hear, she couldn’t see. Then she began to sink, deeper and deeper, the pressure crushing her until she was immobile, the depths darkening until she was blind, the distance silencing the clamor until all was quiet. The nothingness pulled her into its bleak and immutable peace as her life floated up out of her, but she wasn’t alone in the death that waited with patient certainty. Another life was with her. It was too late for her, too late for the frightened boy in the photograph, but it couldn’t already be too late for the life that hadn’t even yet lived. Before the darkness swallowed the last bit of her, she heard a tiny heart beating beneath hers and she endured the dark.

There was a recently-built fence outlining the property, the five-foot planks still pale and splintered at the edges, requiring Leif to cover the spiked tips with his borrowed shirt to avoid any nasty splinters as he vaulted over it rather than risk being seen entering through the front gate. He shook the grime off the garment as he looked for any windows that weren’t covered, becoming quickly annoyed with Vidar’s rightfully justified paranoia upon seeing that there was to be no simple way of observing the interior happenings of the house from the exterior. Usually, Leif preferred to observe the habits of his victims in their habitats for a while if the kill called for a home invasion setting, coming to understand their routines with a familiarity that lent itself to more easily predict the direction and behavior of the chase once he allowed them to realize their homes had become his hunting ground. He would be going in blind with this task and, yet worse, the targets already had Simone as potential leverage. Vidar, though quick-witted, lacked experience to effectively utilize her as a hostage, making the situation even less favorable in that she might be harmed in the ensuing panic. This was a sloppy, shoddy endeavor and Leif did not like the lack of method he was applying to it, but he could not wait on method to mature this brash tactic. Simone was in the charge of the man who had whipped her. Leif unsheathed the machete and left the shirt folded over the back of a lawn chair at the thought, looking forward to the sensation of his brother’s blood splattering his bare skin.

The front door had an unfortunately sturdy security screen, but the backdoor was of a standard wood variety and the metal lock broke through the frame with one solid kick. With his presence now loudly announced, he entered immediately, his senses attuned to any sign of movement in the darkened house. He’d done this dozens of times before. Rarely was anyone ever prepared to defend their home from invasion even if they possessed the means of defense, especially among those unacquainted with violence, although his two remaining brothers had recently acquired an
acquaintance with this very concept. Leif had no choice but to move quickly with a near recklessness that sung through the wide blade in his grip as though the conductive property of the metal could carry the current of his rage. Room after room revealed only stillness, the halls yawning with silence and the walls cold with absence.

The machete sighed back into its sheath. The news of Henrik’s unfortunately-timed demise had no doubt spooked his brothers to take flight. The sleek little sedan parked haphazardly in the driveway hinted that they had taken Anders’ car, a fact reinforced by the evidence of both Anders’ vehicle and the pack of mutts missing from the youngest brother’s residence when Leif had passed by that property on his way here. His brain sizzled with frustrated unfulfillment as he resigned himself to yet another delay in finding his girl.

Moving at a more leisurely pace for one last sweep of the residence, his steps halted abruptly at the master bedroom doorway when he caught the scents lingering from within. He moved through the darkness, deeper into the recent scents of Simone, Vidar, Anders, fear, blood, sweat and… sex. A scraping sensation clawed against the walls of his skull with the confirmation this evidence brought: his brothers had taken his child and used her for sex. His nails dug into his tightening fists until the sting told him he’d broken skin, but he couldn’t let the beast of his wrath overtake him. Not yet. He leaned over the bed, noting how the mattress had been stripped bare and certain he would find the sheets in the garbage bin outside if he looked.

He did not have Simone’s perceptive and overwhelming imagination, and as he ran his palms over the rough-hewn fabric of the mattress and then brought them to his nostrils, he felt a fleeting fit of gratitude that the limits of reality did not bend to show him what had transpired here. Mere hours earlier, she had bled and fucked and cried without him there to piece her back together. It was not wholly unsurprising to Leif that the same darkness that lived in him had also tempted his brothers, but that lack of shock did not alleviate the effect of this realization. It had been nearly three months since Mrs. Marceau had all but gifted Simone to Anders. Three months, within which the repressed young man had unfolded these wretched desires from the false morality he’d constructed to contain them. Three months of his daughter being fucked not only by the uncle she’d allowed herself to be tricked into loving and trusting, but also the uncle who had taken a whip to her without question or complaint.

“I will find you,” he said, trying to contain the destructive heat that was steadily burning away his self-control, “and you will never be lost to me again.”

His objectivity waning, the black tendrils of rage curled around his mind, and another scent yanked his attention. He’d caught it before, a few days after that first fateful fuck in Vermont, but it had been so faint he’d disregarded it out of hand as a common hormonal irregularity. There was no denying what this scent now confirmed of that passing suspicion; Simone carried the culmination of his seed in her womb.

He pressed his hands to his face as if to hold himself together. For all the recklessness he accused of his brothers, it was his own barbaric carelessness that had allowed his seed to germinate in his own child. This wasn’t meant to happen, not for five or ten years at least, and certainly not with his own genetic code folding into redundancy with her own, risking congenital disorders among the myriad of other difficulties such close and repeated inbreeding entailed. The hardships his sibling-related grandparents had endured just to produce a meager two suitable offspring after nearly a dozen unviable lives hadn’t survived their first year had put him off the idea of repeating that mistake. Yet he had done exactly that. He wanted it to seem as unfortunate and foolish as he knew it to be, wanted that wrathful flame to engulf him in the full consequence of this egregious error, but the scent and knowledge that she was impregnated by him incited a primal gratification he could not staunch. This misalignment between his thoughts, his emotions, and his self was the root of the rift that had brought
him into his daughter’s bed in the first place; he could not allow it to negate his stance on this subject, yet that paternal yearning struck him with surprising voracity. It also dissolved his will to remain lucid in this nightmare that kept denying his daughter to him.

His nails, thick and hardened by the restless work he’d put into strengthening his grip, tore into the fabric of the mattress as his fingers curled. A high tinny sound pierced his skull and he did not hear the sound of his fist cracking the solid wood of the headboard in one impulsive strike. He looked at the splintered slab and breathed out a heavy sigh, relinquishing the concept of concealing any evidence of his presence. In fact, stealth was decidedly no longer part of his method. Let the whole country quiver in fear of his fury, for all he cared of such a polite and discreet method to benefit the comfort of sheep. There was a monster in their midst and they would soon know it. Still, he could acknowledge his bloodlust required he kill someone before he did something rash. As though on cue, a distant knock filtered through the high piercing whine and the hot breath scraping out of him hitched in anticipation at the sight of two police officers waiting at the front door. Two unsuspecting pigs, fattened on their illusions of authority, were welcome to the venom thickening his blood as he opened the door.

“Vidar Valstad?” one of the policemen asked, squinting to see the tall figure amidst the shadows.
“We understand this is a difficult time, but we have some questions-”

Leif interrupted him with an upward swing of the machete, slicing through the officer’s abdominal wall and loosing his innards in a splatter before thrusting the blade across his partner’s eyes. There was a level of force that the thick steel of a machete required of its wielder to enact fatal violence onto its victim, its use as a tool to clear vegetation not lending itself well to cleaving flesh and bone, and it was exactly these difficult qualities that provided Leif with the satisfaction of having to throw himself into the kill. He wanted this messy, inefficient, and gruesome. The hacking of the dull edge into the blinded one’s neck and head was nearly more of a bludgeoning than a slicing, though it quickly produced an arterial spray that showered Leif in its gratifying warmth. There was something uniquely pleasing in chopping away at something until it lost all resemblance to what it once was.

“With all due respect, officer,” Leif said above the squealing peals of the disemboweled as he pulled him into the darkened entryway, “I don’t think you understand how much of a difficult time I’m having right now.”

After he was done with them, he smoothed his hair into his calculatedly disheveled bun and slid the t-shirt over his torso, piecing the disguise back together before leaving. The obvious appearance of blood had been towelled off his skin and the dark material of the jeans hid the nature of the stains, leaving only its pungent reek to cling to him. It would have been a futile effort to wash it off since he intended to spill more shortly. Maier watched him approach the car with his one good eye in expressionless anticipation, nothing about his calm and clinical manner saying anything about the bicycle lock Leif had used to secure his ankle to the seat or the fact that he had seen two policemen enter the property and only the assassin exit.

Rather than go immediately to the driver’s side, Leif opened the passenger door and leaned down to level his glare with his happy prisoner’s adoring gaze as he said, “Tell me where they took her.”

“I cannot tell you that information until I have first acquired it, sir,” Maier responded. “But there is a way I may be able to acquire it.”

Leif gripped the edge of the door, his knuckles turning white and every muscle growing taut as he refrained from the delight of punching this man’s throat in to watch him choke, instead calmly stating, “Continue.”

Maier nearly perked up at being given permission to do so, taking a small breath before explaining,
“Very early on in my assignment, I had installed software on Anders Valstad’s cellular phone that enabled me to access the microphone, camera, and GPS applications even when the device appears to be turned off. I had also installed the same software on the cellular phone he had given Ms. Valstad, although her use and proximity to the device was too infrequent to be considered useful. So long as power is supplied to the device through the battery, I have been gathering and recording the information through those feeds onto my personal computer at my base of operations. There is a chance that I may be able to determine their location or destination, pending the device’s proximity to them currently or during any integral planning.”

Leif’s lip twitched in the want to curl back into a snarl. It was to be expected that Dr. Aguiyi’s top lackey had utilized the same methods of spying on his family as the doctor himself had spied on Leif through the cell phones he had supplied in his prior role as the order’s communications manager. He’d had no impressions of assured privacy so long as he was regarded as a prominent figure in the order, but how casually these methods were applied to something that should have been as harmless as monitoring his milquetoast littlest brother seemed gratuitous. Or perhaps his own anger was clouding his judgment. Apparently, they should have been watching Anders far closer than they were. The thought stirred his relentless need to possess and protect what was left of his daughter’s mangled psyche, even if it meant utilizing the help this odd little man offered.

“Is she okay? Is she going to be okay?” Anders asked, his fingers pulling harshly at the roots of his hair as he dragged his hands through it nervously. He couldn’t watch as Vidar had held her down and forced the sedative into her mouth, but he couldn’t just stand there either, so he paced through the grass on the side of the road and tried to just wait it out. Vidar was right to restrain her; God knows what would have happened if she hadn’t been tied up during that attack.

“Of course. This is what the pills are for,” Vidar assured him.

He was still leaning over her, though, not moving from her even as he insisted everything was fine. Anders rubbed the sweat from the back of his neck and tried to force himself to look, but his feet carried him away as his nerve failed before he could peer over his brother’s shoulder and he looked at the skid marks his sudden stop had made on the road instead.

“What the hell are we doing?” he murmured, his fingers sliding through his hair as his arms drifted numbly to his sides.

“Surviving,” Vidar responded.

Anders grit his teeth at the quick and casual answer, as though it were so clear what was happening when, in fact, nothing had made sense lately. He also didn’t mean for that to have been heard; losing half the hearing in his marred ear had reduced his ability to judge what was appropriate volume. In either case, he huffed out his frustration and checked his phone nervously. The signal was spotty this far from civilization, but that didn’t prevent him from fidgeting mindlessly through his photos and calendar.

Anything was better than thinking. If he let himself think, he would start to consider how gleefully he’d done the very thing that had tormented him to drinking. With a mind unfortunately cleared of the lust that had so quickly seduced him into forgetting his basic humanity, it was startling to see such stark and obvious evidence of his own madness. He had followed into the dark terrified of what his brother might have done to a woman, but upon finding that woman to be Simone, his terror had turned into enthusiasm for the very horrors he had just moments before condemned. He wanted to
look back and find a hesitance within that moment, somewhere in that elation and relief where he could honestly say there was reluctance or even just consideration towards what they were about to do with her, but there was none. The shift was seamless, natural, and instantaneous. It wasn’t until he’d pulled back the curtain and saw her fear, her shame, and her wounds that it had occurred to him exactly what he had done again and done with such joy, yet even then, it was a hollow observation rather than the guilt-stricken epiphany he knew it should have been. He had two months to realize his sickness and accept his guilt and all that contemplation had gone to waste the instant he touched her. It was one thing to know he was beyond redemption, but it was an entirely other thing to experience it so viscerally.

He didn’t hear his brother come up behind him until he jumped at the hand on his shoulder.

“Shit!” he snapped, jerking away from his brother’s touch, his shoes scraping over the dirt in his reactive scramble to escape him. “Don’t scare me like that, asshole!”

Instead of soothing his overreaction with humor or polite disregard, Vidar just blinked, his sharp features drawn by fatigue and haunted with a grief that dulled his eyes. Anders almost wished for the biting sarcasm his older brother used to belittle him so constantly with rather than this wan man that seemed only halfway there. The thin smile Vidar offered was nothing more than a manipulation of his facial muscles.

“She’s asleep again. The cabin is still about two hours out. I’ll drive the rest of the way,” Vidar offered.

Anders eyed his older brother, skeptical of his warmed-over corpse appearance, but he knew better than to argue with him even if he did look one stiff breeze away from collapsing. He dropped his keys in Vidar’s extended hand and slunk into the passenger seat, waiting until the car was in motion again before swallowing his cowardice and turning to look at her. With a blanket tucked over the ropes binding her battered body, she looked as though she was merely napping for the long car ride. There was the initial jolt of jubilation at the sight of her, an almost queasy excitement that hit him hard after so much hope and misery, then there was the static warmth of fulfilled possessiveness and a joyfully demanding affection. It was the absence of any sense of his wrongdoing, the blank hole where the shape of his guilt should have been, that distressed him. This was wrong. What they were doing and what they had done was wrong. He desperately wanted that to matter to him.

“Vid…”

“Hm?”

Anders bit the edge of his knuckle, unsure of how to give voice to something that was so vague and strange to him. He wanted to know what was wrong with them.

Instead, he asked, “You were going to explain what happened, right? Where did you find her? Why is she… what happened to her back? Where was she this whole time?”

Vidar didn’t appear to have heard him, his glassy eyes distant as they watched the road, but then he spoke in a voice so subdued that Anders had to lean in to hear, “Actually… Would you mind if we didn’t talk about that quite yet? I’ll explain… everything, but just for now… I’d rather not think about any of it.”

As much as he wanted to know, Anders was too worried for his brother to be irritated. The man seemed faded, only half there while the other half was beyond reach, almost hiding. Something had happened, that much was obvious. Something terrible.
“Are we in danger?” Anders asked. His gut tightened unconsciously at Vidar’s silent nod in response. He’d guessed that much from his abrupt and frantic demand that they go on this trip up north to his friend’s vacation home, though to have it confirmed filled him with a different dread. “Shouldn’t we have taken Henrik? I know he’s not really involved in this, but if they can’t have us… We should warn him, at least.”

Vidar’s jaw tensed as if considering what to say, but nothing came. He rubbed at that tension, some sort of anguish leaking into his darting eyes and for a moment, Anders thought that he might vomit. Slowly, that impression passed, and his brother only stammered something unintelligible before coughing and resuming his wary silence. With the subject apparently closed to him, Anders glanced back at their sleeping girl before committing himself to relax for the drive. She was still deeply unconscious, no more of that upsetting twitching and sputtering, and he allowed himself to believe that she wasn’t as distressed as she’d seemed. Certainly not by them, at least. Whoever had her had abused her, whipped her until the skin had split in several places across her back and choked her until her neck had bruised. He wouldn’t let that happen to her again, and neither would Vidar. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he slid his mind away from the evidence of her horrors. It was odd, sitting in the passenger seat for once. He’d been alone for so long, he couldn’t recall anyone having driven him in this car and, even if it was a small and silly concept, it hit him then that he wasn’t alone anymore. It was going to be the three of them from now on, and soon, that number was going to increase. Perhaps he was incapable of experiencing guilt regarding all of this because it wasn’t so wicked as it read on the surface. Nothing that resulted in something so beautiful could be wicked; they had just taken a different path than most.

At the peace this perspective brought to his mind, the tension in Anders’ body bled out of him and he shut his eyes, relaxing in the reassuring scents of his family so nearby. All those worrying little details about consent and morality would iron themselves out over time in the happy future they would have together. He finally had what he had wanted for so long, it was just difficult to trust that it was this easy after all the suffering and pain they’d each been through.

As Simone woke from drugged unconsciousness, she was immediately and immensely aware that she was not where she needed to be. Reality dripped into the thick and viscous nothingness, dissolving it with an acidic hiss that slowly became the sound of rainfall. Hands molded her body back together as they caressed and fondled her nakedness, but she was not afraid or embarrassed; these hands touched her with a familiar bid for sweetness and comfort that she automatically leaned into. Reality dipped back as this touch took her back to her mother’s cool palm checking her forehead for fever in the night, those work-hewn fingers gently brushing her wild mane from her face before lips replaced her hands to soothe the needy lonesomeness that sickness brought.

“Mom…?” she whispered, too weak to speak, too frightened to open her eyes.

“Ssshhh…” someone hushed her, the sound distinctively different from Lisa’s pitch.

Simone shut her eyes tighter against the tears her need pressed out of her. The soothing touch tucked between her thighs and belly to gently squeeze at the slight roundness her curled position had pronounced, right above where her baby was growing. She shuddered at the immediate thought; it was just a tiny cluster of cells rapidly dividing within a protective balloon in her body, but it was already her baby. She wanted her mother even more, wanted her there to stroke the hair she’d chided for being so offensively textured, to kiss her fever and tell her everything was going to be alright, even when it could never be alright again. Arms that were too thick with muscle and too long to
belong to Lisa cradled her against a body too flat and the edge of a cup tipped water too insistently against her lips until it spilled down her chin and she sputtered to swallow it. So often, especially when she was alone during those long days when Henrik was working, she conjured her mother by closing her eyes and caressing her own face, replaying memories of a familial affection that held no underlying desire or expectation of sex. She occasionally wondered, with a sinking shame, if she was capable of returning that kind of affection anymore or if all familial touch had forever been tainted to fall into the binary of threat or sex. The hand that wiped her chin held both.

“You are okay, kjære?” Anders’ voice, smooth as snake scales sliding down her spine, whispered into her ear.

The sense that she was in the wrong place returned with a severity that opened her eyes. The wooden room with its low, sloping ceiling was illuminated by the fire from the cast iron stove in the corner. She didn’t know this room, but she was too afraid to ask. Wherever she was, she wasn’t where she was supposed to be.

“Take me back,” she rasped, pushing ineffectively against him.

She was unbound and his hold was gentle, but the drug made her weak enough for none of that to be needed to keep her seated on his lap. Somewhere in her mind, she realized that she had been bathed and the reminder of just how much they could do to her unconscious body without her ever knowing made her shudder in horror. It was a stale horror at this point. He hushed her again, cradling her closer and pressing her head to his chest as he nuzzled his cheek against the top of her hair, and she had no choice but to allow this attempt to soothe her. There was no use in fighting them, especially when drugged. She pushed down the urge to cry in frustration and forced herself to accept this.

“Please,” she whispered plaintively, “please, please take me back. I don’t care what you do to me, just… I need to stay there.”

He murmured something in Norwegian against the top of her head, the small breaths that carried the foreign words warm on her scalp, but she couldn’t understand any of it and he wasn’t moving them from their seat in front of the fire. His hands began to caress and fondle her once more as he kept speaking, his touch becoming more rough and insistent as his words became more impassioned, almost frantic. Her fear accompanied his steady escalation, but there wasn’t anything she could do. If he wanted to dig his nails into her skin, he would. If he wanted to crush her against him until her ribcage bent, he would. There was nothing she could do to stop any of them.

“I don’t understand you,” she said.

He appeared not to have heard her, his stream of words continuing uninterrupted. An admission, a plea, a confession, a demand, she couldn’t tell what he was on about, and really, it had never mattered what he told her anyway. Every promise that he would help her, every claim that he loved her, every apology after he’d hurt her had never mattered. Despite his sincerity and intent, it had all led up to this. It was just the way things were.

Wincing from the pain of his nails dragging along the curve of her hip, she rasped, “I could never understand you…”

Finally, he stopped talking and they sat with only the sounds of the rain falling outside and the fire crackling inside for a moment, then he shifted her on his lap to straddle him. She swallowed the sick heat that rose in her chest as he reached between them and undid his pants to pull his erection out. His fingers dug into her hips as he pulled her closer, pressing her cunt to his cock, but not penetrating her yet. The warm, silky skin over the blood-engorged hardness was tantalizing against her sore labia even without the buildup of arousal, although arousal was quickly pouring its syrupy presence over
everything in her perception.

“You are wanting this, yes?” he asked, breathless with lust, hands twitching to pull her in. “Say it... Please, kjære, say you are wanting.”

She couldn’t remember how many times she had been used by them, she couldn’t even remember how many times she’d been used since the previous night, but it was never going to be enough to break this sick need she responded with every time. She shut her eyes and thought of her mother. Threat or sex, or threat and sex. There was nothing left. She leaned forward, weakly wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and felt him shiver when she opened her mouth on the side of his neck. Then, she bit down.
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The fire spat and crackled in the wood burning stove, its muted yellow glow casting shadows that danced to the rhythm of the flames. Anders cradled Simone in his lap, her much smaller frame fitting easily against him as he indulged in the soft wealth of flesh available to his touch, and he let his emotions flow unrestricted by fear of what he might feel after months of running from them and drowning them in drink. There was nothing to fear with her here in his grasp. Peace and contentment reigned where there was only rage and bitterness for so long, and loneliness for much, much longer before that. The same loneliness he’d seen in her, way back in Vermont, in her shy glances that pulled him in like a silent love call. Things were so simple then; all he’d had to feel guilty for was lusting after his niece to the point that when he’d first indulged in that lust, it had nearly destroyed him. So much had happened since then, so much that made those problematic details of their blood relation and age difference seem not only trivial, but not problems at all. Their bond was only strengthened by the blood they shared, his paternal role determined by the guidance he could offer her with his experience. He cupped her breast, circling the rough pad of his thumb over her nipple to feel it harden into a serviceable nub as he wondered when her physical changes would become more apparent. She would make a fine mother, he had no doubt. That raw protectiveness and loyalty she held for family would only increase for their baby.

“Just like an animal…” he murmured, smiling at the dark appropriateness of the offhanded remark when he remembered the collar and chain still locked around her neck. Its presence comforted him. She would learn to trust them again in time, and then she would earn her ability to go without the collar once they were sure she wouldn’t run. Vidar had explained it much better, had made Anders appreciate the effort and thought he’d put into these things the younger man would have never considered, but more than any explanation, Anders trusted him to know what was best. Vidar had gotten their girl back to them, after all. They were going to keep her any way they could. He squeezed the pliant mound in idle enjoyment of her softness and sighed in contentment.

“It’s starting to rain,” Vidar’s voice drifted through the open door to the bedroom. “I’m gonna go buy a pack of cigarettes before it gets too muddy out there. You want anything?”

Anders craned his head back to look at him as he asked, “You sure you want to go out? You should get more rest before driving again.”

“Not with how fucking early things close out here in the boonies,” Vidar groused, and then smirked as he approached them, “But thanks for worrying about me, mom.”

“Let me know if you find a signal anywhere out there, asshat,” Anders grumbled, frowning to keep from smiling at him. His older brother seemed more like his normal self since they’d settled into the cabin, but there was still something distant in him.

Vidar knelt in front of the chair, watching Simone’s sleeping face with a guardedly neutral expression that warmed into something that felt intrusive to witness. There was no reason to be shy around such private matters anymore, though. They were all part of the same private connection now, as awkward as adapting to that might be. Anders forced himself not to look away as his older brother reached out and, with a gentleness that seemed unnatural to him, tucked her hair behind her ear and caressed her cheek.

Anders debated with himself whether to voice his thoughts as he watched him do this, but the sad longing in his brother’s usually stern glare pressed him to say, “Why don’t you, um… You know, I don’t think you have to be so strict with her all the time. She doesn’t need to fear you to obey you.”
Whatever feeling was in Vidar vanished behind his typical callousness as he stood up and said with a finality that brooked no argument, “We don’t have that kind of relationship.”

“I’m not an idiot, Vid, it’s obvious that you want her to at least like you. If you want her to love you, just be a little nicer,” Anders suggested.

“If you want her to love either of us, you’re going to have to be a little smarter than that,” Vidar scowled. A cruel smile pulled at the edges of his mouth as he added, “You’ve been living in a dreamworld if you don’t think she hates us by now.”

The words stung deeper than Anders could have thought possible, yanking at an icy fear that quavered in his voice as he stammered, “That’s… That’s n-not true!”

“Come on, littlest brother, this act was cute back when we were just playing with her, but we’ve got to get serious now. There’s a baby on the way and we have to train her to the point where she doesn’t just kill the thing when we’re not watching.”

A cold chill ran up Anders’ spine. “Don’t… say that. She wouldn’t… She’s not that insane…”

Vidar shrugged and turned to walk to the door as he conceded with an insincere, “You’re probably right. Who knows what kind of crazy she is now after months of whatever was happening wherever she was?” He paused, looking back at him with a reassuring smile. “But don’t worry. We can train her into what we want her to be. Leif did it, and so can we. She might even learn to love us if we’re strict enough with her training, so don’t look so fucking sad.”

The door shut, leaving Anders alone with his horror. He gathered Simone closer, holding her for comfort as he denied his brother’s cruel ideas, but she was limp and unresponsive to his touch. She was just a body with no awareness to either push him away or pull him closer, and he hated that he suddenly wasn’t sure which she would do if she were awake. He felt her smooth, even breaths hitch and he pulled away enough to watch and caress her face, both eager and nervous for her to wake.

“Mom…?”

He didn’t know what to expect from her anymore. However, he did not expect that.

He shushed her, not knowing what else to do and suddenly at a complete loss of English to say anything, and soothed her with a comforting caress that tuck into the curl of her body to rub her belly. The tremor that travelled through her was a familiar one, having been present so often through her withdrawal period, and he wondered with a shock of worry if the sedatives they’d been feeding her were bad for the baby. He reached for the cup on the side table by the arm of the chair and propped her up in his hold to let her drink, his nervous hands fumbling the task at her mouth and dribbling water down her chin and torso as she coughed.

“You are okay, dear?” he cooed as he wiped the wetness from her chin.

She opened her eyes, the half-lidded grays glassy with drowsiness as they rolled blearily away from him to blink at their surroundings. Her sweat-dampened brow furrowed as she squirmed with a weakness and ineptitude that was so like a sleepy newborn puppy, he couldn’t help but squeeze her to him and hush her soothingly in the demanding affection that swelled in his chest. Her hair, freshly washed, had curled all on its own as it had dried by the warmth of the fire, not having been subjected to the rigorous combing he’d known her to apply to it immediately after bathing. He rubbed his cheek against that wealth of wild loose curls as she mumbled something, a franticness bubbling up along the muddy words that dribbled from her drug-slackened mouth.
“… ease… please, take me back,” he heard her whisper. “I don’t care what you do to me, just… I need to stay there.”

His arms wrapped around her tighter at the threat her request posed, and he kept his voice calm and low despite his horror as he muttered against her curls, “No, dear. No. You’re with us now, we’re not… You’re confused. I don’t know what happened to you, but you’re safe now. We’re going to take care of you and the baby. Take you back… What are you saying? You want to be with us, right? Of course, you do. We’re your family.”

She pushed against him, wriggling weakly to escape his embrace, making him clutch her tighter. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen. She was supposed to wake up groggy and confused but thankful to be safe with her uncles. He would get to take care of her, snuggle and fuss over her with abandon, and she would be crying tears of relief, not despair.

He ran his hands over her soft skin, fondling her roughly, but he needed her to feel how much he cared as he rambled, “Vidar was just being a grumpy bitch, that’s all. You love me. You have to love me, you said you love me. And I love you so much, dear. There’s nothing wrong with what we’re doing as long as it’s out of love, I mean… nothing’s that black and white. I knew we were pushing you too far, too fast, a-and that was a mistake, but come on, dear, you wanted it too. You wouldn’t have stuck around with me if I was… if it was just… Nothing’s changed. We still love each other, we still want to make each other feel good. Is that it? Do you want me to make you feel good, dear?”

The feel of her skin bunching under his fingernails as he dragged them harshly over her hip only occurred to him as hurtful when he heard the pain in her whispered, “I could never understand you…”

Shame silenced him, weighing his tongue down like lead in his mouth. It didn’t make sense. This wasn’t how this was supposed to go at all. He pushed the chain over her shoulder to dangle down her back as he maneuvered her to sit up and spread her thighs apart to straddle him. He could make this better, even if he had to show her how to feel. He fumbled between them until he undid his fly and pulled his cock out, the organ hard and greedy for a third turn in her that day. The heat of her bare cunt still a little red and inflamed from the overzealous fucking he’d given her earlier made him squeeze her hips and drag her closer, pressing her flush against his erection. She wasn’t wet at all. He would fix that.

Scrounging his mind frantically, he pulled together enough English to ask in a husky whisper, “You are wanting this, yes? Say it… please, dear, say you are wanting.”

She had to. He knew what this was, what they had together. Her submissiveness, her vulnerability, her reliance on him were undeniable factors, but that hadn’t meant he was taking advantage. This was something she wanted, it always had been. She was a masochist, a sub, all those things Vidar had shown him. They had pushed her too hard, he knew that, knew her fear and despair were real because they were part of his excitement, even if it had made him sick to recall when his head had cleared. She would forgive him again. He could make it better, make it like it was before when she had reached for him to comfort her in that little ratty motel in Vermont. She was scared and crying then, too, she just wasn’t scared and crying because of him.

Not wanting to think anymore, he focused on waiting for her to take the next step, needing her to show any sign that this wasn’t going to be rape. If she engaged and participated, then it couldn’t be rape, and then it hadn’t been rape all those times he wasn’t sure what it was. She had to want it. She had to love him like she loved her. His heart soared when she leaned up and wrapped her arms around him, the drug making her weak movements so slow and heavy. Redemption flooded the tension from his body and mind with a shudder of relief at the contact of her wet mouth pressing to
the side of his neck. This was just like her; communicating so clearly through action when words were so meaningless. His sweet Simone’s teeth pressed against the sensitive skin of his neck, scraping delightfully along the nerves to make him moan and his fingers curl into the soft flesh of her ass, and then that love nip pressed further. The sting of the pressure quickly increased and, when he realized it wasn’t stopping, he tried to jerk away from her on reflex, then harder when the nip rapidly became a bite. Her jaw had locked onto his neck, however, and his motion only worsened the pain that was pouring panic into him.

“Simone, stop, stop!” he commanded, his voice spiking into a cry when he felt his skin start to split under those sharp incisors and knowing the blunter teeth he’d so admired in her kind smiles would soon follow suit.

She didn’t heed his command, her arms clasped around his shoulders and thighs squeezing his middle with a strength that defied the drug still dampening her muscle control. He groaned in pain when that bruising crush of her front teeth pinched past the breaking point of his skin and the wet slide of blood dribbled down his shirt collar. The shredding force of her sharp premolars sawed against her deepening bite next, alerting an instinctive drive in him that brought his hands to wrap around her neck and press his thumbs into her pulse. It would take seconds to subdue her by strangulation, seconds a part of him knew he didn’t have before her teeth tore a hole out of his neck he couldn’t hope to keep closed long enough for an ambulance to arrive, so he shot up out of the chair and threw her off him. Her teeth tore out of his flesh in an alarming shock of burning agony as she fell away from him to hit the floor with a loud thump and a rattle of chain.

The warm slide of blood pouring from his neck tore out a truth harsher than the throbbing sting of her bite: no amount of love or affection could fix whatever Leif had put in her that made her kill. He pressed the heel of his palm tight to the wound to staunch the blood while he stared down at her slowly squirming body as she pushed herself up onto her hands and knees.

“You’re insane…” he muttered, the words spilling out under the full weight of them.

Her wooziness made her movements pathetically uncoordinated, but his pain was too fresh to keep him from backing away from her. The perfect picture of their future as a family was crumbling away under the strain of the truth in Vidar’s words. She must hate us by now. A corrosive dread washed up on the crest of that statement before he felt as though he was drowning in it, a horrid filthy feeling soaking him as he sat back down to let it wash over him. Every suspicion that had tortured him came rushing back all at once, confirmed by the blood that ran down his front to pool in the crux of his thigh and soak into the seat below. The amount of blood should have worried him more, but he couldn’t focus on much of anything past having been shown how certain he was that she had wanted this, any of this, right up until her teeth had torn him.

He’d stolen her from her home, made her rely on him for her every need, pressured her into sex he thought she wanted and became so confident that he could make her want the sex that she didn’t want at all. He looked at the proof of his guilt in her hunched form naked but for the collar and chain, blood smeared on her grimacing mouth as she grunted in pain and effort just to crawl away from him. It had taken this much for him to see what this was. He didn’t know how long it had been this way, if it was always this ugly or if it had grown into it, and if so, he wondered when she had stopped loving him. Was it the second time with Vidar, or the first? Was it when he didn’t tell her he had stolen her mother’s guardianship over her? Was it that time in the hotel in Vermont, when he had kept fucking her despite her fear and her tears, a pattern that had only repeated regardless of her distress? Was it when he had tried to prevent her from resuscitating her father’s overdosed corpse? Or was it never love?

Running along the bottom of each horrid question that trampled through his mind was another, more
shameful and insidious question: why didn’t it matter as much as it should? He watched her crawl across the floor, dragging herself on her hands and knees with the chain dragging after her like a long limp tail, and alongside the guilt and shame her pathetic condition incited in him was a strange sort of hatred that boiled at the proof that she would let him believe what he wanted for so long only to betray him now. The mixed signals, the confusion, all of it was partly her fault. She was too insane to know what she wanted. He pushed himself up, wavering a bit in a bout of dizziness before walking towards where she was trying to crawl to the door. He’d been so careless with her condition, he’d forgotten that she couldn’t be held fully responsible for her decisions. As her guardian, he had the responsibility of making the right decisions for her when she couldn’t make them herself.

His vision blurred and vertigo tilted him sideways as he knelt next to her and scooped up the chain in his free hand. He didn’t think she’d gotten to his jugular, but the crushing force of her bite might have done some internal damage to the veins. They should have taken Henrik along; he would know. Henrik wouldn’t have let them keep her on a collar and chain, though. He wouldn’t have understood that they needed to limit her freedom to keep her safe. Anders stood, taking a moment to steady himself against the nauseating vertigo before walking and pulling her towards the bedroom. She resisted, then stumbled, then he was dragging her as she choked and grabbed at the collar, but he couldn’t wait for her to follow along. He blanched at the spill of blood that was just waiting to gush out when he took his hand off his neck to grab the padlock off the nightstand and he fumbled in his haste to secure the chain to the rod in the closet. Wherever the truth of their circumstances lied, he could never let her leave them. He shut her inside the cluttered closet and leaned against the door for support as he fished his cell phone out of his pocket.

“Shit, shit, shit…” he muttered, holding down the power button on his buggy cell phone. The thing had never worked quite right, and as he waited for the device to power on, he could only pray that he found a signal.

Leif was somewhat taken aback that Maier’s base of operations was less of a place and more of a thing, that thing being a full sized commercial van repurposed into a mobile covert surveillance unit. It was hardly street legal, its ineffective timing belt requiring rigorous pumping of the gas pedal prior to ignition via screwdriver and its power steering having been completely shot, but it was the home-brewed surveillance system running on the quiet hum of a small on-board generator in the back that had sold Leif on giving up the comfortable Lexus for it. On shelves bolted into the walls that might have once been utilized in warehouse transportation or delivery service, several devices glowed, clicked, beeped and hummed with possibility. Four rack-mounted LCD screens displayed split feeds of Anders’ and Vidar’s residences, the AV cables connected from a standard personal computer console that was hooked into a total of eight external hard drives and a long cable leading through the ceiling to the highly conspicuous satellite antenna atop the roof. The old van roared to life with a powerful shudder of the engine rattling on its mount and Leif wrestled with the rusted window crank to diffuse the reek of burning motor oil and festering fast food wrappers as he drove north, following the path where Anders’ cell signal had last pinged. Three hours into the drive, the last ping was further north before the signal was lost to the mountains. Allowing Maier to use the radar and radio scanners to track traffic cop locations, Leif had managed to cut their distance down to an estimated two hours apart, but they needed another ping to determine their direction soon or that effort could be lost at one missed turn.

“Fresh,” Maier announced as he crouched down and ran the pad of his thumb on the skid marks on the road where that last ping had been centralized. “Tread matches the tires on Anders Valstad’s vehicle. Gradual deceleration does not indicate collision.”
Leif looked over his shoulder, peering at the dappled black marks on the weathered concrete, and remarked, “You may not understand human behavior, Dick, but you understand evidence.”

“I was CSI before I was FBI, sir,” Maier offered as he pushed himself up, wavering woozily on his feet before bashfully adding, “I was analyzing evidence to catch you before I knew what you were. Eighteen years ago, you suspended a republican senator, one Mr. Alexander Gunzer, from the ceiling of a Maryland Baptist church by a hook through his collarbone and flayed the skin from his face. That was when I first ‘met’ you.”

Leif gestured for him to walk back to the van and followed closely as he said, “I appreciate a good ego stroke as much as the next man, but it will not buy you leniency. You’d do better directing that energy toward tracking the target.”

Maier continued unabated by the advice, “When the FBI took over the case, I applied to the academy for the singular goal of one day being assigned to your case. It was only several years into my career that I was successful in obtaining that assignment.” Leif cast him a warning glance before shutting the passenger door and walking around the wide vehicle to begin the laborious process of starting the van. Focusing on turning the screwdriver in the dismantled steering column as he pumped the accelerator, he listened with increasing interest as his captive went on in his odd bout of chattiness. “I was the one who had connected the sixteen cold cases across Massachusetts to the murders in Los Angeles. Then the murders in Chicago, in San Francisco, and in Minneapolis. Unlike most serial killers, you have no victim profile. You left no evidence to suggest any personal relationship to the victims, real or surrogate. You were meticulous in every aspect, even your violence. The only thing linking your murders was the style, rather than the motive or method; they could never catch you because they were looking for a serial killer when they should have been looking for an artist.”

The ignition finally took, revving the engine to roar and quake like a beast in agony, and as they accelerated back onto the road just as the first few drops of rain splattered on the windshield, Leif smirked, “You’re not as ignorant of human behavior as you present yourself to seem. Is that what you’re hoping to prove with this speech?”

“I only hope to present my fealty, sir,” Maier answered. “Three years ago, I recognized you on the surveillance footage of a liquor store nearby one of your kills. Five years prior to that, you were also captured on video at a gas station near a hotel in which you’d killed five people. I investigated your travel records, placed you in each city within the timeframe of several murders; I had everything I would need to obtain a warrant for your arrest. I followed your work closely for over a decade, dedicated myself to finding you, but when the time came, I could not rid the world of you. I destroyed that footage.”

Leif wrenched the wheel hand over hand to maneuver the massive van down the winding country road, listening as his captive revealed this dreadful information to him. There was always the looming reality that each day of freedom could be his last, whether that came by death or by incarceration, either was dependent not so much on skill as it was on luck. Unlucky for him that Maier was an excessively thorough eidetic, lucky for him that Maier was utterly insane. Leif watched the map on the old GPS screen in the dashboard, its feed updating very sporadically with blips of wherever Anders’ phone caught a signal in these mountains, as he considered whether it was worth listening to his captive blather on in hopes of finding out any of the answers to his growing list of questions. They’d been driving for eighty minutes, uncertain if they were even headed toward their mark, when his boredom had won out.

“You knew what I was for three years,” Leif began carefully, hiding his motive to dredge information from him behind a cautious self-consciousness, “what did you do with that knowledge?”
“I watched you,” Maier answered plainly. “Tracked your life through your online activity, credit card purchases, phone conversations, all the standard avenues. I eventually found that I was not the only one watching you.”

“I am aware that Francis had hacked me,” Leif stated. There was something about the order of these events that was off. Even with his good luck, this was all far too serendipitous to be believable, although he could not detect any hint of dishonesty or deception. He had to coax more out of Maier. “It’s… surprising that he allowed himself to be traced by you, however.”

An alert popping up on the laptop that had been rigged to the computer tower through a tangle of wires interrupted Maier before he could expel the breath to respond, and Leif’s suspicion was suspended by more urgent matters when the ex-agent confirmed, “We have a ping on Anders Valstad’s current location. It is not far from our position. We could be there in as little as twenty minutes if… Oh. It would seem as though he is attempting to make an outgoing call. Shall I disrupt it, sir?”

“Yes, that will be helpful, Dick,” Leif answered.

He glanced at the updated route with a shiver of excitement at how close he was to his target and, hopefully this time, his daughter. The tension between his worry and fury gnawed at him from the inside out, leaving him raw with a restlessness that was glad for the sheer physicality and focus that steering the van through the pounding rain demanded. Beneath those consuming emotions he allowed to pump acid into his veins, an unfamiliar and generally unwelcome presence of guilt loomed. This, all of this, from the unleashed depravity of his brothers to the misguided loyalty that kept his daughter prey to it, was in the most essential sense his own doing. The suspicion that it was already too late to save his family from continuing to suffer the sins of their fathers was not one he could accept, not after coming this far to break that cycle. It had to stop, even if he had to end it with his own hands.

Simone leaned against the wall, trying to ground herself against its solidity as the world seemed to vibrate and time seemed to melt and stretch oddly. She was being dragged along the floor, her bare skin skidding and sliding across the dusty hardwood, until suddenly she was alone in this unfamiliar room. The taste of blood was thick in her mouth, its wet smear on her lips and chin wafting up its iron tang into her nostrils to block out any other scents, leaving her with muffled hearing and touch to navigate the cramped dark space she found herself in. In a hopeless replay of earlier, she felt along the chain to the padlock at the collar, then slowly pulled herself up and felt the padlock that kept the chain wrapped around a horizontal wooden pole high in the tiny space. She wouldn’t let the drug win this time. Her legs trembled as she leaned up and blindly felt along the shelf above that pole, her fingertips brushing the edges of cardboard boxes and grime before her muscles began to give out. She sunk back down to her knees, her whole body sweating and trembling, but she was so sick of waiting. The urge to fight still burned alongside the drug that tried to tell her it was impossible, to give in and give up. She was so sick of it all.

She licked at the blood still wet on her lips and tried again, feeling around for anything she could use to pick the lock. Her heart fluttered with hope when something long and sharp stung against her palm, fingers eagerly tracing the broad metal side and long wooden handle of an ax. Excitement pumped adrenaline into her as she held the heavy tool close to her body and tears of relief pricked her eyes, but she had to think. She had to be careful. As quietly as she could, she wrapped the slack of the chain to drape her shoulders and tested the blade against the pole.
The sound of Anders’ voice muttering just on the other side of the door stopped her before she swung the ax. It was his blood on her tongue. She couldn’t let herself think of that, couldn’t allow the memory of that drive to kill consume her with the panic that waited just on the other side of that thought. A scream built up in her aching throat, but she couldn’t let it out or she might never stop. With every ounce of the meager strength and coordination left to her, she swung the ax, felt it collide and crack the pole, heard Anders’ startled shout at the noise. The pole did not split.

“Hva faen er det du gjør?” he yelled through the door.

Simone grabbed the chain and pulled, yanking it down with her bodyweight and willing the pole to snap. The panic that had always accompanied being bound rose up loudly in her, nearly drowning out her wordless demand for the pole to break until finally, she crashed to the floor. She didn’t feel the fall, the adrenaline and victory numbing her to pain as she scrambled to get back up, ax clutched close to her chest. She didn’t know how much longer she had before Anders’ commanding shouts tipped over into action. She had to act, no time for thought. She buried the ax into the door, hearing and feeling it splinter but not give, and jerked the blade out of the wood before immediately throwing her weight into another swing. She could think about what was on the other side of the door when she was through it.

Exhaustion weighed down her arms, the chain draped heavily around her neck and shoulders dragged her down, and at the third strenuous lift and fall of the ax, the scream that had coiled in her throat tore forth from her blood-stained mouth. Her rage rang loudly in that cry, every violation and disruption of her life leaping up through that terrible sound and driving the ax through the wood. Gray light poured through the jagged hole the ax cleaved out and she, emboldened by her fury and that thin slice of light, cried out as she swung again and again. There would be no more delay. She would carry her vengeance against a world that had accommodated this wickedness by the will that found her through this ax. The wood fell away under the blade in splintered chunks until she rammed her shoulder through the jagged ruin and stumbled into the light. The weight of the ax and the weight of the drug threw her against the wall to scramble back with the animal fear that gripped her before her awareness could perceive what she had entered. Her heart paused in the trap of gray eyes locking onto hers, of sharp cheekbones bronzed and weathered under a consistent cast of sunlight and toil, of a wide mouth slack with an astonishment she mirrored. The ax fell away from her hands to clatter, unheard and unheeded, to the floor.

A weak, quivering breath scraped across her worn vocal chords to rasp, “Papa…”

The powerful back of her father straightened from where he crouched to loom over Anders’ prone body, a dim awareness of red pooled beneath him sparking along the edges of her mind but fizzling to nothing in the presence of Leif. He rose, as impossibly tall as he’d always been and yet always still larger than she ever recalled, and she wilted under the sheer size of him as he approached. This was a trick, a dream, a hallucination, but still, she stepped towards him to meet those hands that reached for her hair and her face with a touch that burned in its desperation and greed. The intensity in his eyes as he searched her features with both touch and sight pinned her and she could not look away from the madness that called to her own. Under his searching, she bared herself without thought to resist, even as she trembled under it. This couldn’t be real.

“I-I…” she whimpered, causing him to still at the sound. She swallowed, forcing herself to start again, “I’d thought I had lost you… but you came back to me.”

Leif’s eyes softened in recognition of his past words, the desperation in his hands melting into gentleness as he slid his fingers into her hair and bent to whisper close enough for his breath to huff against her mouth, “I can’t leave you, my darling girl.”
The warm slide of tears fell down her cheeks before she knew she was weeping, the confusing cacophony of emotion threatening to burst out of a body too small and frail to contain it, and she shuddered under the painful swell of relief when his thumbs caressed her wet cheeks with a heartachingly familiar and rare tenderness. He was there. Despite all reason and logic, despite everything she knew, her father was right there. She lunged at him, wrapping her arms around his chest and burying her face into the crook of his neck to inhale his scent and exhale in a shaking sob at just how right it was.

“I’m sorry! I’m s-sor-ry… The needle… I didn’t- I didn’t know it…” she sobbed, her words falling from her in a nearly unintelligible mess against his neck.

Leif shushed her, his strong arms scooping her up and lifting her effortlessly as he straightened to his full height. She felt like a child, being cradled by her father like this, and the relief it brought her wracked another sob from that deepening swell of emotion in her chest. He wasn’t angry. He didn’t hate her and she, maybe even more surprising to her, didn’t hate him. There was no room and no place to hate him in the fullness of her heart. The bare skin of his arms and chest was hot against her chilled skin and she tingled wherever they touched with an almost unbearable burn she couldn’t get enough of. This was real. The empty ache that had burrowed inside her since she’d last seen him with his paling features tipped with deathly grays and blues as he had laid dying now filled with warmth. Her anger and her suffering melted away as he kissed the tears from her cheeks, but she couldn’t stop crying. So much had happened. She’d endured so much for this, and now that it was finally here, she didn’t know what to do or say. All that mattered was that he was there with her. She realized then that being together with him was all that had ever really mattered to her.

“Do you still love me, Simone?” he asked.

She looked at him, startled, but relaxed at the smug self-assuredness in his smile. He knew her answer. He’d known it far longer than she had, in ways she once would have never guessed herself capable. She responded to his question by leaning forward, letting her eyes fall shut to indulge in the feeling as she kissed his mouth, and a shiver ran through them both at the contact. The slide of his tongue along hers ushered in the taste of him and the warmth of his body seemed to pour into her, filling her with that tingling sensation. It was too much and not enough all at once. The rumble of his pleased groan purred low in his chest and sparked a carnal response in her body, reminding her of the measure of beast in this man. She still feared him, both the power of his body and the power he had over her, but after living for this long in the topography of her own power and powerlessness without him, she could feel where the boundaries between them had settled. Love, like madness, operated entirely out of the control and will of the afflicted, and she no longer found herself wanting to escape either from him.

“Please, please take me away from here,” she begged between his devouring kisses.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked. He nuzzled his way lower, tilting her in his hold to access her throat as he kissed above the leather collar encircling her neck, and speech failed her at the nip of his sharp teeth and the scrape of his stubble.

His teasing bites stopped at the sound of Maier’s voice saying, “I am afraid there is only one destination open to both of you at this junction, sir. I would suggest that you accompany us willingly back to the Marceau estate, or we may have to utilize force.”
“Just passing through?”

Vidar looked up from pulling the cash out of his wallet, his mouth twitching into a frown when he confirmed the cashier was attempting polite, if somewhat invasive, small talk with him. Paranoia choked his response. Any answer he could give would provide information that could get back to the police when they inevitably come looking for him. Or worse, Maier’s fellow murder cultists seeking vengeance for whatever Simone had done to end him. A sudden clatter from behind startled him into flinching and he nearly hissed through his teeth in irritation and relief when he saw it was just a store clerk that had dropped a broom. He had to get a handle on this flinching habit before it cast him as suspicious.

“Some weather, huh?” Vidar offered instead as he handed over the cash.

The cashier nodded and, to Vidar’s regret, did not ring the money through the register as he responded with an unfortunate friendliness, “Summer storms up here in these parts just can’t be predicted. Bet we’ll hear thunder soon, judging by how quick it rolled in on us. I hope you aren’t tent camping?”

Vidar stared at the money remaining inert in the cashier’s hand and considered just letting him keep the change. No, that much would be suspicious and make him memorable. He needed to be as forgettable and ordinary as possible, and if that meant being held hostage by this delayed transaction for a jug of milk and a pack of cigarettes, then so be it. He glanced at the clock, seeing there was only five minutes until closing. Judging by how fiercely this man’s coworker was sweeping, at least one of them wanted to get off work on time.

“You get a lot of rain out here?” he asked, avoiding his question and attempting to avoid thinking too hard on why this stranger was so inquisitive.

“Sure,” the cashier nodded again. Vidar watched how the motion seemed to puff up and then deflate the man’s double chin, reminding him of a frog. “Keeps the greens greener all through summer.”

“Right... I’d better get on the road before it gets any worse,” Vidar hinted hopefully.

“It should clear up in a few hours. By morning, definitely.”

The rapid, short brush of the broom drew closer and Vidar could feel his jaw aching as he clenched it when he forced a grin and lied, “That’s nice. Well, I have a lot of driving to do tonight, so…”

“There’s a good hotel up-”

The scrape of the broom bristles was deafening, drowning out the sound of the cashier talking until his mouth was just moving silently. Vidar’s jaw clenched tighter with each pass of the broom over the linoleum. The broom, the roaring refrigerators, the drone of the fan on the counter, everything
was too loud. The stranger’s frog chin swelled and collapsed as he nodded along with something he agreed with himself on, the slant of his mouth still squirming, the cash still held in his palm. Vidar glanced at the clock. It had only been one minute. His stare ticked back to the cashier, but what he saw wasn’t anything that could be considered human. It looked the same, but it was a mindless and soulless assemblage of moving parts, like a machine or an insect. Whatever it was, Vidar was struck with the want to make it still and quiet. The hiss of the broom felt as though it was scraping the inside of his skull as he shut his eyes and reeled away from that impulse.

“I have to go!” he blurted out abruptly, interrupting whatever the cashier was saying.

The ding and whir of the register finalizing the sale broke the cacophony of noise. The sweeping was suddenly far on the other side of the store, the refrigerators hummed low, the fan was barely a whisper, and he was able to hear the cashier now clearly say, “Sorry for your loss, Mr. Valstad.”

Vidar struggled to stop himself from bolting out of the shop. His tongue was suddenly too numb to articulate a response as he grabbed the bag and accepted the change with shaking hands.

It was the tabloids, it always was, it had to be. Those vultures were never far from their family’s tragedies and they must have already sniffed out Henrik’s death. A country store clerk with time on his hands to browse websites would be the among the first to know when the story broke.

The heavy rainfall had soaked Vidar in the short distance to the car and he smoothed his dripping hair back from his brow as he sat at the wheel. His hands were still shaking. If the story was out, then it wouldn’t be long before Anders read about it on his phone. As he drove through the downpour, he hoped he could make it back to the cabin before his little brother went out in search of a cell signal strong enough to reveal that gruesome headline. At least this unending sense of dread had a reason to nag at him now.

He glanced at his hunting rifle laid out on the passenger side floor, feeling more than thinking about what might have happened if he went into the store with a weapon. There was a small, jagged piece of him that whispered for him to turn around and make sure that cashier never said anything about him to anyone. It wouldn’t be hard. It wouldn’t be anything at all like with Henrik, but maybe if he did it again, if he got used to killing, it would make what he did feel more normal. He reached blindly into the backseat for the blanket to cover the rifle. More than anything, he just wanted to get back to his family.

Leif’s daughter was the only person he had been close to for the entirety of their life. He had seen every stage of her existence rapidly shift into the next through the volatile nature of youth, a youth that still continued to carry her along its swift and tumultuous flow into her burgeoning adulthood. In holding these memories, sometimes he could not ignore how they splintered the image of her into the many forms she’d taken through the life he had witnessed. In her deep and even breathing in sleep, he remembered carrying her to her bedroom when she’d invariably nod off on long car rides, her little body growing over time until she’d outgrown the habit. Even when he’d indulged his lust after sedating her, sometimes the sound of her breathing shrunk her and transported them back to those moments he had held a child so trusting that she would only stir to lean against him and cling willfully to sleep. Time and memory placed her through a kaleidoscope that reflected the many faces that were behind the one here now before him, a Simone both so recognizable and infinitely unknowable to him.

In the Simone he now held in his arms, there was also the precocious child and the turbulent
adolescent she had been, all existing in tandem with the present. He tasted her tears, her sweat, her skin and her kiss, greedy to know what parts of her had changed and just as greedy for the reassurance of what was familiar. Her love still permeated the bedrock of her psyche, untouched by the trauma above it, and it rushed up through the wide cracks in her mind to reach for him as she kissed him. Where fear had once kept her reigned and timid, it now propelled her need for him with a boldness so fierce he might mistake it for desperation.

When she turned her wild stare to Maier, her fear propelled another new ferocity in her: a savageness toward bloodshed with an unprecedented focus. Leif’s hold on her had tightened in an instinctive need for her closeness, then tightened further to keep her from lunging in the pursuit of the violence that tensed her quivering muscles. Maier was unarmed, injured, and exhausted, but he was not bluffing. This did not bode well.

“You certainly know how to bury the lede,” Leif quipped sarcastically, tucking that suspicion behind his lack of patience with the presumptuous sociopath. “Did they teach you such subtlety at Quantico?”

“I swore fealty to you as the earthly embodiment of that which imbues unearthly sovereignty to Ouroboros, sir. I am bound by oath to do whatever is necessary to serve that embodiment, and that duty extends to ensuring you are able to fulfill your role,” Maier explained, the obscenity of that content belied by the sterility of his clinical monotone. “For that, we need you to return to the estate, where it is safe.”

It would have been funny to Leif if it didn’t fit so many pieces of a puzzle he was just now beginning to see. Maier’s motive in all of this didn’t match the sequence of events that had led to the arrest staged by the Marceaus. Leif’s task to seize leadership on the basis of his popularity among the cultist and the secular members alike was not part of the scheme against the Marceau agenda until later, but Maier gave no impression that it had ever been anything but a religious ascension from the very start. Maier, who was Dr. Aguiyi’s man. Dr. Aguiyi, who had approached Leif in his imprisonment with the idea to embrace the occult mythology surrounding his bloodline as the linchpin in usurping Mrs. Marceau’s attempted takeover. Francis’ gain was as obvious now as it had been when he’d first approached him, but what was opportunism then seemed far too orderly now. Questions began to form amid these observations that Maier’s involvement shed new light on.

Leif considered this as he responded with moderate disinterest, “With all due respect to your religious beliefs, Dick, spiritual figurehead to the faith of cultists is not a role I had ever intended to embody, unearthly sovereignty or not.”

Maier paused, his breath suspended in a moment of hesitance before he continued, “It has been an honor taking any part in your ascent to a position more fitting your magnificence, sir. Please, return with us to the estate.”

“Are you speaking in the majestic plural now?”

“A hunt will be here soon, if not already. I realize that such measures may not be enough to deter you from resisting, but would I be mistaken in assuming you would not risk your daughter by casting her as part of their quarry?”

Leif’s grin fell as the icy crawl of a dreaded suspicion being confirmed made its way up his spine, followed by the heat of bloodlust ignited by this threat to his offspring. It had crossed his mind that all the tracking equipment in the van would have been broadcasting as well as receiving, but he had believed Maier would not risk his wrath by communicating the details of his predicament. He had believed wrongly. There was no fear in a man who longed for death and no reason in a zealot who lived only for a cause. He could not talk his way out of this and, knowing the danger had extended to
his daughter, he found that he did not want to.

“You are not mistaken,” Leif answered.

“Don’t,” Simone’s whisper was barely audible, but her uneasiness was carried on that shaking breath. Leif pressed his cheek to her forehead absently, his thoughts too focused on the danger of their circumstance to mind the automatic response to comfort his daughter, and she bristled at the blatant attempt to placate her.

With the rehearsed authority of the law enforcement officer he once was, Maier ordered, “Please step away from Ms. Valstad and put down your weapons, sir.”

“Maier,” she growled as Leif slowly lowered her back on her feet. He held a firm grip on her shoulder as she steadied, wary of her hostility escalating into reckless action. “You motherfucking snake, if you don’t—”

Whatever threat his daughter was about to lay into Maier was interrupted by a loud bang and a burst of gore erupting from the ex-agent’s middle. There was no time to wonder at what fortune had arrived at the edge of this desperate moment. In the habit of proactivity in the presence of a threat, Leif rushed past Maier as his body followed the force of that blow, and he grabbed the muzzle of the rifle protruding from the darkened hallway. The shooter had a chance to pump the next round into the chamber as Leif closed that brief distance and the muzzle kicked in his hand as another shot rang out just as he seized it. The shock of that blast so near sent a jolt through him, but his grasp had turned the aim upward in the last moment to send the bullet rushing above him instead of through him.

Blue eyes widened in primal fury met his narrowed grays on the other side of that upturned barrel before Leif threw his fist between them, sending Vidar stumbling backwards, his grip stubbornly still held to the gun. The impact of Leif’s knuckles smashing into the snarling face of his daughter’s abuser drew a unique satisfaction and he indulged in a second turn. The haymaker connecting solidly to Vidar’s cheek both fed that satisfaction and remedied his brother’s stubbornness as the younger man reeled at the edge of unconsciousness. Leif wrenched the rifle from his faltered grip, considered ending Vidar’s life in the manner he had just tried to end his, then opted for a more visceral execution. As he drew the heavy hunting rifle back to drive the butt of it into his brother’s face while he was in the midst of recovering from the haymaker, however, Simone rushed between them and grabbed at the gun with both hands and a feral snarl.

His hearing was muffled to the high whine of acute tinnitus, but he was able to read her lips as she yelled, “Stop this! Stop it! We don’t have time!”

She was, loathe as he was to admit it, more right in that demand than she could know. Whatever window of time they had to escape the hunt might be so narrow as to not exist, or it might be wide enough for them to achieve successful evasion. Leif’s hands itched to cave Vidar’s skull in with the rifle, the crunch of bone taunting his grasp, but reason wormed its way ahead of that temptation. He huffed out a disappointed sigh between his clenched teeth as he shoved her aside and delivered just one heavy blow to the side of Vidar’s head, sending him over the line from disoriented to unconscious. Sound seeped back into Leif’s hearing as more of a sensation than noise, drawing his attention to what he had shoved Simone to direct her frenzied focus toward as she crouched over Maier.

The ex-agent was curled and squirming into the protruding gnarl of entrails blasted out of his gut, not even seeming aware of Simone as she grabbed him by his shirt and yelled into his grimacing face, “Why are you doing this?! Why are you doing this?! You scum-fucked shithead, answer me!”
The sight of his daughter naked but for the chain draped around her neck like a scarf, bent and snarling over her perceived enemy would have prompted Leif to hold back and observe the sprawling viciousness within his progeny, but the impending danger of their circumstance and his resolve to renege familial tradition had him drag her away from the sociopath. The immediate surrender of that rage into passive malleability under his touch as he wrapped his arm around her middle and hauled her into the darkness of the hallway was something he didn’t know he’d missed until he felt her melt into his hold. The twin sentiments of paternal and amorous possessiveness her unquestioning acquiescence yielded dug deep beneath the boundaries of what they had always should have been, connecting a splattering of moments across time to this constant point where those opposed and conjoined concepts met.

“I can’t- I can’t just leave them, I-” she stammered.

“Hold onto me, darling,” he said, grappling the sling of the rifle over his shoulder as he pulled her through the firelit cabin. There was no way of knowing if the hunt was already upon them, but there was no choice except to run. Whatever happened to his brothers or his subjectively loyal subject was no longer his concern the moment he passed the threshold into the pounding rain. He had all he needed, now he just had to keep it.

The winding roads grew darker as they drove north in search of civilization. A city where the population was denser, where they would be less conspicuous, where there would be opportunity for shelter. Those were the very reasonable reasons Leif gave her, but she hadn’t asked. It hadn’t occurred to Simone to ask. They either told her or they didn’t, and often, what they told her wasn’t what ended up happening. There was nothing she could do with this information but wait and see what came, so she nodded and watched him or the glittering sky instead of the winding road rolling toward them in the frame of the headlights. Both sights inspired the same sense of awe. It had been so long since she had seen the sky so open and yet longer since she had seen him so solid and real. Through the stale smell of dog and cheap air freshener, he was there, the oakmoss and fennel of his sweat mingling beneath gunpowder and blood. The oil on his unwashed skin caught the thin blue light from the dashboard of Anders’ car, highlighting the ridges of his cheekbones and aquiline nose.

She stared at him, studied his profile without reservation as he drove, and traced his hand as he held hers, never letting her go even as the rain made the road treacherous. He was harder. His muscles were more honed, his body fat having melted down to a tautness that gave his angular features a more predatory sharpness, and even his skin seemed tougher and tighter. She’d never seen him with a beard or long hair, couldn’t reconcile this wild man with the clean cut sophisticate, but he was somehow more composed in this chaotic image than that reserved businessman. Everything about him had changed. Her stare fell to where his grip engulfed hers, to where she stroked the thick callouses over his knuckles with her free hand. Maybe she just didn’t know how to look at him before.

He glanced at her often, the wet in his eyes catching the light and shifting with their motion as he swept over her, examining, then settled into a hardness that made her gut clench in fear despite knowing his anger was not aimed at her. Anger didn’t need to be aimed at her for her to suffer it. This time, his anger lingered on her abdomen hidden beneath the t-shirt he’d given her from his backpack.

“When did you last eat?” he asked.

Anders’ blood had been wiped from her mouth, but it still sat like lead in her belly. That was not the
answer he wanted. She tried to remember. Raisins. The sweet bun before she started carving the sheep horn into Maier’s face. A thousand questions rose up in her throat like warm vomit and she swallowed them back down before they came out.

“This morning… or… was it… I’m not sure,” she muttered. Her eyes darted back down to his knuckles. Just one question. “How did you find him- find Maier? Did you… you know him?” That was two questions. She winced. “I’m sorry.” She couldn’t look up, couldn’t handle his reaction to her stupid, stupid mistake. She had no self control, not even after all this time. He hated her questions, she knew that, but still, she was too impatient, too stupid to control herself. She should have just kept quiet. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“You’re agitated. It’ll pass,” Leif’s warm, soothing voice rumbled low. His thumb rubbed her palm, the thick slide of his rough skin in her clammy hold closed her throat shut before she could apologize again. “Let it pass, darling. I won’t hurt you. There’s nothing to fear so long as you’re with me, and I will never leave you again. No one’s going to take you away from me. Breathe. Let it pass.”

She breathed. In and out, slow and even, just as he used to coach her through the panic attacks when they started up in her early teens. He wasn’t going to punish her. Not yet. Slowly, the panic waned into the background, always there but not overwhelming anymore. The drug lingering in her system did little to help, only keeping her exhaustion constant even in the presence of adrenaline. The tremors returned as she calmed down and he squeezed her shaking hand.

“You need food and rest. There might be somewhere we can go for tonight,” he said. “Someone we might be able to trust.”

The fear spiked at the suggestion of trusting anyone. There was no one they could trust. Give anyone enough time, and they would show you what a mistake it was to ever trust them. She couldn’t say any of this to her father, though.

“I’m fine. I don’t need anything,” she said instead.

“You still have that stubborn aspiration of independence, I see. Regardless, we can’t keep driving, not in this car,” he countered. “There are plenty of other options if I find him unsuitable.”

She hadn’t meant to argue. Questions and now arguments, it was no wonder why they had hurt her so often and so badly.

“We’ll talk once we’ve settled somewhere, after you get some rest,” he continued. The softness in his tone left her waiting for the sting. He intertwined their fingers and rubbed small circles into her palm, each rotation of his thumb inching up her anxiety. “We don’t need to focus on the past so soon. I finally have you again… just be here with me and leave all that’s happened behind for now. I’ve missed you so much, darling.”

“I missed you too, Dad,” she said, the words so inadequate to what she had felt for so long. “I… I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again. If I would live that long. I didn’t know, but… I had to keep going. And now you’re here. How… How did you get here? Did you escape? Is that why Maier-”

“Shh… Later, Simone. I promise,” he hushed her.

He pulled his hand away and she nearly choked on her fear that he would hurt her for being so disobedient, but he only unbuckled his seatbelt and patted his lap. She swallowed her terror and crawled over the center console dividing them, squeezing awkwardly between his body and the steering wheel. His jeans were rough and still a little damp from the rain, but all of him exuded that
delicious warmth that seeped into her to relax the muscles she didn’t even know were so tense. He shifted his hold on the wheel to his other hand and wrapped his left arm around her to hug her closer as he kissed the top of her head. The constant push to prepare for punishment fell into the background with her panic as he showered her with this affection. She rested her head on his shoulder, letting the thick and tingling fog diffuse her thoughts into pleasant mush. Her eyes fell shut of their own accord, leaving her in a world filled with just his scent, his touch, and his voice.

“You’re my most precious thing, Simone,” he whispered. “You’re not allowed to die.”

His command sunk into her with a heaviness that she simply had to accept. She had no control of her self, her life, her body, or her mind. It was almost nothing to give up the only thing left, her only way out of it all. Almost.

“Yes, Papa.”

Trondheim was a sleepy little city, even as close to the university as they were while Leif navigated through its looping residential neighborhoods. It had been over ten years since he had last visited his associate’s house, seven years since their last correspondence, but Dr. Benjamin Wallis was not the sort of man prone to change. His assumption was proven correct when he slowly passed the split-level house and saw the same stone komainu snarling alongside the walkway from the garage to the entrance. Simone waited, crouching behind that statue as he rang the doorbell.

At first, the house was still. On the second ring, he could hear the creak of floorboards just beyond the door, but no lights had come on in the house. At this hour, such a level of caution was more than reasonable, but he was tired and irritable.

“I would have rang ahead, Ben, but I left my phone book in the US!” he said, loud enough to carry through the door.

A beat of silence, then the metallic scraping of several locks being manipulated before the door opened and the porch light illuminated a long and narrow older man in a bathrobe. He did not return Leif’s smile.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Mr. Valstad?” Benjamin asked wryly, his dry English accent now slightly tilted from being in Norway all these years. He glanced at his watch, which was entirely for show since the time was almost certainly the first thing he’d checked upon being woken up. “At 2 on a Sunday morning? I leave for church in five hours. I might as well start breakfast.”

He was, for all appearances, the same man he’d always been. There was no hint that he was aware of the danger Leif’s company presently afforded, no more than it usually had anyway.

“May we join you?” Leif grinned.

“No, no, you may certainly not. Are you perhaps forgetting my wife and children live here?”

“How is Nina? Little Benny is in high school by now, right? And Trevor-no, Treg…”

“Trygve,” Benjamin corrected him flatly.

“Trygve! He’s my Simone’s age, so he must be in university now. Does he attend locally?”
“He’s in Oslo, but he’s home on the weekends. He just drove in tonight, in fact, which means my house is full.”

“Nonsense! We just need somewhere to catch our breath, you’ll hardly know we’re there.”

Benjamin’s narrow features pinched in aggravation and confusion. “What do you mean ‘we’?”

Leif’s genial grin slid into something sly as he snapped his fingers to signal his daughter to come. He watched the psychiatrist’s irritated frown fall, his muddy eyes widening at the sight of the life he had helped alter so irrevocably a decade prior. The guilt tugging his thin mouth downward cemented Leif’s plans.

“I’ll pull out the sofa bed,” Benjamin muttered, blinking as he turned away from them and shuffled into the house.
Exhaustion and drugged drowsiness enveloped Simone like a thick tar dragging her down, the last sputtering dregs of anxiety-fueled adrenaline all that were keeping her upright. Unreality clawed at the edges of her awareness, threatening to throw her into a nightmare with or without the framework of sleep. Time flickered, transforming the bathroom she shut herself in into Henrik’s bathroom with the window gaping open to a black sky, then to the one in Vermont with its dark green rug like an algae-infested puddle in the center of stark white tiles. She clutched her scalp through her thickly-tangled hair, holding her mind together. She couldn’t lose reality. Not now.

Beyond the bathroom door, Simone could hear the man her father had called Ben arguing with his wife in swift and hushed Norwegian peppered with hisses of English. She let the faucet run, trying to drown out the vicious and quiet exchange, and splashed her face before wetting her sore throat with handfuls of the cold water. There was a window in this spacious bathroom, but it was too small for her to squeeze out of. The beads of sweat began to collect and crawl down her skin, the impression of fingertips ghosting in their wake making her flinch and twitch.

They had to know. They had to know what her father was. It was all over the news, all over the world. They couldn’t invite that into their home, but they’d left Leif sipping tea in their living room while they argued over it in the kitchen. He could kill them and their sons in cold blood like he’d done to so many others, but Ben was arguing with his wife in such politely hushed tones to let a known killer sleep in their house.

“Calm down…” she mumbled to the wide-eyed girl in the mirror. “He knows these people. They’re his friends. He said there are other options if this doesn’t work out, right?”

Like killing them if they don’t go along with what he wants.

Simone grit her teeth against the building desire to scream, her fingers gripping the edge of the counter to keep herself from running out there and pleading with Leif find anywhere else to spend the night. Find some bridge to park under and sleep in the car. Pay some homeless man to rent a cheap hotel room for them. Break into some rich asshole’s pool shed. Anything but this nice normal home with this nice normal family that didn’t deserve to die.

The door opening broke her out of her thoughts with a panicked stumble backward into the wall, a panic that receded only slightly when she saw that it was her father entering the bathroom with a bundle wrapped under his arm. The initial shock of seeing him still sent her heart racing and squeezed the breath from her lungs. It was hard to believe he wasn’t just another hallucination or another dream she would wake from in tears. Leif’s polite mask slipped when he looked at her, his mild smile sharpening and his eyes darkening at the sight of her cowering against the wall like a rabbit caught in a cage trap. The predatory hunger that invaded his composure as he locked the door behind him spilled a liquid heat in her pelvis and she stifled a surprised whimper at her body’s unexpectedly strong reaction to something as scant as a look from him. Shame rushed to follow that heated arousal as it always did. Human lives were at risk by their very presence. She couldn’t lose
touch with that reality.

“We can’t stay here,” she whispered.

“Nina has already agreed to let us stay as long as we need,” he replied, his voice carrying nothing of the false friendly inflection he used when speaking with the Wallises. She’d nearly forgotten how he used to sound, how normal he could make himself appear when he wanted to. Part of her missed the disguise she had grown up believing Leif to be, but the thing behind that façade was so oddly and comfortingly familiar. The low, dark richness of his natural pitch enticed her to relax, or more accurately, surrender.

He set the bundle of clothes and toiletries down on the counter near the sink and turned off the faucet before preparing two toothbrushes. She accepted the offered toothbrush, going through the motions of cleaning her teeth on automatic as she tried to wrap her mind around how this was happening. A fugitive serial killer had shown up on their doorstep in the middle of the night and they were behaving as if he was the husband’s old friend dropping in for an unannounced visit. It was obscene. Although, that’s all this might have been to them. Simone watched him as he scrubbed the plaque from his molars, absentmindedly mirroring his motions until foam ran down her chin. She didn’t know what these nice normal people knew about her father or how long they’d known him. Perhaps it was possible for them to see him as something other than what he was. She rinsed the minty foam from her mouth as that idea settled her fear for their lives and mollified a deeper hurt in her as well. Perhaps it was possible for her to be something other than what she had become. Something nice. Something normal.

The knife Leif pulled out from under the clean clothes brought that brief fantasy to a crashing halt into raw fear.

“Be still, darling,” he said as he reached for her.

There wasn’t time for her to stammer out a response as he grabbed her by the collar and slid the cold steel of the blade under it. The slide of metal against her sensitive neck made her draw in a sharp gasp and she jerked in his hold when he began to saw, making him press her back into the wall and hold her there with his body as he kept cutting. The welts and open wounds on her back from the whip screamed at the pressure. A choked grunt managed to escape past the terror tightening her throat before both the knife and the collar were removed from her neck. The cool air brushing over the sores that were beginning to form from the chafing leather brought a relief that drained all that instinctive panic from her, leaving her embarrassed of her uncontrolled behavior and dreading the consequences of her disobedience. Tears blurred her vision as she fixed it to her bare and filthy feet. She couldn’t bring herself to look up at him, not even as he unwound the chain from her shoulders and dropped it and the broken collar into the wastebasket.

“Undress,” he commanded.

Without hesitation, she dragged the baggy t-shirt over her head and shimmied out of the jeans, the cuffs she’d had to roll up catching on her heels as she stumbled out of them. Seconds dripped by slowly as she burned under his stare, each moment of his silence making the married couple’s argument in the background seem louder. She would behave. No more arguing, no more questioning, no more disobeying. If he became upset, she wasn’t the only one around to take the punishment. Even if it was just the two of them in that house, she wasn’t alone with him. She chewed at her lip and folded her hands over where her baby was nestled low in her abdomen. Her body had never felt so inadequate as it did now, so close to him with only her fragile flesh to protect the precious secret growing inside her. Nausea shivered through her at the thought of him finding out.
His touch was gentle as he began to caress her face, but she couldn’t drag her stare up from the floor. She couldn’t move at all, in fact, her mind and muscles frozen in the experienced knowledge of what this gentle touch could so suddenly become. It was safer to not do anything rather than risk doing the wrong thing, and she’d done so much wrong already. One hand slid down, ghosting over the tender marks the collar had left, the fading line where he had cut her in Vermont, then tracing the grooves his bite had carved into the crook of her neck. She nearly broke down when she remembered the suck bruise Vidar had made there, right where her father’s fingers were pressing.

“It will fade,” he said, his tone strangely soft, warm and reassuring. The fearful tension that pulled her tightly into herself relaxed again at his voice. “All of what they have done will fade.”

Despite all the horror these past months had layered onto her, she believed him, knowing he could somehow magic it all away with his touch and his voice. The effect was brief before logic ate it up, but that momentary belief lingered like a pleasant taste in her mouth. He moved away from her, leaving her cold and confused at his behavior. There was no pain, no punishment, not even a barbed comment about this blatant evidence of her betrayal.

The sound of the shower drowned out the couple’s argument and she let her father pull her under its warm flow. The weight of the water made standing the best she could do in her thorough fatigue. The smell of stale blood wafted up along the steam as she leaned against him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Even at ease, his powerful body exuded both terror and protection, the double edge of his presence making her tremble in both fear and awe. Exhaustion finally settled a thick layer of numbness to muffle her thoughts. As he worked palmfuls of a creamy floral conditioner into her tangled mane, she shut her eyes and her mind to the world and sunk into the soothing attention. It was easier not to wonder how this straight-haired white man knew how to detangle her hair with a wide-toothed comb while the conditioner soaked into those snarls. He was her father, he knew how to take care of her. Soap stung her cuts, lashes, and scrapes, the pain waking her up as he scrubbed the suds into those wounds unmercifully and then soothed them with gentle kisses as he rinsed the bubbles and blood away. The harsh sting and the soothing touch both forced sighs from her panting mouth. Mercy without mercy, kindness through pain, sweetness made sweeter by what was bitter; this was how he loved her. When his fingers curled into the crux of her heat and found her slick with lust, he kissed her sore and bruised labia with an affection that made her shatter.

“Papa…” she breathed, her voice cracking under the strain of shame.

As his hands snaked around and under her ass to pull her hips forward and he settled on his knees, he smiled to show her his sharp teeth and whispered, “Ssh… Let Papa take care of his darling girl.”

She swallowed the uncertainty and fearful anticipation, unable to break away from his darkened stare as his beard tickled her inner thighs. The gasp he forced out of her with his tongue delving inside and laving over her clit in its slow and long initial lick was loud and quavering. His laugh rumbled low and raspy when she slapped her hand over her mouth and blushed in shame at recalling where they were and who could hear them. She kept her hand over her mouth, stifling her moans and panting through her nose as he swirled his tongue against her clit. His stare burned into her, intimate and intimidating all at once, until he dipped lower and his eyes fell shut as though savoring this act. He moaned against her like she was a delicacy, that pleased hum vibrating through her to make her toes curl. Her trembling thighs parted wider for him of their own volition, her fear still present but losing to her need for his approval and the reward her willingness brought. Those sharp teeth scraped against her as he fucked her on his tongue, the sudden roughness knocking a choked scream against her palm.

Without his constant stare locking her, she leaned her head back against the wall, letting herself just feel the terrifying pleasure beginning to crest over her. Soon, she was grinding against his mouth, the
slight gyration of her hips encouraged with his hands kneading into her ass and his tongue dipping into her rhythm. He knew just how to stroke her, how to scrape his teeth over her, and how to flatten his tongue against her clit as he slid back down to twist into her. He was her father, he knew how to take care of her. How he had found that knowledge didn’t matter right now. She didn’t want to think about it.

Her body was already shaking and bearing down, that throbbing tension drawing tighter and her muffled moans growing higher. His mouth pressed against her more insistently, his teeth digging into her outer flesh just enough to remind her to fear, and it was that reminder of panic and pain that pushed her pleasure to come crashing over her. His wide grip on her ass was bruising as he steadied her frantic shaking and licked into her pulsing cunt with a fervor that had her bent and sobbing into her hands. The love hurt. It tore through her, ripping where it overstuffed, crushing everything in its way. Too bright, too hot, too much. She trembled, her hands moving away from her face to hold her trembling body together when she could trust herself not to scream. What meager strength she had left was depleted and darkness swam at the corners of her vision, framing her father's face in that encroaching black as he grinned up at her with all that fearsome love burning in his eyes.

“No, no, don’t pass out yet, darling. I’m not done with you,” he chided, pulling her up off her unsteady feet as he rose, her back sliding up the smooth wet tiles.

Her heart fluttered, bashing around in the cage of her chest when he positioned himself between her legs and moved them to wrap weakly around his hips. The blunt tip of his erection knocked against her tender opening, his size never more intimidating than when he was pressed up to her. There seemed no way it could fit. No matter how many times he’d proven her wrong, her gut still tightened in revulsion of that cock splitting her apart. He’d proven her right once, though, the scar healed but still there inside her. A small yellow evidence flag marking the spot on the floor where he’d torn her bloody flashed up from the depths of her memory like the fin of a shark breaching murky waters. She shuddered, willing the memory back into the brine. Time had proven him right to punish her then. Leif was the only person she could trust, the only one who returned her love as wholly as she gave it, even when that love hurt her so badly. So much suffering could have been avoided if she’d just trusted him to begin with.

With one hand hooked under her to keep her pressed between his body and the wall, he tipped her chin up and leaned down to kiss her. She parted her mouth for him, her taste on his tongue and her heart aching under the pressure of his love. The hand at her chin moved to grip the back of her head. She didn’t think anything of it, couldn’t think at all through the heated haze his kiss poured over her, until he sealed his mouth over hers to stifle her cries as his cock began to shove inside. Too much, too fast. Even with as wet as he’d gotten her, the sudden stretch was unbearable. She mewled pleadingly, her fingernails clawing down his chest in desperation, but he rammed his way through the resistant tightness of her narrow cunt.

He wanted it to hurt. The realization of his intent, his awareness of her fear and his enjoyment in actualizing it, made her unable to force herself to relax. He pulled back, his girth threatening to drag her out as it pulled at her inner flesh before he slammed into her, jolting her at the abrupt fullness. He didn’t give her time to adjust, repeating the motion and setting a brutal pace that she struggled just to endure. He replaced his mouth with his hand, leaning back far enough to watch her take his punishing cock, the same fearsome affection burning in his gaze. This, too, was how he loved her.

“Good girl…” he rasped, his voice a ragged growl as he drove into her. “My sweet, darling little girl… Don’t look away. Stay with me, Simone.”

His bruising thrusts forced her to yield to him until she adjusted enough to feel the inexplicable pleasure sparkling along those nerves. She welcomed that betrayal of her biology, leaning into its
mercy and allowing the fear to wash through her. Here, there were no boundaries, each emotion and
sensation blurring into one another until all she could discern was need. Need for him, for both the
tenderness and brutality of his love. She rocked into his motions, rolling her hips to meet his thrusts,
and he groaned as she took him deeper.

“That’s it… Yes, that’s it, darling girl…” he sighed. His eyes fell shut and he leaned forward to press
a kiss to her forehead, her cheek, then dragged his lips over her ear as he whispered, “Come for me
again, Simone.”

He didn’t give her any other option. The hand supporting her underside curled inward to rub against
her asshole as he filled her cunt to the hilt and rammed into her with short, quick thrusts that kept his
body pressed close to her clit. The change in stimulation knocked a startled cry from her lungs that
hit flat against his palm, but it was the deep twitch and hot spill of his own release that set her off.
Her body writhed to move against him, the love breaking her as she came around his throbbing cock.
Each deep pulse of their conjoined climax brought that darkness at the edges of her vision closer, her
shaking body growing weaker until that darkness nearly swallowed her. The world shrank to her
father cradling her against his sex pressing pain into her vagina, the wall pressing pain into the lashes
across her back, and the horrible love burning between them. She thought of the monk, immolating
himself in the street, and felt the flames consume her from inside her body.

His hand slid from her mouth as he panted and leaned against her heavily, his powerful body now
nearly on the edge of collapse, and he asked in a thickly accented murmur, “Did you think of me
when they hurt you?”

She tried to speak, managing a squeaked, “Yes.”

His beard tickled her cheek as he nuzzled her and asked, “Did you think of them while I hurt you?”

Her head lolled back, the world spinning at the realization that she hadn’t thought of anyone or
anything at all but Leif and what was happening between them. The reparations his brothers had
taken from her body for the curse she had carried into their lives did not enter her mind once, despite
memories of her father’s touch having haunted every torment they had inflicted. She was too tired to
wonder why this was so very strange, but she knew there was something broken and unnatural about
the utter lack of connecting their brutality to his. Leif’s hold over her was terrifying, and even more
frightening than that was how well he knew he possessed her. How well he’d always known.

“What… what did you do to me?” she asked, barely audible over the sound of the shower.

His teeth scraped the shell of her ear, making her suck in a sharp breath as he whispered, “I made
you mine, darling girl.”

“How long are you going to be in Norway?” Benjamin asked.

“How long can your marriage withstand us?” Leif asked in return, not looking up from the pot of
eggs he whisked rapidly to aerate them as they cooked. He didn’t need to look to see the older man’s
frown sour at the quip.

“Come off it, man, it took being chased out of a country for you to escape your marriage,” Benjamin
sneered. He paused halfway in bringing his coffee mug up to his mouth to add, “And you weren’t
even married anymore!”
“I’ll have you know I had already settled into the Vermont property by the time the FBI had been alerted to my livelihood,” Leif countered cheerfully.

Benjamin set his emptied mug down on the counter, his sneer given an apologetic slant as he said, “Ah, damn it, that’s right. Sorry I couldn’t make Einar’s funeral. Did you get the card I sent?”

“Your card is most likely sitting in some evidence room at the Bureau, waiting for anyone bored enough to connect the dots and send the hounds after you next.”

Benjamin scoffed, blowing out an incredulous huff before dryly grumbling, “Well, if they can find anything on me, they’re liable to take the whole bloody organization down. Oh wait, it has a name now, right? Ouroboros? Real cute. You get that out of Harry Potter?”

“First, there is not nor has there ever been any such organization as you are referring to,” Leif corrected him in mock sternness, then continued, “Second, I didn’t choose that name for it.”

“What, they didn’t like us calling it the Mickey Mouse Club anymore?”

“Very kid-friendly.” Leif switched to a spatula when the scramble began to congeal in the low heat, folding the eggs gently as he hedged, “Speaking of, how’s Trygve doing on his initiation?”

The hesitation before Benjamin’s reply was brief, almost unnoticeable, but it was there to tell Leif all he needed to know about the man’s discomfort with the subject. The psychiatrist had done well to tailor this easygoing repertoire with him, avoiding the sycophantic humility or grandiose posturing so many others in their field had made the mistake of regarding him with. There was a resolute air of normalcy he insisted upon, wielding his dry wit and dull disinterest like a priest swinging an incense burner between the pews, although he sought to achieve the opposite of those holy men by deescalating the mysticism and macabre. It was his frank rudeness that had drawn Leif’s trust and sustained their friendly acquaintanceship. Benjamin had no special respect for anyone or anything and, though he could acknowledge and adhere Leif’s authority, he never treated him as what he was. However, there were some subjects that were simply not safe to discuss precisely because of what Leif was.

“Well,” Benjamin started, clearing his throat before smiling crookedly, “if you hadn’t noticed, both my sons are capable of sleeping through World War III. I don’t think they’re cut out to be very great hunters.”

“They don’t have to be hunters. There are many ways to serve,” Leif assured him, waiting a beat before adding, “Or not serve.”

Benjamin turned his attention to idly rotating his mug on the counter, the grind of ceramic on granite making a noise that didn’t quite fill the silence that stretched thin between them. There was no option to not serve, not as deep in as they were, not even for their families. Leif could almost smell how desperate Benjamin was to escape it and that stench of desperation was thicker now than it had been over a decade ago. Nothing had changed in all that time, not for them, not for their children’s futures, not even with Ouroboros’ initiative. A contract was a contract and theirs had been written in, by, and for their own blood.

“My girl is a heavy sleeper, too,” Leif said as he plated two servings of the scramble. “But it’s rarely restful. What we did to her was not the success you had set out to achieve, but it did succeed. You helped me turn her mind against her and there’s been no shelter in the world but what I can provide.”

Misery carved the lines of Benjamin’s frown deeper into his ashen face, but his tone was admirably controlled as he muttered, “Congratulations. I’m sure she’ll make an excellent addition to your
Leif dusted the two plates of eggs with paprika, giving Simone’s the generous amount he knew she liked as he said, “I don’t want that for her.”

The grinding noise of the twirling mug stopped. Leif had spent much of his time at the Marceau estate executing traitors, some of them guilty only of engaging in the kind of talk he and Benjamin were dangerously approaching. He politely left the kitchen with his two plates to let the psychiatrist consider what he’d confided.

When he entered the living room, the summer sun had already been up for hours and light poured between the cracks of the blinds, diffusing everything in a soft yellow glow that gave the droll mid-century modern décor some warmth. He set the plates off to the side of the thin mattress protruding from the angular couch before sitting on the edge of it and pressing down on the wadded bundle of blankets to feel where his daughter was cocooned among them.

“Simone,” he said softly to the shapeless hill of cloth. “Wake up. You need to eat.”

A hand lashed out from beneath a quilt, grabbing his wrist with a swiftness he couldn’t evade, but no further movement occurred from the cocoon. He stifled his laugh under a pursed smile and reached along that protruding hand into the warm pocket she made, his fingers tracing her skin as he slipped it under the loose sleeve of the t-shirt he’d dressed her in. Feeling her there grounded some restless part of him, drawing his searching gaze to fix on her and want to search no further. Careful not to jostle her, he pushed the pile of blankets away and smiled at how she laid curled on her side, a few winding tendrils of her hair escaping her braid to sprawl inelegantly over her sleeping face. In the few hours he’d joined her in rest, she’d clung to him with the same full-body tenacity she gripped the pillow now crushed to her chest. He watched her for another moment, the slow rise and fall of her breathing, the stillness of features so rarely absent of emotion, before brushing the hair from her face just indelicately enough to rouse her. Her breath stuttered to quicken as her eyes cracked open to fill with the stirrings of awareness before pain flooded them. She smiled at him.

“Good morning, darling,” he smiled back. “I hope you’re hungry. I made fluffy eggs, just the way you like them.”

“No, thank you. M’not hungry,” she mumbled, rubbing her face against a pillow as she stretched.

“Just taste them and I’m sure you’ll find your appetite. You mustn’t starve yourself,” he said, stopping himself before he finished that statement with in your condition. There would be time for that talk soon enough. He helped her to sit up, placing a plate in her lap and a fork in her hand, and sat close enough to touch his thigh to hers as he ate.

After a few reluctant bites, she muttered, “You made scrambled eggs then, too.”

“Don’t mumble, Simone,” he said, the parental reflex still kicking to correct her behavior even now.

She lifted her gaze from the breakfast to the window, looking at something beyond what was there as she said, “You made eggs the morning after we… that first night at grandpa’s. Mom wouldn’t touch them, not even the coffee you made, because the food belonged to a dead man. She was supposed to come back in a week… I… I miss Mom, Dad.”

He paused, waiting for her to begin crying, ready to put their plates aside and pull her into his lap to kiss those hot tears away, but she only looked back down at her plate and resumed slowly eating. There was no hint to the deep sorrow that had opened up in her confession, nothing but the calm that had moved over her to seal that gaping sadness shut. There had been no one to comfort and console
her the way she once needed, and even though he was now there and available to her, she had already learned to bury, to conceal, to suppress in ways she never truly had to know before. It dug at him the same way the long red lashes across her back did. She’d grown up so much in such a short time. She’d grown up without him there, surrounded by men who did not care about the ways their conduct had made her grow.

“I missed your cooking, too,” Simone’s shy whisper tore him from the churning storm of his rage. Her small smile around the fork in her mouth brought him away from those grim thoughts and he leaned down to kiss the side of her head, the fragrances of floral conditioner and her clean sweat soothing him. Any trace of his brothers had been fucked out of her and washed away, replaced by his scent both in and on her, as it always should be. He nuzzled his nose into the soft and fluffy waves of her hair, greedy for her scent, and removed his empty plate from his lap to move behind her. His legs stretched out on either side of her, he wrapped his arms around her middle and hugged her as he bent to nuzzle her neck. She melted against him, leaned into wherever his touch roamed, breakfast quickly forgotten in her lap as she sighed at the slide of his tongue along her jugular. Warm, soft, so full of taste and sound and scent, his greed for her rose with each enticing reminder of what he had so sorely missed. Her breasts filled his palms, begging to be bruised and sucked as he kneaded them beneath her shirt, and the sound of her gasping at his rough squeeze made him growl against his bite mark at her neck. He needed to hear her scream.

The abrupt tension that stiffened her in his hold could have been mistaken as a reaction to the torment he was inflicting on her breasts, but her stillness brought him to look up from sucking on her neck. He licked his lips and smirked at the cause of her sudden wariness. Benjamin’s oldest son stood pale and dumbfounded in the opening to the hallway, his wide eyes crinkled at the corners in terror at what he’d inadvertently walked in on. Apparently, the details of Leif’s desperation to have his daughter brought to him was not quite as common knowledge among the members as he’d thought.

“Good morning, Trygve,” Leif said to the young man, not bothering to mask the huskiness from his voice. He smirked at the nervous bob of the boy’s knobby Adam’s apple as he swallowed. “G-Good morning, s-sir,” Trygve responded tightly. Sweat was just beginning to bead on his upper lip as it quivered before he jerked his wide stare away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were here.”

“No need to apologize for walking into your own living room,” Leif said. He pinched Simone’s nipples beneath the cover of her shirt, his smile sharpening at how she didn’t even flinch. He wanted to see what savagery burned in her eyes at this interloper. “We can just pretend this didn’t happen. Our secret, right?”

The boy nodded with a stiff jerk of his chin and then continued shuffling down the hall, as pale and drawn as though he’d seen a ghost. Leif chuckled at whatever misery must be ravaging the young initiate to have stumbled upon this scene and brushed the amusing thought away as he removed Simone’s neglected plate from her lap before pulling her down to the task of removing the interruption from her mind as well. He might have to wait for the Wallises to leave for church to hear her scream, but there were many quieter sounds he could have her make in the meantime.

The steady repetition of a heart monitor pulled Vidar out of a deep and dreadful rest, the sound familiar in the worst ways. His mouth and head felt stuffed with dry cotton, prompting him to push himself up onto his elbows. When the blurry room stopped spinning and came into focus, however, he realized he wasn’t in a hospital room. The white plastic curtains that formed the walls didn’t even
reach halfway up to the pastel yellow ceiling and strange voices echoed around him. The heart monitor was nearby, but not in this room those curtains squared off. All that he was hooked up to was an intravenous drip connected to a completely emptied saline bag. As he sat up, he noticed the bed he was laid out on wasn’t a bed at all, but some sort of tufted and plush fainting couch.

“… what the fuck…” he mumbled.

His body felt numb, almost disconnected from him as he shuffled cautiously to a crack in the curtains that seemed to mark an exit. A narrow passageway of yet more curtained off areas led him closer to the steady beeping of that heart monitor. The murmuring of several voices could be heard somewhere beyond the curtains, growing louder with the beeping until he found himself standing before a wider opening where six men in scrubs stood around someone lying in a stretcher under a bright overhead lamp. The blood on their stark white uniforms stood out obscenely. The men all turned their attention to him at once and he noticed through his dreamlike haze that most of them had facial scarring and tattoos visible around their surgical masks.

He flinched at the motion of one of the curtains being drawn back, his increasingly bewildered stare latching onto the strange man who entered on the pungent wake of smoke from the cigar clenched between his yellowed teeth. Eyes milky with cataracts peered out from a gaunt face of cracked brown leather as they looked him over with a detached interest. There was a sternness to him that pinned Vidar with a vague fear, something hard and unyieldingly inhuman beneath that human face before it receded behind a chillingly bland apathy.

“Walk with me,” this old man said to him in dry and whispery English.

The stranger didn’t wait for him or see that he was following as he walked back through the flap he’d entered. Vidar, not knowing what else to do and not entirely sure this wasn’t a dream, rushed after him. Six pairs of eyes followed him as he crossed the room and he risked a glance at the man on the stretcher, recognizing Maier cut open from hip to sternum beneath all the tubes and forceps. His intestines were suspended on hooks above him like sausage hanging in a butcher shop window. Vidar looked away before the sight could burn any further into his mind. The old man was not bent or slowed by his age, nor was he in any particular hurry, but Vidar was winded by the time he caught up with him and had a moment to look at where he’d been led. The room was opulently furnished in a theatrical rococo style, its oppressively thick ornamentation distracting his eyes in too many directions at once until he settled on two occupants of the room. There, laid out on a heavy wood table amidst an intricate display of fruit and foliage, was the bloodless corpse of Henrik. Seated at the head of the table, his head leaned back limply and body slumped in his chair, was Anders.

Vidar’s head pounded with a blinding pain and he collapsed to his knees as he gripped his splitting skull, his senses muffled by the overwhelming agony until he could hear someone screaming. It wasn’t until he felt the burning in his throat that he realized the bloodcurdling sound was coming from him.
Chapter 74

Vidar looked up at the touch of another hand patting his back, then immediately looked away at the sight of the deep scar splitting the sad-eyed stranger's face.

"Dis-moi ce que je peux faire pour t'aider," this soft-spoken man said, and Vidar was glad to have looked away to avoid seeing how that split mouth worked around those words.

For hours, very strange strangers had shuffled into the room to offer their condolences in an array of languages, or just a pointed silence as they viewed Henrik’s remains. Some brought gifts of alcohol, flowers, fruit, or envelopes stuffed with anything from cash to cocaine. Sometime after the second hour, Vidar had opened one of the unmarked bottles and set to the task of drinking it. His hand shook as he brought the half-finished bottle to his numb mouth, dribbling a bit down his bloodied and torn shirt. He perhaps shouldn’t be drinking with a concussion, but it hardly mattered now. None of the men who had come through seemed to even notice the slow drip of blood down his chin, but they looked to be quite comfortable around blood and death, or perhaps more accurately, comforted by blood and death. He set the bottle down on the marble floor, steadying it carefully as it rocked dangerously in his drunken clumsiness, and dragged himself to where he’d laid Anders out on a tufted velvet couch away from the immediate view of strangers.

There was no change to the younger man’s condition. Same deathlike unconsciousness, same shallow breath, same weak and rapid heartbeat, same bluish tint to his pale skin. Vidar knelt on the floor and pulled down the blanket covering his brother, unbuttoning his shirt in a sudden horrid suspicion that maybe he’d repeated his crime, but there was no hole in Anders’ chest to match Henrik’s. Despair rushed up to devour what brief relief this brought, and Vidar rested his aching forehead against that blessedly unmarred chest as a fresh bout of weeping pressed his resolve. There was no doubt that this place and these people were part of what Leif belonged to; they were as dead as Henrik so long as they remained captive here.

The return of that pungent odor of cigar smoke made his sore body tense in the raw terror and rage it ushered.

"He won’t make it to tomorrow in this condition," that dry, gravelly voice said, much closer than he should have been.

Vidar turned to snarl up at the old man, "He won’t make it if you do nothing to help him!"

"He’s not my responsibility."

"You brought him here!"

"He was brought to me, but I have no use for him. You’re barely worth all the trouble you’ve caused, and I don’t need two of you around," the old man said, his steps eerily silent as he folded his hands behind his back and walked idly to the growing shrine of flowers and gifts surrounding Henrik. "Do you know how valuable a man with Maier’s skillset and mentality is to me? Much more valuable than a man who couldn’t kill to protect his family. Anders doesn’t have the right instinct."

He struck his thick signet ring on the table, the knock echoing loudly three times, each making Vidar wince reflexively. "You do, though. It’s a shame Einar didn’t take you on as a second apprentice; you’re as much a born and bred hunter as Leif."

"I don’t give a fuck about any of that," Vidar sneered. His muscles flexed and bunched to shoot up and charge at the old man, his better reasoning barely enough to hold back that animal response.
“Anders is dying. Please, he’s… he’s valuable to me.”

The stranger turned, his profile silhouetted against the light pouring in through the barred windows, the milky cataract covering his iris making it impossible to determine where he looked as he said, “All present medical staff in this garrison are currently occupied trying to save Maier’s liver and what they can of his bowels, thanks to you. As I have stated, Maier is valuable, Anders is not. I have no use for him alive.”

“Then send him to a hospital! He won’t remember anything about this place anyway!” Vidar insisted, rising off his haunches and taking one staggering step toward him before the old man turned to fully face him. The leonine features of this stranger gave him a ferocity that defied his age, and just the wrinkling of that heavy brow was enough to stop Vidar’s approach.

“Only initiated members of Ouroboros leave the inner sanctum alive,” he said, pausing to take a puff off his cigar. Smoke billowed out to mesh seamlessly into the gray wool of his beard as he continued, “and only the worthy are initiated. You might be worthy, but neither of you are initiated and you’ve done no service to me. You have no right to demand such unreasonable concessions. You are nothing to me as you are, and he is less than nothing to me indefinitely.”

Frustration tied a tight knot in Vidar’s gut, wringing desperation toward a bitter resolve he trembled to consider but had no choice but to face. He’d lost one brother, was on the verge of losing the other, and his slave was lost to a demon. He looked at his brother, his only brother left, and his affection became an affliction; he knew then that he would do anything for him and that knowledge weighed a burden too heavy for his heart. His cozy little life of calculated solitude had crumbled under that weight before he’d even known it was there and now, standing in the company of death, he could not imagine living without him.

He kept his eyes on his brother, needing the sight of him to give him the courage to say, “If I’m nothing to you as I am… then tell me how I can be worth enough for you to save him.”

The hand clasping his shoulder nearly made him jump if not for the terror that immobilized him at the sound of that horrible, whispery voice saying, “Walk with me.”

“You were so fiercely protective of them… When was it that they turned against you?” Leif asked in hushed tones, engulfing Simone’s body from behind as they laid intertwined on their sides. He enjoyed her shiver as his fingers slid under the loose waistband of her borrowed pajama pants. His ministrations hidden beneath the cover of the blanket, their position was not entirely inappropriate for a father to indulge in cuddling his daughter, and as the Wallis family flitted about the house in the last moments of preparation to depart, he relished the thrill of this secret indecency.

“P-Papa…?” she whimpered, her nervousness making her voice small, almost frantic as her breath hitched when his fingertips brushed over her delicate labia. His erection throbbed at the moist heat above her needy sex and she sighed beautifully when he pressed his cock to her ass in a slow, hard grind.

“When did their abuse become so overt?” he asked. As she shuddered at his touch and his words, he whispered, “Did you weep when you realized you were being raped?”

She choked out a pleading, hoarse groan in response. The anguish in her plea shot an ache of pity for her straight through his resolve, but this had to be handled properly. He had to work through both of
their suffering to truly bring her the comfort he so wanted to provide. This was nothing new. There
had been countless moments of guilt and reluctance to do the hurtful work of tilling her psyche and
this was no different, but he was different. His heart was red and alive again, beating to the tempo of
his own purpose and the purpose he had found in his child. His fingers shook as they dipped lower
and smeared her wetness at her clitt. Below the guilt and the reluctance was the pleasure that always
demanded him to subjugate and dominate; the old temptation of flesh that warred with the temptation
of mercy, never having been an even conflict until now. He could not be weak to either. The sound
of the front door shutting behind the Wallises departure set him to commit to this task.

“What changed?” he breathed into her ear, then took the curve of that sensitive flesh between his
teeth.

She whined like a puppy, wincing and flinching, but managed to stammer, “I-I don’t know- They…
ah... I don’t deserve their trust, can’t earn it, and… they know what I am, so… They started to treat
me like I deserve…”

“What are you, Simone?” he prodded gently when she trailed off panting in her distraction at the
slow way he stroked her. “What did you do to deserve that treatment?”

Her arms hugged around her middle tightly, holding herself together as she whispered, “I made them
want to do that. It’s not their fault, so please… don’t blame them. I ruined them. I’m a… a monster.”

Hearing how those seeds of self-loathing he’d planted had taken root in the fundamental core of her
being surprised him. She was so malleable by the time he’d gotten her alone in Vermont, it didn’t
take much to completely shatter her sense of self, but that was just one step along the path of her
rebirth. He was supposed to be the pillar supporting her as he reconstructed her into something more
whole and powerful than before, and in his absence, she had grown back together wrong and jagged.

“You didn’t ruin them, Simone,” he said. “Whatever heroic aspirations they might have had in taking
you from me had simply decayed down to the bones of their savagery over time and temptation.
Your susceptibility to such cruelty may have enticed their cruelty in turn, but their cruelty is their
own. You did not create it. It is as much a part of them as it is a part of me, but they didn’t love you
like I do. No one can. You were made for my love, to belong to me and me alone, Simone. They
couldn’t force you to fit them no matter how brutally they tried. Tell me how they tried, darling. Tell
me how they hurt you.”

Her trembling grew more severe as he spoke, each word piercing through the walls she tried to erect
around the wounds of memory he prodded and pulled. To allow healing to begin, he had to cut away
the rot of deception and falsehoods that had built around those wounds, and a painful debridement
was unavoidable at this point. His red, living heart beat faster at how openly fragile she was and how
tempting it was to break something so fragile, even as he wanted to protect and heal her.

“They put me in chains,” she croaked through a throat thick with agony. He pulled her to him
tighter, kneading her breast roughly and curling one finger into her ready cunt to pump her at a
steady pace as she shook with the sobs she tried to suppress. “They could do whatever they wanted
to me… and so they did. I tried not to fight them and just... but they wanted so much, so much, I
couldn’t do it. Nothing I did, nothing I wanted mattered. They never asked, they just, just took, so I
tried to be good, but… They put me in chains, Papa. I hate that. I want to hate them. I hate
everything else so much, the whole goddamn world, but… It wasn’t their fault. If I had just... none
of this would have happened. It’s all my fault, but they didn’t have to put me in chains, did they? Did
they have to whip me and split me open on both of them at once? Why did they want me to be a
slave or a pet or a doll? Why… Why any of it? It hurts. It’s never going to stop hurting, is it?”
“It will stop one day,” Leif lied.

He felt her tense at the slide of a second finger in her, heard her pained whimper at even this slight stretching, and he wondered how he had ever possessed the will to restrain himself with that snug softness sucking at his fingers.

“Please, Papa… make it stop…” she whimpered.

His dwindling restraint snapped at the need in her voice, that need evoking a response more visceral than lust or fury, something closer to instinct as he pushed her onto her back and rose to pin her to the thin mattress. Her red-rimmed eyes went wide at whatever she saw in his expression, but his urgency afforded no time to soothe that fear out of her. Her pain was as open and present as it could be, now he had to twist those pathways toward places he could manage. Sex was the domain he had most dominated in her, so it had to be through sex he would create a conduit. He just hoped the drug therapy was still in effect enough to accomplish the desired result since she had gone so long without reinforcement of the method.

He yanked his shorts down enough to free his cock as he pushed her knees to her chest, then pulled her ridiculous cartoon-patterned pajama pants halfway up her thighs as he leaned over her bent form. She was still tender and swollen from earlier, dragging a pained groan from her when he pushed his head through her resistant opening, and he bared his teeth against the urge to ram a scream out of her just yet. With his weight holding her doubled over, he grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head and used his other hand to grip her chin, immobilizing her to remind her of the bondage she had so feared. She wriggled in spasmodic jerks, more the involuntary twitches of fear than any struggle to escape, and he rewarded her with a harsh push of his hips. Her cry was broken by a sob, her eyes scrunched shut from the pain, but he had to keep her submerged in that fear and agony.

“Look at me,” he growled out his command, and her teary eyes strained to keep open and focused with a dogged obedience that made him want to kiss her. Not yet, though. The reward of affection always had to come at a price, especially now. “What am I?”

“Y-you’re my… dad,” she whimpered, breathing raggedly.

“What else am I?”

She paused, her mouth hanging open and eyes shining with uncertainty until she whispered, “You’re a murderer.”

“Is that all I am? Your father, the murderer?”

She shook her head, confusion mingling with the myriad of other feelings furrowing her brow.

He sawed into her with a firm roll of his hips, watching her slack mouth fall open in a silent cry as he asked, “Are you a slave? Are you a doll, or a pet?”

“No!” she gasped.

“No, you’re none of those things. They chained you and broke you, but they couldn’t make you any of those,” he said, breathlessness making him hoarse as he sank into her narrow cunt. “You’re not a monster, either. You’re not what was done to you or what you have done. You are Simone Lili’uokalani Valstad, you are mine, and you are still so much more than that.”

She broke down into the tearful sobbing he’d been waiting for, her shivering breaths interrupted by her sharp gasps as he fucked her as deep as she could take him. His girth dragged along the soft flesh that gripped him, her slickness making that divine friction bearable to fuck more rapidly until he
found a rhythm they both fell into. His grasp at her wrists slid up to her hands and she held onto him, her fingernails digging into the back of his wide palm at each thrust. The thin padding of the sofa bed did little to absorb the impact of his flesh slapping against hers, the lewd sounds of their sex echoing freely in the solitude of this spacious house. He watched her, marveling at how openly she wept beneath him, so much like the little girl he’d known her to be not so long ago. He wasn’t there for her when she needed him, not then, not when his brothers had raped her, but he was here for her now and he vowed he would be from then on.

Leaning down, he kissed her lips, so full and puffy from crying, and she met his kiss with a fierce desperation that made his heart ache with the paternal pull to soothe and fix her. He reared back abruptly, pulling out of the tight grip of her cunt and yanking her pajama bottoms all the way off before nearly tearing his own clothes off in his urgency. She curled onto her side, ready to cry out the pain she had bared to him, but he hauled her up and spread her open on his lap as he sat at the edge of the mattress. He pulled her into a searing kiss, embracing her as she straddled his lap with his cock nestled between their bodies, and she moaned into his mouth as he pulled her to rub against it.

“Fuck,” he whispered against her mouth, not an expletive, but a command.

She obeyed, pulling back enough to reach between them, her shaking hand grabbing his cock and holding him steady as she lifted herself over his tip. The uncertainty in her small panting breaths was easily overcome by her eager moan as they both watched her sink back down, his fingers crushing into the soft flesh of her ass to keep from pulling her down faster as she took him inch by inch into her throbbing cunt. The surprised little grunt she made the moment she finally fit all of him in was immediately followed by a shocked yelp when he rolled her hips on him.

“Fuck,” he reminded her in a growl.

She shuddered, but obeyed, rolling her hips as he’d shown her and he let her set the pace. She was cautious, his size no doubt uncomfortable in her much smaller frame, but she could and did take his entirety with each sensual grind in his lap. He kissed her neck, sucking and biting deep purple bruises into her skin he didn’t care to think about explaining later, the need to mark her rising as steadily as the pressure building low in his pelvis. He could feel every twitch and shiver in her body at her slow rhythm, and he groaned at the first fluttering pulse of her approaching climax.

“Good girl,” he murmured into her neck. His grip on her ass curled inward, his index finger pressing against her pucker and she tensed at the contact. “Let me in, darling. It’ll hurt if I have to force it.”

With a quavering sigh, she relaxed, and he pushed past the tight ring of her sphincter to wriggle his finger into her ass with the aid of her copious wetness that had dripped down her cleft. The effect this additional stimulation had on her was immediate, making her groan and buck almost erratically in his lap, her cunt tightening like a vice to around him. He’d always thought himself too big to fuck her there without hours of stretching her beforehand, hours he’d never had the patience to apply even when the opportunity was present, but perhaps his brothers had done him at least one favor in training her asshole for him.

As he worked a second finger into her, however, she tensed abruptly, her girlish pitch rising as she cried out, “Ah, Ah, AH! PAPA!”

Her sudden climax caught him off guard, the contraction of her deep pelvic muscles sucking at both his cock and his fingers with each throb, and he grunted in the effort it took not to succumb to the pleasure. He had to fuck her ass, had to reclaim every part of her his brothers had trespassed to reassure her of the security that came with his claim. When at last her orgasm began to taper and she slumped bonelessly in his hold, he nuzzled her affectionately and allowed her a moment to recover. Her soft little body settling against him so weakly warmed the parts of his heart he had tried so long to
“Feel better, darling?” he asked.

She groaned and nodded sluggishly, her heavy panting tickling his chest hair. He chuckled, amused at how adorably dazed she became in the afterglow, and maneuvered her pliant body to carry her as he slid out of her and stood. Exhausted and trusting, she let him carry her into Benjamin’s home office and even cooperated to let him lay her front over his desk without question, her legs dangling off the heavy oak furniture with her ass raised in the perfect position. There, in that stuffy little overly formal and oppressively old fashioned office with its insufferably British heavy bookcases and patterned wallpaper, he was going to fuck his daughter up her ass. Just as he’d suspected of a man with a difficult wife and a very private job, Leif quickly found a small bottle of lube hidden in the bottom drawer of Benjamin’s desk. He drizzled a liberal amount on his cock and stroked it slowly to coat him as he worked a finger back into her asshole. She hissed in a sharp breath, her back tensing in nervousness, but relaxed the longer he kept his touch slow and gentle.

“Dad…?” she asked uncertainly, raising her head off the desk and turning to look at him when he pressed the second finger into her.

“Ssh. Just relax, darling,” he responded in warm, soothing tones.

“Yes.”

Her muscles clenched around him, the grip strength of her hole impressive as it stopped the slow sawing motion of his fingers, and terror leaked into her whispered, “No! No, please don’t!”

“I’m going to need you to stay relaxed, Simone. This will hurt a lot more if I have to force it,” he calmly reminded her.

“But I-”

“Do you want it to hurt?”

She bit her lip and looked away timidly, her tension easing a bit as she meekly answered, “No.”

“Good girl.”

Her submission and the sight of that tight hole stretching open drove his impatience and she whimpered at the slide of a third finger into her. He remarked with pride that she really was such a good girl as she controlled her breathing and closed her eyes in the effort to remain as relaxed as possible. Still so sweet and eager to please even after everything she’d been through, and just as importantly, still so lustful. It didn’t take long before she was pushing back onto his fingers, those calm and even breaths grown ragged and hitched with small feminine grunts. He couldn’t wait any longer. She shuddered when he pulled his fingers away, bracing herself as he pressed his tip to that delicate hole. He pushed forward carefully, that tight ring resisting him until it yielded to slide over his thick glans.

“Oh, darling…” he sighed, overwhelmed by the wave of affection that crashed over him along with the pleasure of sinking into this unventured part of her.

He caressed her beautifully rounded backside as he watched his length slowly disappear into her asshole. When at last he was nearly hilted, he felt his tip hit the end of her rectum and he paused, debating with himself whether or not to go deeper. As worked up as he was at this point, it wouldn’t
take long for him to finish, but it was risky. It was also far too interesting to pass up. Holding her hips steady in case she tried to bolt away, he pushed against that narrowing passage, feeling a pop as he squeezed his tip into that second opening. She whimpered and jerked, the sweat that had been beading on her skin now dripping down onto the desk under her, but she took him. He moved, pulling away enough just to feel that narrow passage rub exquisitely at his glans as her snug asshole massaged his shaft with the natural response of the muscles to squirm at his presence. There seemed no end to how her body could delight him, as though she were truly made to serve his pleasure. He fucked her in short, rapid thrusts more akin to an animal than the controlled brutality he usually fucked her with, his excitement overtaking his composure, and moaned loud enough to startle her at the first deep tugs of his completion. He pushed hard against her, burying his length completely as he pumped his come into her colon and relished the possessive thrill of the depraved act. Wave after wave of overwhelming pleasure dizzied him with euphoria as he spilled in her, the throbbing in his body spreading outward to hum and tingle at his extremities until it left him with a thick coating of satisfaction. With reality still diffused in the soft high of a thorough fuck, he leaned over her and kissed her cheek.

“I love you too much, Simone,” he whispered, smiling against her damp cheek and the taste of her tears.

“Draw a picture with a house, a tree, and a person,” Benjamin said as he extended a pad of blank paper and a fountain pen to Simone across his desk, directly on top of where her tears had dried earlier that day.

She couldn’t look at him as she reached for it, barely able to glance at the items he held out to her as she leaned forward and took them. Beyond the paper and pen, she could see splashes of his features in the unfocused background; his long and narrow face, his beady eyes peering out of hooded slits beneath his heavy brow, his thin mouth sloped downward. More than looking at him, she hated how he looked at her. She didn’t want to feel the invisible hands of his gaze searching her and leaving their filthy fingerprints. The smudges of pity and resentment between his attempted detachment left her grimy with contempt. There was no discernible reason for him to harbor such guilt at the nucleus of his regard for her, but he was rancid with shame and it made her distrustful. Leif’s command to her to be good for Mr. Wallis did not prepare her for the possibility that Benjamin would interact with her, however, and she found her will to obey that command waning with each loud tick of the antique clock on the wall. He had fought for Leif and her to stay in his home, though, so she could not resent him as fully as she’d wanted. This, in turn, only made her hate him more.

Pulling the pad and pen to her a little too quickly than was perhaps polite, she asked, “What kind of house do you want?”

“Don’t think about what I want, Simone, just draw any house and tree and person that occurs to you,” he answered. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to sit?”

“I’m more comfortable standing,” she grumbled.

With a nod, he leaned back in the plush leather armchair to steeple his squared fingers in front of his face and turned away from her. The heavy sweetness of gardenias wafted in through the open window, carried on a breeze she longed to feel in the spacious outside, a longing that was clipped through months of denial. She drew as she was asked, quickly in her anxiousness, each moment without her father there making Leif’s return less and less real under the weight of doubt that came with the unmooring of solitude. She would not cling to Benjamin’s presence as her anchor, not even
as her edges frayed and unreality breathed whispers down the back of her neck. The pen tore across the paper, ink bleeding out in a generous sputter from the harsh friction, and she tossed the drops of black to splatter from the nib as she abused it. It felt good to make something bleed.

A house, a tree, and a person began to take shape among the smears and the splatters. A pale hand hung at her side, fuzzy in the peripheral of her vision, but she didn’t need to look to know who was there. The stale, sour stench of the darkroom was enough to know what it was that stood next to her. Benjamin remained staring out the window, fingers steepled, waiting for his drawing. He did not see Bjørn because, she knew just as well as she did not, that Bjørn was not really there. That gray, dead hand hung low, too low for anything alive and human, those limbs stretched to Dali levels of distortion in the corner of her eye. She scratched her wrist where their watch should have been, feeling the flesh there crawl where he wanted to touch a question of where into her skin. The watch was with her uncles. He could stare all he wanted, all damn day if he pleased, it didn’t matter to her how a ghost spent his time. A house, a tree, and a person twitched on the paper like mice stuck in a glue trap. Bjørn wasn’t really there, of course, but they were reacting to him like he was. She couldn’t blame them from wanting to tear themselves away from the paper and run, but running never solved anything. It was better to just let it come, let it happen, and deal with it. Besides, they weren’t going anywhere. They were just drawings. None of this was real.

“They’re done,” she announced, sliding the pad and pen across the desk.

“You,” Benjamin murmured as he reached for them.

She smeared the excess ink from her fingers in a thick band around her wrist as she waited to be dismissed. The sight of the ink around her wrist was apparently enough tribute to placate Bjørn as that pale hand drifted away from her peripheral as silently as it had come.

“Is this the tree?” Benjamin asked, bringing her to look up at the drawing when he turned it to face her.

It looked different from the one she’d drawn Simone wondered if he was playing a trick on her, but the ink was still wet and the style was undeniably hers. She squinted at the figure, the many overlapping mouths baring teeth and tongues, the dozens of hands uprooting the bare and dead sapling beneath its oddly bent form, Einar’s house in Vermont on fire far off in the distance, a river of black dragging dozens of screaming featureless humans to the many-mouthed thing to grab and bite into. This was not the Ralph Steadman interpretation of a Thomas Kinkade cottage she had meant to draw. The hopeful little tree at the foreground was a pathetic thing meeting a pathetic end at the pull of the monster that was supposed to be a gardener tending to it. The violence in every aspect of the drawing shocked her, but as she stared, her memory rearranged to fit these changes she had applied. Her eyes flicked up to the clock, alarmed to find that 40 minutes had passed since Benjamin had handed her the pen and pad.

“She’s done,” he repeated, tapping the paper and leaving inky fingerprints over the twisted sapling.

She stammered a string of broken syllables before clearing her throat and starting over, “Did you want a bigger tree?”

“It’s not about what I want. What makes you think it’s not big enough?”

“I’m sorry it’s not… nice. I can redraw it.”

“Please, answer the question.”
She swallowed nervously, wringing her hands until they were smeared with black ink as she tried to come up with an answer. Unable to think, she spoke instead, “It’s not about it being big enough... or being anything at all, I guess... it’s just what happened. It doesn’t matter. If you want a different drawing, let me know what you would like and I can draw that instead. I’m not... I don’t think I know what’s good anymore.”

His stare gave her an itchy, oily feeling that smeared just as much filth on her as the ink that stained her skin. He laid the pad of paper down and sat back in his chair, that stare sliding around to examine her as she wrung her hands. The jeans her father had given her to wear fit oddly and the rough material was torture against her abused privates, making even standing there all the more uncomfortable.

At last, he said, “You’re awfully concerned with what I want.”

“People who want something find ways to make me concerned about their wants,” she responded. When the implication of her words occurred to her only after they’d been uttered, she hugged her arms around her torso. He didn’t know anything about that and there was no reason for him to know.

“When’s my dad coming back?”

“Tonight,” Benjamin assured her with a curt nod. “I’d like to ask you some more questions, do you think that would be alright?”

“Alright for what?”

“For you.”

She shrugged, curling tighter into herself and looking out the window. The stench of rotting gardenias was sickeningly sweet and heavy in the air.

“The person in your drawing— is it anyone you know?” he asked.

“It’s a monster, how could it be anyone I know?” she shot back, irritation clipping her tone.

“How about the corpses in the river? Are they-”

“No,” she interrupted.

“Well, alright then,” he sighed. He stared at the picture, fidgeting with his pen. “Simone, is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable? Are you hungry? You barely touched your supper.”

“I’m not hungry,” she lied.

She couldn’t bear to sit with them, couldn’t bear their stares and awful attempts at conversation, as though any of this was normal, as though she could ever be normal. They were temporary, anyway. She and Leif would soon leave, or Leif would kill them. No one good ever stayed in her life, or they stayed long enough to turn bad. Her father was the only one who came back, and back from the death she had flung him into at that. He was all she needed. A knock at the door pulled her out of her contempt and she rushed to it, disappointment falling heavily over her when it was not Leif, but the boy Trygve.

“Uh-um, h-hey, Simone,” he stammered. She glared at him, his brown hair, his freckles, his glasses, and hated him for not being Leif. “Do you, um, want to watch a film or something?”

“Trygve, I’m busy with her right now,” Benjamin frowned from his desk. “Aren’t you supposed to
be driving back to Oslo?”

“Can I pick the movie?” she asked, pointedly ignoring Benjamin.

The idiotic smile that spread on Trygve’s face curled a sour feeling in her stomach, but if it irritated Benjamin and got her away from the stench of gardenias, she could stand it.
Chapter 75

Vidar’s flesh crawled where the old man’s hand gripped his wrist, that weathered skin as leathery as it looked and cold as death. As he struggled to keep up with the swift pace, he tried to take in as much information of his surroundings as he could through the alcohol that had blunted his awareness. He could not regret this handicap to his perception, however, for the deeper he was taken through the spacious corridors that bore a clash of lavish opulence and ghastly madness, he was certain that he would have succumbed to hysterics without it.

Men mangled by degrees of purposeful scarification to wounds that had torn them into inhuman shapes looked to them with a guarded curiosity as they passed between the contrasting mesh of thrumming machines and antique furniture. The elegantly molded walls were riddled with the too-frequent scatterings of bullet holes and the rust brown splatters of aged blood. The distant sounds of abrupt yelling, agonized screaming, a cacophony of animal calls, and the constant din of banging and whirring machinery echoed from all directions. The old man’s rapid pace afforded Vidar no time to discern the terrible purpose to any of it, but even among the madness that lived there, there was a disciplined order to it all, a grave sense of purpose among the revelry of violence. They were building toward something here and, though he could not decipher anything beyond that general sense, a nauseating shudder pulled through him at the thought. When at last the old man stopped, it was before a wide steel door.

“What do you want of me?” Vidar rasped through heaving breaths, yanking his hand away.

“What I want will come later. Your brother has entered stage four hypovolemic shock. If I am to entertain your conditions to achieve your willing cooperation, then it would be prudent that we assure your conditions remain possible to achieve,” the old man answered.

The heavy steel door squealed on its hinges as he dragged it open and a foul rank wafted from within. Vidar followed as they stepped into a room crowded with racks of what looked like medical equipment, but he wasn’t given enough time to observe his surroundings before a large plastic pouch with a long flexible tube was thrust into his arms. A clear liquid sloshed around in the mostly empty pouch as he adjusted it to drape over his forearm and follow the old man through another heavy door in the back, the reek of animal waste and rot nearly causing him to gag as he was led through this dim corridor. Livestock rattled and banged at the cage walls, their muffled braying weak and mournful within those shadowed kennels as they continued their brisk pace.

It wasn’t until they stopped and the old man flicked on the overhanging light in one of those kennels that he saw what breed of livestock this dark space held. Vidar’s throat closed around what he now recognized as the reek of human waste, human rot, human suffering. The wire cage was neither tall enough to sit up straight nor wide enough to lay uncurled, forcing the man inside to constantly hunch or bend, and it was suspended off the floor to allow waste to drop through the spaces of the wire bottom. He was reminded of the pictures of cramped, barren cages often shown during the fur farm ban campaign, and his mind immediately jumped to what this mad cult could be farming from men. The large pouch and tube draped over his arm grew heavier as its purpose became clearer, its use confirmed when he saw the laminated sheet next to the lock advertising the man’s blood type and antigens. They were harvesting from these people.

The old man pulled at a cable hanging from the front of the cage, causing the barely conscious prisoner to groan as it pulled at the strange metal contraption encasing his face until he crawled forward. After securing the cable to keep the prisoner pressed flush against the metal wires, the old man pulled a second cable to drag his bound arms forward. Like a marionette, the prisoner allowed
himself to be pulled until what little mobility he had was completely removed.

Only after this was achieved did the old man open the door to the cage, put on a pair of neoprene gloves, swabbed the neck of the prisoner with several alcohol pads, and then tapped at the line of dark spots of scars along that neck as he said, “Convenient. This one comes with a map of where you will stick him.”

“What?” Vidar heard himself ask despite knowing, with a horrible clarity, what he was going to do. He needed to hear it to be certain of what he was already so unfortunately certain of.

“Insert the needle up the vein at a thirty-degree angle to the skin,” the old man explained patiently as he handed a pair of gloves to him and picked up the tube. “Keep the bag low, allow it to fill, give it a little shake every so often to mix in the anticoagulant solution. We keep this process very simple for whoever has need of it and there is always plenty of fresh blood or tissue available.”

He removed the wrapper at the end to reveal a startlingly thick needle as Vidar struggled to balance the pouch and stretch the neoprene over his long fingers. No sooner had he managed to get his shaking hands in the gloves than the old man gripped him and closed his fingers around the base of the naked needle. As he guided him toward the neck of this man he knew neither face nor name of, a man who had been reduced to something less than a farm animal, reduced to his very basic pieces, the well of terror that had pooled around his mind was not for what he watched himself do. Anders’ cold pale skin was enough to fortify his will to drive that pole of a needle through this animal-man’s jugular without any thought to the moral torment that may await him for it later. The terror that had gripped him since the light had poured into the cage was the threat this old man so had purposely and poignantly posed to him without saying a word. His conditions were to be entertained for his willing cooperation. All of this was mere display of not only what they were capable of, but what was considered so common and acceptable to them. That could just as easily be him in that cage. The sense that his life was allowed to him as a courtesy was another terrible certainty among a growing mass. It was not just his life that was at risk, though; there was no room to mourn his circumstance so long as there was hope for Anders.

As Vidar watched the prisoner’s blood fill the tube to trickle into the bag he held at his side, he asked, “What is it that I will be doing to earn our lives, sir?”

The old man puffed on his cigar, the pungent smoke a welcomed interlude to the stench of this corridor as he exhaled, “You can call me Dr. Aguiyi, to start.”

“Doctor?” Vidar questioned hopefully, his thoughts never wandering far from his brother’s condition.

Dr. Aguiyi shook his head, a smirk splitting his smoking mouth. “Sociology, University of California, Berkeley.”

“Why did you bring us here?” Vidar asked.

“‘Why’ is not yet within your ability to understand. ‘Why’ is a long story, longer than we have time to spare today. For now, you will have to settle for ‘what’, and at the moment, your ‘what’ is securing your brother’s survival.”

“What is it that you want me to do? You have my conditions, but I don’t know what I’ve agreed to.”

“Good. ‘What’ is much better than ‘why’. I don’t want to hear you ask for any ‘why’, in fact; it’s just such a troublesome thing, you see. Yes. What I want you to do is simple, really, as simple as the needle. I want you to live.”
“Live?”

Dr. Aguiyi nodded, brushing something off his dusty and washed-out lapel in an act so futile Vidar could not even begin to question it.

“We could have done that a lot better if you’d just left us where we were,” Vidar said, his utter confusion removing the venom that would have normally accompanied that statement.

Dr. Aguiyi smiled, his yellowed teeth gleaming under his beard as he said, “Oh, no. You must live here, you see, and living here, or rather, staying alive here means something different than out there. If you can do that, then you might be worth what I want of you.”

Leif entered the hotel elevator behind a young couple, their conversation not deterred by his presence in the slightest as the chatty redhead continued to complain about a restaurant while his seemingly mute partner nodded along in obligatory sympathy. He stood away from them out of both an ingrained politeness to allow their conversation room to breathe and to attempt to blend into the background, an attempt that did not prove successful as he caught the redhead’s partner all but blatantly staring at him through the reflective metal that lined the interior. There was no alarm in the younger man’s face, but there was a vague intent. Leif watched him from behind the cover of his cheap sunglasses, running his fingernails through his beard and adjusting the paper bag under his arm to give them a false impression of where his attention was.

The handgun that was tucked at his back in his waistband was brought more to uphold his image around the identity broker he was set to meet with, though it was far too noisy an option to consider using here. If the conflict did not begin here in the elevator, he could see which floor they got off on, follow them to find out what room number, then come back to it before they could decide what to do. If the conflict began here, he could collapse the younger man’s trachea with a swift elbow to the throat, buying him the time to drive his fist into his partner’s temple to fatally fracture his skull before turning back to finish him. Leif straightened his posture from the casual looseness he wore in public, the familiar thrill in this action alone uncurling an excitement that heated his blood delightfully. As he flexed his fists, however, he identified the vague intent in the younger man’s stare. It was not suspicion or recognition that had attached this young man’s stare to him, but rather the much too tight tank top that had attached this young man’s leer to his tanned and trained arms. Leif’s disguise was both effective and, apparently, somewhat provocative. He pursed his lips to keep from laughing as the couple exited the elevator, letting it out in a loud bark when the doors finally shut to take him up to the fifth floor. His slutty shirt nearly had him murder two men in error. He was still grinning when he knocked on room 508.

“You’re early,” the stocky older woman frowned when she opened the door.

“My apologies, Mrs. Hu,” Leif smiled, stepping around her when she shifted to the side for him to pass.

“Early is good,” she replied just as gruffly. “Gets this shit over with faster. Where’s the girl?”

Leif looked over the array of documents, machines, printers, and all the specialized clutter of forgery spread out on the bed as he answered, “I did not see any need to bring my daughter to this… introductory meeting. I was not aware you would be providing the documents straight away.”

“Whatever,” she seethed. “I don’t need her here to do it right. You got the cash?”
“I would like to know what I’m paying for first, if you don’t mind,” he said, clasping his hands politely in front of his chest, careful to employ his most non-threatening behavior.

Mrs. Hu did not seem to be the type of person easily susceptible to threats either way, holding his gaze with a shrewd glare as she cocked her hip and frowned, “What, you comparing prices? Shopping around? Not many people do what I offer. If you’re pinching pennies, there are plenty of assholes who can sell you a photoshopped piece of shit on laminated card stock. You might be able to buy a fucking pack of cigs with it, but it won’t get you through an airport.”

“Yours will, though?” Leif asked. “Will we be clear to go through Germany? Hong Kong?”

“You’re worried about facial recognition software?” she smiled slyly, her acrid disdain shifting abruptly into a cheerful confidence. “That is my bread and butter, Mr. Valstad. Just think of all the money and hassle you’re saving on plastic surgery. I go a step beyond what the surveillance contractors do and cross-reference databases to find the IDs that slip into their software’s margin of error and then I widen that margin. You’re not just paying for a name, you’re paying for a face without having to lose the one you’re using. Short of restructuring your DNA and burning off your fingerprints, you’re walking out of this room as someone else.”

“And there’s been no issue with such doppelgängers entering the world?”

“The world isn’t really that organized enough to notice. Besides, you people are good at living under the radar. Makes you my preferred client.”

“Speaking of my people, you’re unconcerned with their reaction should they ever discover that you aided in my disappearance?”

Leif huffed out a chuckle at that. The raw confidence in her aggressively enterprising disposition put him more at ease than the lofty claims she stated and he handed her his paper bag. That glittering grin widened as she unbranded the brick of cash within and fed it through the bill counter set on the nightstand. With her payment confirmed, Mrs. Hu turned to her work, beginning at a laptop, then a series of putting the initial printouts through different machines that stamped layers of ink patterns, chips, strips and foils into them. Leif leaned against the curiously unused desk in the room as he watched this process, finding that observing the focus she dedicated to each precise step brought him comfort with this decision. This was the entry point into his and Simone’s new life together, a life that would have been interrupted by the network’s expectations and utterly impossible with the demanding position he’d held in Ouroboros. All those obligations and the restrictions of their family’s past would no longer hold any bearing on what they could become. He could give her the choices he never had.

“Passports, records and national identification cards for you and your traveling partner,” Mrs. Hu announced as she passed him the documents.

Leif took them, examining the identification card proclaiming him to be one Mr. Marcel Leblanc of French nationality, and his optimism faltered with a flat, “France.”

“Stricter limits on access to biometric information in their databases and I have an inside source,” she explained. “These counterfeits aren’t counterfeit.”

“You don’t happen to have an inside source in any other country, do you?” he asked.
“Not anything this airtight, and you need airtight. Why? Don’t speak French?”

His brow furrowed as he examined the passport bearing the same name with a slightly different photo bearing his likeness, then flipped to Simone’s new identity as Apolline Perrault.

“Why not have her surname also be Leblanc?” he asked.

“Manipulating relations is too complicated to amend in the public records; that’s also why you’re both listed as foundlings on the birth certificates,” she answered. “I’m very thorough.”

“I was hoping to remain her father in all capacities,” he frowned, the thought of his daughter being removed from him stirring an uneasy and unpleasant feeling, even if only in a false name. An odd idea flew up out of this notion, a strange fantasy he’d never even considered before by the sheer impossibility of it. This was a clean slate. There were no longer any limitations to what they could do or be, and with that dizzying freedom came possibilities that their relation had barred them from ever achieving. He was still her father in every way that mattered, but now, he could be so much more than that. He smiled at Mrs. Hu, genuine gratitude riding on the crest of that giddy wave as he said, “Actually, no. This is perfect. Perfect.”

“Cannibal Holocaust? Texas Chainsaw Massacre? The Thing?”

Simone shook her head to each title the boy suggested as he scrolled through the films he owned. She shifted on her side as she curled up in the armchair furthest from where he had sat down on the sofa, tucking her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them to form a tight ball. This room was lower than the rest of the house, putting the windows too high for her to look out of, and the lack of any direct sunlight tied a knot of unease in her gut. The thoroughly modern design of this house felt stark and soulless, less a home and more a product. Every light and window shade was operated on verbal or remote command, negating the need to touch anything but what was wanted, and this lack of tactile connection to her environment left her with an odd sense of rejection. A restless want to make use of her hands had her clutching and pulling at the sleeves of her t-shirt.

“Do you want me to get you a blanket?” Trygve asked.

“I want to watch Mary Poppins,” she said.

The incredulous snicker from him turned her glare to see him halfheartedly suppressing a grin and he shook his head before smirking, “Really? Mary Poppins? You want to watch a little girl film?”

Simone shifted her glare to the large screen taking up a tremendous portion of the wall and, finding that this did not reduce the oily filth his ridicule smeared on her, pushed herself out of the chair.

“Hey, wait! I’m sorry!” Trygve called.

The sound of him scrambling to follow after her as she walked off raised her hackles with a stuttering alarm. Before she could stuff it down, the touch of his hand grabbing for her shoulder bypassed any control over her reaction and he was bent and coughing on the floor before she realized she’d driven her elbow into his solar plexus when she had spun away from his hold.

Her irritation was at herself, her lack of control, but as she dragged her fingers through her hair and grimaced in frustration and fear, what came out of her mouth was, “Fuck your opinion! Mary Poppins relaxes me!”
“Oh… kay…” he croaked, not looking up from where he knelt hugging his middle.

She walked away from him, then walked back, her nerves on fire, and soon she was pacing, her fingers gripping her scalp as she tried to calm down. This wasn’t how people acted. This wasn’t how she used to act, not even at her worst, not even on the nights she and her friends went looking for trouble. These people had been nothing but generous and polite to her, yet she reacted to them with distrust and hostility like a wild animal trapped in their house. Her steps slowed to a halt under the weight of her shame. Her lack of control might have just cost her and her father a place to stay.

“I’m sorry,” she forced out, unable to look at the boy as he unsteadily pushed himself up. The words were bitter ash as they fell from her tongue, even as she knew she was entirely in the wrong. “That was… I shouldn’t have hit you. You should stay away from me.”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing,” he said. The strain in his voice said otherwise, but his readiness to excuse her violence brought her to turn to him. Perhaps it was just to save his pride, but even his forgiveness seemed suspicious to her. “See? No problem. I can take a hit.”

“You should never have to,” she frowned.

“No, I just wasn’t ready. Come on. Hit me again,” he insisted, his smile widening as he took one purposeful step toward her that she matched with a step back. Whatever rejection she was about to verbalize was sucked back into her lungs when he continued his approach and her backwards steps ended at a wall.

“Stay away!” she warned, hands held in front of her.

His smile didn’t change as he advanced, his head tilted in curiosity as he asked, “What’s the matter? I want you to do it. Let me show you that I can take it.”

“I would really prefer not to.”

He didn’t seem that much taller than her before he was standing this close, looking down at her as she glued her back to the wall. Those boyish features took on a crueler impishness and he looked older when he took off his glasses, maybe older than her, and it struck her then that he wasn’t a boy at all but a young man. The feral hostility she was able to choke down came rising up. She had to control herself. No matter what he said, he was still their host’s son and she couldn’t let this game or trick get her father and her kicked out.

“That was a really good move you pulled,” he said. “Why don’t you try it again? It’s okay. I won’t fight back or try anything.”

“Get away from me,” she hissed, low and shaking. “Please. I don’t like this.”

“You’re the next Valstad, right? You’re his only offspring, you have to be the next. I want to prove to you that I can take pain. It’s nothing to me, I promise. Let me prove myself.”

“What are you… No. No, I don’t want-”

“I can be a hunter, I can prove it if you just-”

“Trygve!”

Simone sprang away from between him and the wall at Benjamin’s abrupt bellow from the doorway, her pains completely evaporated under the heated adrenaline thrumming through her. The loud argument between father and son was just terrifying noise as she ran, every fiber of her being
humming with the singular purpose to flee, and the urge didn’t leave her until the soles of her feet found grass. Her body felt as though it would fall apart as she trembled and a burning pain began to creep in, forcing her to stop her blind sprint. As she crumbled to her knees in the large backyard, the stabbing ache deep where her father had fucked her throbbed in time with the burning in the lashes across her back, the cold sweat on her skin gave a terrible impression of those wounds bleeding again. She yanked the shirt off in a fit and laid down on the ground. The cool damp of the grass seeped into her front and the gentle breeze caressed her back. Slowly, the calamity of panic receded, but there was no comfort in the grass or the sunshine she had coveted for weeks at a time, no relief from loneliness in the company of these strangers, no shelter in the house that rejected touch. Her only comfort, her only relief, and her only shelter belonged to the man who had taken all of those precious things from her. She didn’t deserve them, but she had never stopped needing them. Needing him.

She clutched the earth and tried to will herself to sink into it, prayed to the dirt to fill her in place of this sickness. She begged the earth to swallow her whole, to hold her with the loving conviction of a mother smothering her child into a more merciful death than this life had in store for them. Her fingernails clawed at the damp grass and soil, but no matter how she willed herself toward oblivion, that sick love for him still ached at the eye of the storm that ravaged her mind. A hot, searing wave of hatred for herself flowed up and out her throat as she screamed into the dirt and turned her clawing nails to dig at her neck instead of the unresponsive earth. The hands lifting her and pulling her fingers away from the bloody lines she carved into her skin burned where they grabbed and she lashed out at them blindly, knee and fist connecting to flesh that fell back at her violence. It didn’t matter who it was. They were not him, so they did not matter.

The bag was heavy and warm, like a fat hairless creature curled in Vidar’s lap as he sat in a chair near the stretcher where two men operated on Anders’ neck. The room was bare but for the chair and the stretcher, it’s lack of ornamentation a calm departure from the chaos outside. The monitor displaying his heart rate and oxygen levels was blessedly silent, only displaying the readings to which he had no reference to determine whether the numbers were good or not. The men muttered softly to each other in German, half-words that Vidar caught in snippets from his rusty grasp on the language, but their conversation was never on their task. They worked in a harmony that was communicated almost telepathically, their slight gestures and shifts of posture signaling what they needed from each other as they clamped and stitched at where they’d pulled the side of Anders’ neck open. Their quiet mutterings were of rebirths, sacrifices, divine beings, and Bjørn. At the first mention of his late uncle’s name, it didn’t occur to him that it could be the same man, but then they mentioned the gray eyes of Leif and the girl as a sign of blessing between the three. It wasn’t a far leap to suppose who the girl was, and as their conversation went on, the mystery to all this madness only became more bewildering to him.

“The revolution was quick.”

“The revolution, yes. The creation, not so.”

“Two decades. Many have died.”

“They will have died well.”

“Divine death. Return us to death.”

“Return us from death.”
“Return Bjørn from death?”

“As Leif was returned?”

“The girl might.”

“Might.”

Vidar strained to listen for more to make sense of any of it, but they fell into silence. The urge to stand up and demand to be told where they were and why they were taken there fizzled up and out. Interrupting their focus while they were finger-deep in his brother’s neck didn’t seem like a good idea anyway. This sprawling mansion of madness was where he was once going to send his beloved slave to be used by a madman, only to have stolen her for himself and run in defiance of that duty just to end up here. It would have seemed a divine punishment for his sins if he believed in such things, but as he didn’t, the thought just irritated him.

“One of us will return later to check on his progress,” the man said. “Dr. Aguiyi recommends you remain in the room with him.”

Vidar could only nod, his attention unwilling to leave Anders’ pale visage. When the door shut and sealed him in this bare room, he pulled the chair up to the stretcher, sat down, and laid his head next to his brother’s. It was odd to be so close to him, but he couldn’t ignore the impulse to stay near. He pulled the blanket further up Anders’ chest, covering where the needle fed a dying prisoner’s blood into his veins, and sought out his hand beneath that blanket. He was startlingly cold when he grasped it.

“I won’t let them throw you away,” he promised.
Chapter 76

The evening sun was covered by the more typical overcast of a Trondheim summer by the time Leif made it back to the Wallis residence; an observation that, amusedly, led him to consider where in France might best suit his daughter’s favor for clear skies. A myriad of troublesome steps and worries wrought the path to that point, but he had no patience to ponder and plan. Fantasies flitted about his mind rampantly, cutting through the careful consideration of logistics with bright and swelling thoughts of obtaining romantic seclusion with her at last. Even the matter of what method was safest for travel was interrupted by daydreams of teaching her French in whatever little apartment they would land in, with her reciting simple phrases until they boiled the American accent from her tongue. He would teach her the French he was taught as a boy; the Scandinavian accents more of an easy cover for her true country of origin than the unattainable goal of passing her off as a native speaker. So long as she sounded simply exotic rather than definably American, the matter of her national identity would be as ambiguous as her racial identity, and just as easy for her to rebuke the attempts by others to pin her as she truly was.

As he tried to concentrate on what other ways they must conceal themselves, however, his mind snagged on the much more interesting ideas of how to establish French as the language she would speak even when surprised or impassioned. It wouldn’t do to have her shrieking English expletives when shocked, after all. A smile stretched at the corners of his mouth as he imagined all the fun ways he might train her to scream and moan reflexively in French. Imagining Simone’s voice going small and ragged as she pleaded *Je t’implore* over and over beneath him warmed his blood with a renewed hunger despite having sated himself in her just that morning, a fact that only seemed to further his distraction. Practical planning was impossible with the nearly giddy delight that had come with the sudden attainability of such fantastic notions he’d never before even thought to entertain, chief among them the new territory open in her for him to claim. There was no point to pursuing anything but celebration in this state.

He hummed a cheerful melody as he pulled Benjamin’s car into the garage at the Wallis residence, holding the folder containing his and his daughter’s new life in the crux of his arm as he carried the bags of new clothes and luggage for her. Sunday evening shopping in this sleepy city left much to be desired, but he’d managed to find her the necessary items to dress her less conspicuously than the comically oversized men’s clothes she’d been swimming in. In fact, he very much looked forward to seeing her in the little sheath dress with the skirt bunched up around her waist and the little black panties pulled to the side. His eagerness to search his Simone out quickened his steps as he made his way through the large house, but the appearance of a thoroughly rattled Benjamin stopped his progress in the hallway. The blood slowly oozing from his host’s swollen and split lip doused Leif’s cheer with a chill, but his gravest concern was allayed by the sheer fact that he still lived. If it was anyone from Ouroboros or any of the enemies he’d made by allying himself with that organization, Benjamin would not be standing there with a bruised and worried face, or any face at all.

“What happened?” Leif asked. “Is Simone-”

“She’s quite alright,” Benjamin interrupted hurriedly, then more calmly added, “Now, at least. You didn’t mention that you’d trained her in hand-to-hand combat.”

Leif’s ever-slipping self-restraint lapsed in the smirk that formed around his words. “Sorry, Ben, but I did no such training. You were bested by the expertise honed by five months of an after-school karate class she took when she was ten. What prompted this?”

The older Englishman stiffened at the question, his immediate discomfort inciting a dark impulse in
Leif tore the truth he could see his old associate attempt to conceal with his cautious, “I don’t know. She just suddenly flew into a… a wild panic and attacked us when we tried to stop her from harming herself.”

“‘Us’?”

“Trygve and I.”

“I thought I’d warned you against allowing your boy to interact with my girl,” Leif frowned, distaste tightening his grip on the bags into a fist.

Benjamin shrugged. “She didn’t seem too bothered at first, and he knows better than to risk anything with you. It was completely out of nowhere. She just—”

“I clearly stated that she was not to fraternize with your sons,” Leif interrupted tersely. “It was not out of nowhere; she reacted badly to a situation that I specifically told you to avoid allowing for this very reason.”

“How was I to know that her disorder would manifest so violently?”

“You of all people should know to exercise caution after what you did to her.”

The words were no sooner spoken than the awareness of what danger they posed extinguished the heated ire in him. The ashen terror of his misstep gripped Benjamin in the pause that followed, and Leif allowed a moment for that fear to permeate in his host. As friendly as their terms might have been, Benjamin could not afford to forget the nature of the man he so casually addressed as much as Leif held a responsibility to remind him of that nature. There was no need to remind him now, however. Memory glimmered behind the fear that tightened the older man’s eyes, and Leif could guess at what particular violence he was recalling just then.

“Not all of my goals were so mad as to have failed,” Leif corrected him amicably.

“I know. I shouldn’t have said that. That was rude of me,” Benjamin relented, then cleared his throat as he found his mental footing once more. The solemnity he adapted was more exasperating than concerning. “Your daughter is a very troubled young woman, Leif. She needs help.”

“I know quite well what my own daughter needs. You helped implant that need, after all.”

“Are you proposing to have this conversation now, or are you just having a bit of fun tormenting me?”

Leif chuckled at Benjamin’s dependable flippancy, the tension that tightened his fist loosening at this levity as he answered, “No conversation necessary on that front. Where is my child?”

“Passed out on the sofa bed. I was forced to administer a chemical restraint to gain control of the situation.”

“What did you give her?”

“Haloperidol-promethazine. Had to double the dose when the first shot didn’t take. Would that be due to a heightened tolerance?”
“Haloperidol?” Leif frowned, unable to staunch the distaste that tugged his lip into a slight snarl at the presence of an antipsychotic possibly undoing so much of his hard work in the girl. The last thing he ever needed was her being able to think clearly, but the promethazine relieved some of that worry. With any luck, she’d either be asleep or a drooling zombie for the duration of the haloperidol’s effect. There was a questionably less selfish worry behind that, one that incited an alarming protectiveness within him as he warned, “Simone’s mind is not something you’re allowed to tamper with anymore, Dr. Wallis, whether it manifests violently or not. If you tamper again, I’ll feed you the skin from your hands.”

Benjamin’s thin eyebrows shot up, deepening the grooves in his forehead as he responded, “Noted.”

Leif readjusted the file tucked in his arm and patted the older man’s shoulder as he passed him, smiling, “Thank you for minding my girl while I ran that errand, Ben. Your continued assistance is greatly appreciated.”

The living room was darkened, the evening sun peeking through the closed blinds providing just enough light to give shape to the shadow of his daughter laid out on the thin mattress at the center. Leif placed the bags and the folder in an armchair, draping his clothes over the back of it as he undressed, confident that all present Wallises now knew better than to glance in on him here and not too concerned if they did anyway. Simone’s skin was cold and clammy as he ran his palms up her legs and crawled over her.

“Dar-ling…” he murmured in a sing-song whisper near her ear, nipping at the sensitive appendage when she didn’t stir.

Her unresponsiveness reminded him, with both a wistful fondness and frustration, of the not so long-ago time that this was the only way he had allowed himself to have her. Those first shame-ridden moments of fumbling under her pajamas were paid in days of nerve-wracking certainty that she would divulge his perversion and shatter the perfect family man disguise he’d so diligently crafted. It all seemed so petty and ridiculous now. Had he known how it felt to be free, not only with his desire but with his whole being, he would have whisked her away into a new life from the start. But he was also not the person he was now. He would not have even thought to betray the family tradition and carve out his own path according to his ideals. He would not have delayed her initiation into the organization if his guilt over his forbidden lust had not bled into wishing to spare her of that violence. He would have continued to act according to the obligations and convictions he’d been born into, passing on the same cursed and limited existence to his daughter. Fate was a construct of fantasy that he’d never given much credence to, but fate was the only thing he could credit so much needing to go wrong to reach this right.

Leif gathered Simone into his arms, cradling her limp and vulnerable body in the dark, and hummed the cheerful melody he’d walked into that house with. As much as he hungered to take pleasure in her flesh, he was too greedy to settle for anything less than all of her. For now, at least, he could be content to just be her father.

Vidar knew that he felt something shift in him, or at least had become aware of some vague sensation of change, when two young boys no older than ten rushed past him down the hall carrying a severed human leg between them and he did not recoil on any physical or emotional level. Instead, he wondered where they were going, and to whom they belonged to that would let them run such a grim errand unmonitored in this place where agonized screams echoed to garner no more attention than the machinery noise they competed with. The leg itself or the human being it had once been
attached to was none of his concern, not out of indifference, but out of necessity. He could not think on it, could not allow himself down that path of thought, and so he watched the children run past and wondered where they were going with that leg in such a hurry. Regrettably, Dr. Aguiyi went down that path of thought for him.

“What determines the value of life? Life itself? What made the blood stock’s life any more valuable than your brother’s?” the old man mused aloud as he led him at a leisurely pace through this lavish and unkempt mansion. “The fact is, life itself has no inherent value. Nothing does. We have to protect what value we create from those that seek to cheapen it.”

A frown wrinkled Vidar’s brow and twisted his mouth around the words he could not stop from slipping out of his loosened mind. “You keep people in cages for their blood. How much cheaper can life be reduced to than that?”

“We are not a society without justice. Those who have profited from the devaluing of human lives through slavery and oppression surrender their right to be human,” Dr. Aguiyi explained, opening a door that led immediately down a dark spiraling staircase. His dry, gravelly voice bounced off the close stone walls as they descended into the black and Vidar found himself clinging to each word for the reassurance of another presence, even if that presence was the man who had threatened him with the same horror he referred to. “Their lives have extended many others’ many times, bringing some balance for what they have taken. Imprisonment has long been a tool of oppression and it is not a system we abide by lightly. Any tool in the wrong hands can be misused. You point out our reliance on a system that depends on oppression as a direct hypocrisy, but the day we stop needing the blood of oppressors is the day we no longer risk our blood in the fight to end all systems of oppression. Not that you care about any of that. Your sense of social responsibility does not extend beyond your brother, and so long as you’re both kept out of the literal and figurative cages you’ve benefited from, you don’t care about them.”

A stray irritation at being berated on a lack of conscience by a member of the murderous cult that had kidnapped him rose and fell on the acknowledgment of this truth. He could not refute it and he could not resent being judged on what was true.

“Don’t worry. We’re not going to punish you for being selfish,” Dr. Aguiyi added. “Your selfishness has been very useful to us, after all.”

The screaming, pounding, and whirring muffled through the stone grew faint until the only sounds echoing in this claustrophobic darkness were their footsteps. Then, music began to drift up from below. By the time Vidar’s feet found level ground, the low vibrations of a dozen drums joined by a chorus of shouting voices formed a boiling din that exploded in a fury of noise when Dr. Aguiyi pulled open a door. He waved for Vidar to follow as he entered into the room packed with people and heat, the air thick with humidity from their perspiration and hazy with smoke. His heels seemed glued to the floor, but the idea of being without a guide in this savage place launched him after the strange old man.

His wrist was once more snatched up in that leathery grip as the doctor pulled him close and yelled to be heard over the noise, “I recommend you wipe that wide-eyed look off your face before they see you!”

This did not lessen his alarm. “Who?!”

Dr. Aguiyi didn’t answer, already leading him through the throng of bodies that crowded around to look at something he had no hope of seeing. They whooped and shouted all at once in reaction to what they watched, all tense muscle in their enthusiasm, but parted to allow the old man through with varying degrees of respectful nods and bewildered stares. Whatever Dr. Aguiyi was in this place, he
was well-known, and Vidar couldn’t decide if it was good or not to be near someone so immediately recognized. They squeezed through the crowd for what seemed like hours, the sheer multitude of men all seemingly involved in this cult baffling Vidar. What he’d thought was a small smattering of outcasts and creeps was far from the army he waded through now, each of them likely to be as murderous as Leif himself. Every brush against them smeared a staticky fear across his mind until he could no longer stand to look at anything but that brown leather hand hooked around his wrist. When he was pulled into an abrupt clearing and that hand released him, he felt unmoored.

“Doctor?” he called out, but the old man was nowhere to be found among the crowd.

A dense wall of terror fell over him at the realization that the surrounding crowd all watched him, expectation glittering in their hardened eyes. He whirled around and found himself to suddenly be the lone terrified spectacle at the center of a small circular clearing marked by a groove carved into the stone floor. Whatever they were bellowing at had happened in this clearing, and they waited now to begin cheering anew at something that he was expected to perform in this circle. Motion through the wall of bodies swayed like tall stalks of corn in a field as someone stepped through and entered the ring; a man, far younger than him, barely out of his teens if that. The youthful jaw, still thin and smooth, jutted out in that equally youthful manner of having something to prove, and his narrow shoulders, so birdlike and frail, squared to match this foolish bravado. The wall of men shouted, all wordless vowels and tensing necks, eager and demanding.

Through his terror, a harsh laugh barked out of Vidar when it occurred to him what this crowd was expecting him to do. This was absurd, although apparently only to him as the crowd exploded into a joined cheer at the boy’s lunge. The snap and disorientation of a boney fist punching Vidar’s face caused his attempt at dodging to falter into a clumsy stumble, the wall of bodies spinning as he corrected himself in time to receive the next strike to his gut. The deep throb in his already concussed head communicated an instinctive threat to his life should he sustain much further cranial trauma, and before he could consider his reaction, he had slammed the boy down to the stone floor and the heel of his shoe was grinding into his chest. Each throb in his swollen brain flashed red over his vision and the roar of the crowd was distant and muffled. Wet dribbled down his chin from the blood that flowed heavily from his nose once more, but it wasn’t the threat to his own health that kept his foot pressing down into the squirming boy. Anders’ life depended on his worth here.

Kneeling, his foot still firmly pinning his opponent, Vidar ignored the arms that reached too short to claw at his face as he wrapped his hands around that thin neck.

Simone spat the toothpaste foam in the sink, or at least tried to when her attempt resulted in it dribbling down her chin as she leaned heavily over the porcelain basin. A bone-deep exhaustion had her weak and uncoordinated to the level that simply spitting was apparently too much for her, but she couldn’t let that stop her morning routine. She needed something resembling what little normal she had clung to throughout all of this when she was able, and since she wasn’t physically tied down, she should be able to brush her teeth, fix her hair, and go through some stretches if not her usual calisthenics. Routine was something she could take with her and hold onto to make any space and time her own, no matter what the circumstances or setting. Through the monotony of her isolated confinement in Henrik’s apartment, routine had become the structure she needed to hold onto her lucidity with no one around to anchor herself to. She needed that now. She needed all she could get to fill the gaping absence Benjamin’s needle had carved out of her as she’d lied paralyzed for eighteen hours that had stretched in suffering to seem closer to eighteen days. Unable to move, unable to feel, unable to even think, she had been set adrift in that terrible nothingness for so long
that she feared she might never completely return to herself. Even fear was something she’d missed when she had become able to miss anything again.

There was no hope in detangling the rat’s nest of her hair dry, so she sat down on the floor of the shower and greased up the knots with palmfuls of conditioner. The water was heavy and loud, weighing her down under the constant barrage of the spray, but its sound and sensation occupied her as she worked through the tangle. Once the comb slipped through her hair without catching, she scrubbed soap into the inflamed red lines she vaguely recalled scratching into her neck down to the sore ache in the places Leif had stretched her, the burning pain filling that absence a little more. Hurting was far, far better than nothing.

Feeling weaker than when she’d first stumbled into the bathroom, she accepted that this would be the limit to her morning exercise and dragged her heavy feet back into the living room wrapped in only a towel. The concept of clothing had shifted from what fashion suited her tastes to whatever she could get to cover her shameful body, making a damp towel as viable as anything else that could be so easily taken off her by whoever wanted to. When she reached into the shopping bag in the chair near the sofa bed and pulled out the chic little black dress, she put it back, opting to dig out a far less form-fitting t-shirt from her father’s backpack. She had just pulled it over her head when the sweet scent of pancakes roused her sense of smell and a long-ignored hunger. As though manifested on the magic of that lovely aroma, Leif entered from around the corner carrying two plates stacked high with pancakes topped with mounds of whipped cream and blueberries. It was hard to tell which delight sent her heart fluttering: the food or her father’s smile.

“Good morning, darling,” he greeted her warmly as he sat down next to her at the foot of the bed and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

The terrible gap of nothingness in her filled with the bright and hearty happiness that this sweet side of him ushered with that affectionate peck, but all she could find to respond to such a wealth of relief was a timidly mumbled, “H-hi, Papa…”

“Feeling better?” he asked, brushing a damp lock from her face and placing a plate onto her lap.

She nodded absently, her stunted attention span entirely used up by the beautiful arrangement of white cream and cobalt berries. It seemed almost a shame to eat it. Almost. She tore off an edge of the stack with her fork and scooped it quickly into her mouth before she could drop it in her lingering lack of coordination. The warm, fluffy sweetness nearly brought tears to her eyes with the memories it dredged up of happier, simpler times with her family. Memories that can never again be repeated. The soothing touch of her father’s palm rubbing across her shoulders as he ate beside her brought her away from that loss and she focused on etching this new memory with him.

“Do you want some milk?” he asked, offering her his glass.

She shook her head, finding her voice easier this time as she answered, “No. Straight milk makes me sick.”

His brow furrowed, the lines around his eyes deepening as he thought, then said, “I suppose I’ve never seen you drink milk. Your mother had the same problem.”

“Most of us do.”

“‘Us’?”

She paused, fork halfway to her mouth, as fear froze her in place before fizzling into an uncomfortable nervousness. She wasn’t sure what she’d said wrong, but she was sure she had
offended him somehow, or was on the verge of offending him. Not knowing what the right response was, she used the truth.

“Um… you know, mom and me, we’re not… We don’t handle lactose too well. A little is fine, but it’s more of a… It’s more common with white people to drink milk like that.”

His silence tugged at the certainty that she’d handled this badly, that she’d done something to upset him somehow, and she began to wish she’d just sipped the damn milk when he finally responded, “I see. I’d never considered that.”

She hesitated to continue eating, not wanting to choke if he lashed out at her, but nothing else happened. Whatever he was thinking, he kept to himself, and she didn’t know what to think so she shoved her apprehension down and kept eating. She’d managed to devour a third of her food before a nauseating sensation made her put the plate aside.

“You don’t like pancakes anymore?” he asked.

“No, no, it was really good! I’m just not- I can’t eat much anymore. Um. Not since…”

“Not since…?”

Simone squirmed under his gaze, knowing it would be better just to tell him about her pregnancy rather than continuing to ignore it until she couldn’t, but she wasn’t ready yet. Things were finally getting better. She was back with him, he was away from that cult, her uncles were safely away from them both, and Maier was too dead to worry about. The baby could wait. The vengeance could wait. They could have this little bit of happiness together.

“Just nerves, I guess,” she shrugged, then smiled up at his impassive gaze. “Will you teach me how to cook like you someday?”

His guardedly neutral expression warmed into a smile that filled her heart with so much love, it ached deep and heavy in her chest.
Chapter 77

The dark seemed to stutter and pulse to the rhythm of Dr. Francis Aguiyi’s singing, if the rolling rambling sound could be defined as song at all. Vidar shifted on the floor pillow, seeming unable to sit still as whatever was in that bitter tea began to affect him. His skin felt too tight, like something he was about to tear out of, and he longed for the fresh, clean sensation of that shedding despite its impossibility. He was quickly finding that logical awareness was quite different from instinctive awareness, that duality unfairly in favor of the latter with no regard to his lifelong commitment to the former. What he’d thought was logical didn’t hold much truth here, anyway. He flinched back when the abrupt flash of fire brought a half dozen women’s faces out of the darkness, all of them watching him from behind the gold chains that draped and dangled over their faces.

Dr. Aguiyi eyed his shock amusedly as he passed the lit match into a clay pot on the floor between them, the flame catching on a wad of oil-soaked fabric in the bottom as he grinned, “Don’t get too excited, son, these are my wives.”

Vidar looked at them in the orange glow from the fire pot, their eyes and their gold adornments reflecting the dancing flame eerily as they stood behind their husband and watched him with a predator’s leer. He looked away, unnerved, too aware that he had to be careful with his mind in its fragile state.

“You brought your wives to this place?” he asked. The doctor had been receptive to his curiosity, and any foothold he could get in the old man’s confidence was worth the risk.

“Of course. There is nothing more important than family,” Dr. Aguiyi answered as he tossed a handful of powder into the flame, a sweet fragrance blooming up from the fire almost immediately. He gave him a pointed look. “But you know that. Or, you have come to know that, I should say. They tell me Anders should recover fully by morning, by the way.”

The relief this news pushed a deep sigh from Vidar’s lungs, stirring something almost invisible in the air that glittered and swirled. He wiped the sweat from his face and tried to focus on just watching without thinking as Dr. Aguiyi sprinkled something that crackled green in the flame.

“You’re one of us now,” the old man said. “Fully, I mean. You were born one of us and now you’ve come of age, so to speak. I was hoping all of your brothers would be here for this day, but it’s been like herding cats just getting any of you to cooperate at all. Compliance never was a Valstad trait. You’re all so alike, even the little queen.”

Vidar broke his own no thinking rule already, asking, “You mean Simone?”

Aguiyi relit his cigar, giving it a few shallow puffs before answering, “That girl is going to be the death of me, I know it. We spent months trying to track her down and Leif himself finds her in one goddamn day. Made king fools out of us all. He’s going to let us have it when they make it back home.”

A sour discomfort settled in Vidar at how familiarly this man spoke of both Leif and Simone, but his tongue behaved ahead of his caution. “What do you want with her?”

“Nothing more than I want with you. Every Valstad is born one of us.”

“What exactly is ‘us’?”
“The answer to that depends on who you ask. Should you ask any of the boys in the basement, they will tell you we are Ouroboros, allotted with a divine mission to bring destruction to that which is blocking rebirth. Should you ask me, I might tell you to ask Bjørn.”

Vidar felt himself sinking into the floor, the stones turned viscous as tar, and waited for a dizzying wooziness to pass before whispering, “Uncle Bjørn?”

The doctor stared into the flame, his skin rippling and beard melting as he said, “Yes. Uncle Bjørn. He showed me what a Valstad was. Maybe you’ve seen it or felt it by now, maybe you just don’t know it yet, but there’s a piece of something… unique there in all of you. Something preternatural. I’m sure it’s genetic, but I don’t know what it is.”

“Something like madness?”

“Madness is often considered a disruption in normal thinking and normal behavior, but to whose view of normal? What is normal behavior for the wolf is madness to the sheep. Do you feel that you are suffering from madness?”

Vidar lied back in the liquid floor, the words buzzing around in the air above him as he answered, “I was suffering when I resisted it.”

“Are you no longer resisting it, then?”

He stretched, feeling his skin begin to split, and something new and fresh slithered excitedly beneath his shell. He tried to answer, but he couldn’t form human speech past the long sharp fangs that pushed out of his gums.

By the very cautious stillness that had occupied his daughter since recovering her from his brothers’ possession, Leif had sensed an odd sort of waiting in her. Even her natural passivity toward him did not account for all her watchful stares and silent anticipation, and he, in response to her patience to wait, found himself remarkably impatient to act. There was no direct reason to rush things; in fact, it would be far wiser to remain in hiding where they were until their image had faded a bit from public consciousness. Still, Leif had spent every waking moment planning, preparing, and fantasizing about their future as though they might flee into it within the week. Lying on their temporary bed in this temporary place, he longed to expand the permanence between himself and Simone into their upcoming life. As she idly crushed the stray blueberries on her plate with her fingertips and stained the cream with the juice to make colorful swirls in the white, the peace in this moment was bothered by that wandering impatience arriving once more in him. He couldn’t wait. He had to make their future real.

“Darling,” he said, and his heart warmed further at how immediately he had all her attention. She sucked the cream from her violet-stained fingertips as she waited with that patient anticipation, like a loyal pet awaiting her master’s command. He rewarded this behavior with an approving smile and a gentle caress along her chin, his smile widening at how she leaned into his touch automatically.

“Bring me the file on the chair over there. I have something I need to discuss with you.”

She obeyed, her curiosity piqued with a slant of dread as she solemnly handed him the file and resettled to sit up with rigid and alert focus. He chuckled openly at her seriousness and pulled her to lie with him, her back pressed to his front as he lounged on his side. Reaching over her, he spread the documents over the bedding, watching her uninformed impression as she looked at them with a
She picked up the French passport with her picture and her new name, then his, holding them side by side as she compared the two before finally asking, “You couldn’t get me an ID that lets me buy beer?”

Leif laughed, pulling his daughter to flop back against him, and squeezed her in gleeful affection and relief that the humor he’d so missed in her had not been burned away in her suffering.

“Don’t fret, my little lush,” he grinned. “Eighteen is the minimum age for purchasing alcohol in France.”

She rolled over onto her other side to face him, her small hands nervously clutching the undershirt he wore as she asked, “Can we go somewhere other than France?”

“You’re going to love it,” he assured her, stroking her waist when she only bit her lip and withered in response. “Think of all the art you’re going to be able to see in person. All the history and culture, too. We’re going to live somewhere in Marseille; a sunny city off the coast with a large population to blend into. It’s perfect.”

“But… you can’t go there… What if they find you? Or me?”

“You needn’t worry about such things, Simone. These documents are perfect forgeries.”

She burrowed against his chest, her hands fistng the material tighter and her voice going smaller as she muttered, “I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to go anywhere near there. Please, can’t we go somewhere else? Anywhere?”

“No. We cannot,” he answered firmly. “You have an anxiety disorder, darling; you’re going to feel much better about this the sooner you get used to the idea, I promise. We’re going to be very happy there.”

She only responded with a small animalistic whine and a tension that hardened her muscles at once beneath his soothing strokes, all that patient waiting boiled out of her in this fearful reaction. Pity was always a strange guest in his mind, stranger to be in the presence of the cold rage at this evidence of his brothers’ abuse damaging her unstable psyche. She wasn’t like this before, but this new level of vulnerability was ultimately only that: a vulnerability for him to explore and exploit to his design. He rolled them to pin her on her back, pressing her down into the mattress with his weight carefully distributed over her as he gripped her chin and forced her to face him. She didn’t squirm, a mark of improvement on her discipline, but her fear of him was still what glittered in her wide stare as she struggled to not look away. Good. He didn’t want this to be another lesson in fear, at least not too predominantly.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, keeping her eyes locked with his, the same shattered silver that had run in their bloodline to mark the same slippery recessive gene.

“I trust you to do what you’re capable of,” she answered. Her bold words were offset by the breathy terror that weakened her voice into a whisper.

He kept the smile off his lips as he lowered to brush them against hers and ask, “And what am I capable of?”

She swallowed nervously before answering so quietly he would have missed it if he weren’t directly atop her, “Anything.”
His grip on her chin prevented her from moving away, but she didn’t so much as tense to recoil from the light touch of their near-kiss as her fear would have dictated in the past. Instead, the terror that shook her shallow breaths shifted, and her stillness beneath him became that patient anticipation again. Just like that strange moment in his father’s kitchen that had changed everything between them six years ago, she waited to see what he would do and in response he wanted to do something. He closed that slight distance between their lips and felt her patience dissolve in the lust they stoked with this contact. She melted beneath him, her tension relaxing to welcome his weight, and he eased his hold on her chin to allow her to deepen the kiss. Blueberries and sweet cream came with the taste of her tongue when she opened for him, but it was the animal response to licking inside her wet mouth that had him hum in pleasure. Kissing his daughter had always sparked the thrill of forbidden taboo, yet beneath that precious novelty, it held a deeper fascination he had long refused to acknowledge. So much time had been wasted in denial, and since his brief death, he had lost whatever lingering will he had to attach his pride to such a pointless self-deception. He would never again delay his fulfillment, not on the gamble of time or the foolishness of pride.

He pulled away from their kiss and looked down at her, admiring the pink that had bloomed under her golden skin as he stroked her cheek and asked, “What else did you notice about our new identities, darling?”

Awareness seeped through the intoxication of arousal that had weighed her eyelids down and left her short of breath, the tip of her tongue swiping at the moisture he’d left on her plump lips before she answered, “Uh… The… names are different.”

“That’s right,” he nodded, smiling. “You’re not my daughter, according to the French government.”

This brought a troubled furrow to her brow and he pressed a chaste kiss to it, pride swelling in his chest at how bitterly that idea sat with her even in ruse.

“For all they know, we are perfect strangers,” he continued, studying her expressions as he carded his fingers into her damp hair and spoke. “Meeting as strangers and falling in love… It’s all so normal, so natural, isn’t it? Marcel and Apolline, a regular couple free of persecution for loving each other. No more hiding all we do behind closed doors and stolen moments. I can introduce you as ma femme to colleagues who would never know you to be ma fille, take you into my arms and kiss you in any crowded place, fuck you with no concern toward who hears your moans. We could have that. A normal romance, a normal life.”

“But…” she frowned, sadness pulling her gaze down to peer inward at her sorrow. “You told me you would always be my father… you told me to never pretend we aren’t what we are…”

That pride in him for her swelled to nearly bursting, spilling over into the well of affection he was finding to be bottomless as he nuzzled his beard to her smooth cheek and smiled, “My sweet, darling little girl, you’ll always be my child. Nothing can ever change that, but this way, we can be much more with the barrier of our roles removed.”

Curiously, she turned away from his affection and he was surprised at her further despair. She couldn’t have looked more hurt than if he’d struck her and banished her from his sight.

“You can’t just, just remove our roles!” she stammered, voice tight as she struggled to keep from weeping. A hot streak of anger wove between her words. “I don’t care about what’s ‘normal’! I don’t care about what anyone thinks! Why are you doing this? We’re family! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Her fervor had taken him aback. This was not how he had expected her to react, not to this or any decision he made for them. She was supposed to trust him and his judgment, not go into hysteric
over something as tertiary as their cover identities.

“It means everything to me,” he responded evenly. “Your anxiety is preventing you from accepting the bigger picture by attaching itself to these details and inflated them to such skewed and ridiculous proportions. Listen to me. We can be more than just father and daughter this way, don’t you see? We can be family in a new and different manner, one more suitable to our love.”

Her eyes, glimmering with unshed tears, narrowed with a hostile suspicion that he had never before seen on her as she asked, “What could be more suitable to our love than ‘just’ being father and daughter?”

“Marriage.”

Those tears that had been threatening finally fell and she turned away from him as much as she could with him pinning her to the bed. Her reaction baffled him. Possessing her so thoroughly was his ultimate fantasy; it should have been hers, too.

“Why?” she croaked.

“‘Why?’ You belong to me, that’s why. You’ll always be mine. Marriage is the proper institution to facilitate the nature of that bond.”

“Why… Why do I have to be more than your daughter? I know I’m a… a broken, useless monster, but… I am your own child, and even that wasn’t enough…”

His aggravation was pushing over his surprise, heating his tone as he tried to refrain from scolding her. “Simone, you misunderstand. I love you as my daughter, and I love you despite your being my daughter. Don’t you want me to love you as much as I do?”

As though sensing his hidden ire, she returned it with her own more blatant hostility. “Is fucking me as your wife so much more valuable than having me as your daughter?”

“You’re not listening. I’ve already told you that nothing can change what we are. This is a good thing, darling. A wonderful thing. A husband and wife are still family, anyway.”

“Please don’t say that. I know what marriage means to you. Your last marriage was a lie and you left it when your use for it was worn out.”

Leif let out a slow, weary sigh as he settled into what he had to do. He could not be surprised that this complex had formed in her after the depravity his brothers had forced her through. It was obvious that she was lashing out due to some misguided belief that to be his wife relegated her to a purely sexual and superficial function. The societal myth of feminine purity and the subsequent vilification of female sexuality were never part of his moral structure, although such vulnerabilities had been culturally ingrained in his girl, making even the basic act of intercourse an effective tool of manipulation and a highly damaging one. This current dilemma was also partially his own fault; it was going to be difficult to dispel that misconception given how he had woven the ideas of love and sex so closely together in her, and now that sex had been tainted, all she had left was a tattered concept of love. It made sense that she would have put their familial connection on such a high pedestal if sex had been so vilified in her. However, there was the more urgent matter of her insubordination to address first. Her sharp yelp was cut short into a wheeze when he grabbed her neck and constricted her airway.

“Don’t presume to believe you understand anything regarding my actions or motivations,” he warned, letting his voice drop into a dangerous dark pitch that stopped her breath more effectively
than his hand. She didn’t move to struggle, only watched him through narrowed eyes, waiting with that defiant patience even in pain. “I’ve gone through a lot of trouble to protect you from understanding, and I won’t have you start condemning what I’ve done when it was toward your benefit. I only ever wanted what was best for you, Simone, and look at how you’ve repaid me. Siding with my treacherous brothers, allowing them to trick and betray you, letting yourself be a pawn in a game you could never comprehend, and now you have the audacity to presume what you don’t understand. Maybe I shouldn’t have kept you so ignorant and innocent. Would you rather I had subjected you to the hell that I spared you of?”

She tried to speak, managing to squeeze out a couple broken sputters before relenting to shake her head as much as his hold allowed. The feel of her throat squirming under the effort it took only to fail to get out a single word reminded him of a far more pleasant method of choking her. His cock fattened up on the mere suggestion, his interest making itself known against her thigh, though she seemed too distracted by this slow suffocation to notice much else. It was imperative that he begin guiding his daughter out of the dark space his brothers’ misuse had driven her and shying away from sex was not going to remedy her misconceptions. Sex had many more roles and uses than a means to derive pleasure and power at the cost of pain and debasement to another, though it was necessary to begin her corrective conditioning at rebalancing their power dynamic.

“All you need to understand is that you are mine, Simone,” he reminded her, cutting off her airway entirely as he drove this point home. Her eyes went wide and unseeing, mortal terror doing well to wipe that obstinate patience from her fractured mind. “Mine to have and to hold… until death do us part.”

He released her neck when she skirted along the edge of consciousness, allowing her to cough and heave in recovery as he leaned off her and watched. The way she turned and shriveled into a cowering curl, her face hidden in the defensive cross of her arms over her head, incited both protectiveness and destructiveness in him. Fortunately, a little destruction was what she needed. He tugged his jeans low enough to pull his cock out and slowly stroked it as he remained straddled over her hips.

When her coughing subsided into heavy panting, he gently smoothed her hair away from her face and spoke in a soft, sympathetic tone, “You can’t stay my little girl forever, darling. I have tried to protect you from so much of our heritage and history, but I can’t protect you from the future. We only have each other now; I need to know I can depend on you and I need you to trust me.”

She looked up at him with those big, sad eyes wet with heartbreak before she dropped that sorrowful gaze to his erection, a melancholic resignation weighing heavily in her tears. He collected some of the pre-ejaculate that had leaked down the underside of his shaft and smeared it on her lips with his thumb.

As he poked past those plump, unresisting lips glistening with the clear viscous fluid to smear the taste on her tongue, he said, “Doubting me has only ever caused you suffering; you must believe what I say to you is more than true and trust that what I do is for better reasons than they may sometimes seem. Have faith in me, my child. I will always love you.”

She didn’t try to speak, only wrapped her hand around the base of his cock and sat up to lick the trail of fluid before tentatively taking him into her mouth. Her apology was expressed in the warm, wet slide of her mouth welcoming him deeper, her tongue gliding tantalizingly against his frenulum as her lips pushed his foreskin. When his tip hit the back of her throat, he let out the sigh that had built in him and carded his fingers through her hair to grip her head. Slowly, he pulled her forward, letting her adjust to his girth before pushing his length further into the throat he had freshly abused. That narrow passage contracted in a jerk around him as he progressed, trying to cough the obstruction out,
but she controlled her pharyngeal reflex before it overtook her.

“There’s my good girl…” he smiled, petting her hair as he waited for her to recover.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she pressed further and he watched, mesmerized as she took him all the way in until her cute little nose pressed into the thatch of hair at his base and her throat wrapped tight and exquisite around him. She looked up at him, waiting patiently once more, and he, in response to that waiting, gripped her head firmly and pulled almost all the way out of her mouth before pushing down her throat once more. She winced, breathing hard through her nose whenever he was not occupying her airway, and shut her eyes in focus to dampen her reflexes as he fucked her face. It didn’t take long for her to adapt to his rigid length delving deeply with each thrust, something she’d had a bit of difficulty with when she was still new to consciously taking his cock. She always had been a fast learner.

“That’s it, darling…” he sighed, gripping the front of her neck to feel how the rigid column of her esophagus twitched and moved from the small muscular reactions to his thrusts. “Nice and deep… Don’t rush it.”

After establishing a good pace, he allowed her to take over his pleasure. He let his hands roam as he enjoyed the smooth slide and squeeze in and out of her throat, his wandering fingers gathering her soft wavy hair away from her face and slipping under the loose collar of her shirt to fondle her breasts. Spit frothed and dribbled down her chin and his sac, the latter growing heavy from her eager efforts to please him. He was tempted to pull out and delay his orgasm by letting her tease him with just her tongue, but this encounter wasn’t entirely toward the facilitation of his pleasure. Her head bobbed to a diligent rhythm in her task, each pull and thrust building on that delightful pressure until it burst in a dizzying climax.

A low moan tore from him loudly as he held her face flush to his body, burying his spasming length in her throat. He felt her contract around him at each thrilling pulse, the involuntary movement extending his pleasure and milking him until he ached. Panting raggedly, he held her on him after his orgasm was spent, wanting to slip every drop of his ejaculate down this direct line toward her stomach before pulling out. The sight of his length slowly extracting from her beautiful abused mouth was the crowning thrill to this act, and he shuddered in a sudden and violent affection for her as she looked dazedly at the cock she had worked so hard to please.

Leif tilted her wet chin to bring that glassy gaze up and smiled down at her as he softly commanded, “Marry me.”

Simone blinked slowly and swallowed, her voice quiet and raspy from the abuse done to her throat as she responded, “Yes, Papa.”

Anders wasn’t sure how long he’d lied there between muddled consciousness and vague nightmares, but by the time he managed to will his eyes open, the exhaustive effort to maintain wakefulness nearly pulled him back under. He blinked some of the blurriness from his vision to find himself looking at an extravagantly moulded ceiling. The carvings of cherubs in the plaster staring back down at him with blank eyes made him question how far he’d really made it from the nightmares. A strange tugging at the skin of his neck stopped him from turning his head to survey his surroundings, something about the sensation among the overall lack of sensation in his body becoming oddly and distantly alarming. Memory trickled up from the bleary depths of his brain fog, dredging up flashes of blood. So much blood everywhere, not stopping or slowing, the scrape of the chain dragging
across wood like a long metal tail, the grief of losing Simone’s love to madness. That distant alarm flared at his memory ending shortly after he had locked her away in that closet and he was struck with the dreaded suspicion that she was still in there.

“Si-” he choked out, the rest of his call lost in the dryness of his throat.

Movement stirred at his peripheral, startling him as much as whoever his abrupt outburst had startled before Vidar rushed into his field of vision. His eyes were wild with astonishment, then rheumy with the relief that pulled his mouth into a strange crooked grin.

“You pulled through,” his older brother smiled, those long hands gently grasping the sides of his face.

Anders flinched at the cold touch and how strange Vidar’s expression was to hold such simultaneous horror and glee. Without knowing anything, the sense that something was very wrong wormed into his mind. This sense was reinforced by his standoffish brother leaning down and kissing his cheek like a doting grandmother.


Vidar didn’t move away, his hands moving to press his shoulders down to the bed as though he might try to flee as he whispered into his ear, “Big things. Big, strange things are happening here. Terrible things. But! You’re going to be alright, and you’re going to be safe. I made certain of that, oh yes, yes, I made good on all that mess and the Doctor told them that no one touches you without my permission.”

Anders shut his eyes, trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind and make sense of what he was hearing, but there seemed no sense to be made.

“And what happened?” he asked again.

The older man loomed over him, that crazed grin slowly vanishing as his glassy stare flitted over his face, and his tone was solemnly subdued as he answered, “I’ve done a lot of fucked up shit, littlest brother. I didn’t have to, not really, I just… I’ve deceived you, and I’m going to have to deceive you further. I’m sorry, but I’m all you’ve got here, and I need you to trust me, so I am going to keep lying. That’s just how things work sometimes, you see. I’m really sorry.”

Frustration burned at the edges of Anders’ confusion. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I killed some kid,” Vidar responded flatly. Anders felt a sour hollowness well in his gut. “I killed a prisoner. I killed… Henrik is gone. Dead. They took him somewhere, I don’t know where, I can’t know where.”

“What…” Anders’ head throbbed, his brain feeling as though it swelled dangerously in reaction to this news. Nothing was making sense. He shut his eyes tighter, willing himself to wake up again, but this was reality. There was no end to this nightmare. “Henrik’s not dead, he… He can’t be dead! I just saw him last week and he was fine!”

“I know Henrik is dead,” Vidar said, and there was something so final in his voice that it shattered all doubt.

Grief curled Anders to sit up and hold his heavy, woozy head in his hands to catch the tears that immediately spilled down his cheeks. “How…?”

“It’s all over the news. A lot is. They found two cops, dead and dismembered, in my house while we
were at the cabin. They think I did it, but I didn’t do that. They think I stole Henrik’s body from the morgue and they’re pinning Simone’s disappearance on me likely having killed her. Since you’ve been declared missing, they don’t know if I killed you or if you’re my accomplice or both. If they find us, there’s nothing we could do that would keep us out of prison. Hell, we might even be extradited to the US and charged with something Leif did while we were there, and then we’d really be screwed. It’s funny, so funny, but we’re actually better off here than anywhere else. Just like Leif. That’s part of why they wanted him here. Isn’t that funny? We’re following his footsteps no matter where we go…”

Anders pressed his shut eyes against his palms until colors danced in the dark of his vision, the pounding in his head growing to an unbearable loudness that still somehow couldn’t drown out his brother’s voice telling him these awful, hideous things. Henrik was gone. He was the best of all of them, the purest and strongest, yet he was the first one to go. It wasn’t fair. There was no justice or fairness in a world that would take Henrik before Leif. Or himself. He shuddered out a sob in trying to force himself to accept this loss, the grief too great to take all at once, and straightened. There was so much havoc, he didn’t know where to begin or what to say, so he sat there with his hands over his face just trying to hold himself together. When Vidar’s arms wrapped around him and pulled him into a comforting embrace, however, he crumbled apart and wept against him.

“We'll make it through this,” his older brother murmured, breath warm against his neck. “I’m sorry, Anders. I’m so sorry.”
Simone could taste her father’s semen at the back of her throat no matter how she tried to swallow it down. Salty and bitter, wholly animal and masculine, it fogged her brain with an uncomfortable high that made her wonder if it was merely psychological or some bizarre twist of a biological response to the seed she’d been planted by and with. How she knew beyond reason that he was the one who had impregnated her was also something she wasn’t sure was psychological or biological. Perhaps some unholy combination of both, as it had so often seemed to be with anything regarding him.

“When this was not quite the method I had intended to propose to you, I feel we should celebrate the day,” Leif said, his smile loose and easy as he lied back on his side next to her. “The country is lovely this time of year. We could get away from this place for a while, indulge in what privacy the woods might offer for a picnic. Would you like that, darling?”

He gently ran his fingers through her hair to smooth the mess he’d made of it while he had fucked her mouth, the kind touch no longer as threatening in knowing his sexual appetite had been sated. This affectionate sweetness burned where her loss ached, but everywhere else, delight bloomed in her like the vibrant orange poppies of her California childhood opening at the touch of sunshine. This only served to further irritate her even as it relaxed her. She had no influence over her bodily response; rather, it was her bodily response that too often influenced her. Her body controlled her mind, and her father controlled her body. She swallowed again to get that bitter taste down, wincing with her bruised throat protesting every movement of the reflex, and wiped her neck and chin with the hem of her shirt.

“I would like that…” she answered, the words coming out raspy and dry past the inflammation, and hesitated before finishing, “… Marcel.”

His smile faded so subtly, the untrained eye wouldn’t have detected it, but to her, he might as well have sneered in distaste as he said, “While I appreciate your enthusiasm, I would rather delay practicing our new identities to a date closer to our departure.”

A curl of spite emboldened her to respond, “Alright, Leif.”

This time his frown was not so subtle, though his disapproval was only alluded to in a playful tug at her hair and a teasing, “That’s still ‘Papa’ to you, young lady.”

His lack of outburst instilled a withering disappointment in her. He was avoiding a direct confrontation on the subject and she wasn’t nearly so bold in her anger now to incite one, leaving an elephant in the room that was far bigger to her than it apparently was to him. Their conflict had cooled to a silent standoff, or perhaps he’d thought it already settled with her surrender. The idea that he was likely right in that assumption stung almost worse than his betrayal.

Frustration welled inside her until it propelled her to stand and grumble, “I’m gonna go brush my teeth.”

“Alright, sweetheart.”

She bit her tender lip at the abrupt nausea that endearment dropped in her belly and, unable to beg him to never use that term around her, fled from the room. What power words could have was as amazing as their ineptitude to impart their full meaning. Leif did not know that “sweetheart” meant so much humiliation and pain to her now. She did not want him to know that “sweetheart” rattled in every link of the chains that had tied her down as Vidar had shown her, again and again, just what
she was worth to them. She couldn’t trust Leif with that, not anymore, not since he had told her how little having her as his daughter was worth to him. Hot tears began to fill the drying trails down her cheeks before she even left the room.

Marriage. A normal life. It was a cruel joke. Their normal did not fit in the normal world. They were too maladapted by their mutilations, their broken edges honed into weapons too sharp to live in that delicate bubble, but a weapon was what she’d had to become to do what needed to be done. Leif may or may not have tried to protect her from their family’s heritage and history as he’d said, but she didn’t need protection. She needed revenge for herself, for him, for all the lives those murderers had twisted and ended so cruelly. Fleeing into obscurity made them no better than beasts that gnawed their own limbs off to flee from a hunter’s trap. She had to hunt the hunters, and if that meant letting herself be trapped, then she would lie there waiting for them. There was nothing left of her life to salvage for hope of a future anyway.

But…

It wouldn’t just be her own future she’d be risking in this endeavor. Simone’s arms crossed protectively over her belly where that little bundle of cells was multiplying into what could be a normal life somehow, someday. Their baby. The words, in all the power and ineptitude words held, sat heavy on her heart. Whether psychological, biological, or both, she could have never anticipated loving something that was not yet even alive, let alone so powerfully. She stopped her rapid pace in the hallway and leaned against a wall, the conflict between that love and her vengeance too much to hold inside her. She loved it, she loved Leif, and she hated that love just as strongly as she felt it. She wished she’d never loved anything, that she could carve out her greedy heart and just do what had to be done, but it beat for them and she couldn’t stop it.

Maybe…

A sound startled her out of her turmoil, a creak coming from the stairs that steeled her weak and greedy heart with the sudden knowledge that they had not been alone. She followed the slight groans of floorboards shifting under steps just shy of stealth, making it to the top of the stairs just in time to catch the motion of a door shutting quietly. It was likely the Wallis boy, Trygve. She should just let it go. He was just some insignificant creep and that he’d almost definitely spied on her sucking her father’s dick confirmed this assessment. This was his house, and if her father was concerned about privacy, he would not have fucked her throat in the open of the living room while knowing they weren’t alone. Considering Leif, she wouldn’t doubt that he had done it with exactly that in mind and he would only be amused that the young man had risked a peek. But that was him. Simone did not find it so amusing that the little pervert had witnessed her cramming cock into her esophagus. That wasn’t for him to see, not for anyone but her and Leif, and damn if she was going to let a peeping eye go unpunished. Or maybe she just wanted to punish someone.

“Trygve… Trygve, I can hear you typing in there…” she spoke through the door, keeping her voice low enough not to carry downstairs to Leif. It hurt to speak even this loudly, anyway. “Trygve, you bastard-ass chickenshit motherfucker, if you want me to tell Leif, just keep right on ignoring me.”

The door flew open and immediately closed as a nervous Trygve emerged from the darkened room, whispering frantically, “I wasn’t going to show anyone!”

“You…” Simone started, her disbelief stopping her as she absorbed the sheer audacity of this violation. “You were recording that. You were recording that?!?”

“I’m sorry, I’ll delete everything!” he winced. His sincerity and forthrightness were, if anything, irritating at this point. “Please, don’t tell him! Here, I will show you…”
He scrambled to take his phone out of his back pocket and unlock it, holding the screen toward her to see as he deleted the video file. She brought her glare up to him, simmering with restrained rage as he erased it completely from the device, and waited for him to put the phone away before drawing her fist back. He didn’t have time to react before his head was knocked back into the wall with the force of her straight punch to his eye, the ridge of his orbital bone crashing solidly under her knuckles. As he slid down the wall and crumpled into a heap at her feet, she gave him a kick to his ribs for good measure as she pivoted on her heel.

“Dumbass haole…” she muttered, shaking off the buzzing ache resounding in the bones of her hand as she trudged downstairs to brush her teeth.

Strangely, the oily feeling of having her privacy violated by someone who had no place in her life did not lessen despite this swift vengeance. There was no retribution in violence. The violation was still there, along with the anger and disgust that had come with it, only now her hand hurt as well. She wondered at this, annoyed, as she avoided her reflection and washed her face. The suspicion that there was simply no peace to be found on the other side of revenge was too bitter to consider; there had to be peace in justice if there was no peace without justice. There had to be peace for her somewhere.

“‘We only know how we are broken by having known what it is to be whole’,” Dr. Aguiyi said as he poured a small amount of soy milk into his tea.

Vidar watched the liquid quiver nearly over the brim of the gold inlay teacup, trying and failing not to compare the tawny color of the brew to his lost slave’s skin, and asked, “Who are you quoting?”

“Leif, during one of his many pining spells,” the doctor answered glibly. He lifted the decorated decanter of soy milk to him and Vidar shook his head in decline, leaving Aguiyi to pass it to the wives who sat in silence a little away from them. Vidar nearly made eye contact with the woman who reached for it, the vicious glint in her eyes seeming constantly fixed to him, before instinct pulled his gaze away. Aguiyi, not caring or not noticing his discomfort, asked, “Have you ever been whole in your life?”

Vidar sipped his tea tentatively, letting the black bitterness coat his dry mouth before responding, “I have an idea of how I am broken, if that’s what you’re getting at, Doctor.”

The old man nodded knowingly, his gnarled and thick fingers in stark contrast to the fine china teacup he delicately brought to his solemnly downturned lips. Memories of the previous night flickered at the forefront of Vidar’s scattered mind, images of violence and impossible visions of hallucinatory strangeness flashing like sparks lighting up the dark. He rubbed at the skin on his neck, fingers absently searching for the cracks to peel himself free of this tight shell until he recoiled from that impulse. He was losing his mind, insanity creeping through where his sense of normalcy was sinking away in this Hell, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. His hands shook as they brought the cup to his mouth.

“Actually…” Vidar murmured. He shouldn’t say it, he shouldn’t offer what this dangerous old man sought, but survival required sacrifice. He just might not survive the sacrifice if what his gut instincts were roiling about were right. “… I am a little vague on those details.”

“How could you know who you are when you don’t know what you are?” Dr. Aguiyi mused. He stirred a heaping spoonful of sugar in his cup, the silver spoon ringing like a bell in the fine china.
Vidar began to sweat as he watched something else swirl in the creamy light brown liquid. Something like a memory, or a craving, given physical form to be seen but not quite seen. A flash of Simone’s back tensing as the whip from his hand cut her open. Blood pooled in the saucer beneath the cup. “Would you like to find out?”

Vidar blinked, and the blood was gone. “What?”

“What you are. Who you are. What you come from. ‘If you know from whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go.’”

“More quoting Leif?”

Aguiyi snorted a laugh, shaking his head. “Baldwin. You might be amused to know that Simone had that quote taped up above her bed while the man from whence she came came in her.”

Vidar pressed his hand over his mouth, preparing for the nausea of revulsion that strangely didn’t come. Instead, a crooked grin split his mouth and a queer giggle tumbled out. That was funny. The giggle slipped into a laugh that he couldn’t stop, a hysterical glee tickling him as the idea turned over and over in his head. All of it was too funny.

“What… ahaha! What the hell is wrong with us?” he laughed, wiping the moisture from his eyes.

Dr. Aguiyi watched him with a smile, but there was nothing jovial in his answered, “I believe you put it best when you said to your niece, ‘You don’t have to be alone with us’.”

It wasn’t funny anymore. “How did you…”

“I think you must have been holding Anders’ coat for him, because we could pick up audio but no visual from his cellular phone,” the doctor explained with an airy wave of his hand. “Which was really too bad. We could have avoided this entire fiasco had we been able to see who had taken her at the hospital that day.”

Vidar blanched. He’d suspected that their cell phones had been bugged and had made a point to carry his sparingly, but hearing this confirmed just how much of their private lives were known.

“How much did you listen to?” he asked.

Aguiyi chuckled. “Me? No, not much. We have algorithms to take care of most of the listening, set to record when anything of interest comes up through cell feed, television broadcast, social media… We’ll find your family before anyone else, so you needn’t worry. Our eyes and ears are always searching.”

Vidar shifted in his seat uncomfortably, feeling the collective glare of the doctor’s wives pressing on him with an almost physical force. He didn’t want to think anymore. He didn’t want to wonder where his little slave had been taken or what strange cruelties that monster was enacting upon her. He didn’t want to ask who else might find them before they did. The doctor handed him a sugar cube, but not for his tea. The drug was tasteless, leaving only sweetness melting under his tongue, and he relaxed in expectation of its sweeter relief.

“You don’t have to pretend anymore. You can just be what you are’,” Dr. Aguiyi quoted, beckoning his youngest wife over.

Vidar frowned around the sugar slowly yielding up the powerful psychoactive. Simone’s words had scarcely penetrated his panicked mind when she’d said them, and hearing them now from this demon only sparked the guilt that shouldn’t have been there in his failure to protect her. He was always
failing to protect his loved ones.

The delicate teacup slipped from his loose fingers and he watched as it fell, the cup shrinking in the distance until the eggshell-thin china finally shattered between his feet. The tea splashed out in a wide splatter and the black-brown turned deep red on the worn stones. Slight movement among the gleaming shards drew him to lean down and carefully push them away, his fingertips staining red with the thick blood that coated them. There beneath the eggshell shards, its tiny body pulsing rhythmically like a live artery, a baby snake struggled to swallow its tail. He gently stroked the suffering creature, smearing some of the blood and albumen off to reveal the rainbow gleam on its black scales, and its slitted pupils twitched to look up at him from silver irises. In a flash of motion too fast to catch, it shot out at his stroking finger and slithered under his nail before he could jerk away. His skin was clean, no blood, no egg fluid, no little tail slipping improbably under his fingernail despite the phantom feeling of the serpent wriggling under his skin.

“More tea, sir?”

Vidar looked up from his hand to the girl extending another cup of the strange bitter brew, seeing something of Simone in her brown skin and youth. She was not his beloved slave, not beyond those superficial similarities, but it was enough to make the cup clatter atop the saucer in his trembling hold. He had to keep this up. The steam wafted with something earthy and herbal, something wrong, as he drank it. He had to do this for Anders, for Simone, for himself. He had to protect them this time, but he wasn’t so sure anymore what he had to protect them from: the world inside these walls, or the world outside.

When the young girl knelt before him and unzipped his pants under her husband’s watchful command, Vidar leaned his head back and enjoyed the blissful euphoria of the sugar beginning to quiet his squirming mind. Dr. Aguiyi’s raspy voice rolled in the background as Vidar settled into the pleasure the girl’s mouth brought him through his high.

“A long time ago, a young man was scheduled to be hung for the many murders he had committed. However, his savagery had attracted the eye of the cult, which was far different then than it is now. They bought him, bred him like a dog with others of his kind, and bred his offspring amongst each other in a disastrous attempt to purify the bloodline as the ancient pharaohs had once sought to retain the divinity of their lineage. Instead of a line of purebred warriors, what offspring had survived the experiment were unusable cripples. Except for one. He had all the strengths of his sires and none of the mutilations that the method had wrought, but his mind was not of a human nature. Oh, he was mentally able, certainly, and you would not gather that he was any different from a normal man until that nature reared its head at you. There were many who had been lulled by that seeming normalcy, and there were many he had killed in that comfort he charmed them into. The cult had what they wanted, just only all too well. The subject could not stop himself from killing and he would kill even those he had been tasked to serve if his bloodlust had not been satisfied. Eventually, they concluded he was unusable for anything but breeding stock.”

When his story didn’t resume, Vidar rolled his head to look at him and slurred, “What happened in the end?”

Dr. Aguiyi poured himself more tea as he answered, “There is no end. The experiment continues.”

Leif turned the bottle of wine over in an attempt to gauge its quality beyond what it touted on its label by observing its viscosity and darkness compared to the origin and year. Satisfied with the light-
bodied Beaujolais, he made a mental note to replace this particular bottle in Benjamin’s collection when he once more had the means to procure it, and carried it up from the cellar to the basket he was slowly filling with suitable selections for the picnic. Thankfully, his old associate had a decent chèvre on hand, eliminating the need to search out a low-lactose cheese option along the way. As he cut the green apple to pair with the goat cheese and drizzled the white flesh of the slices with lemon to prevent oxidization, he hummed the cheerful tune that had been occupying his mind lately and listened for the signs of his daughter’s movement through the large house. He chuckled and shook his head at how she sulked, her pouty downturned gaze and shuffling steps the same tells of her dour mood as they were when she was a toddler denied some toy she righteously demanded. She would forgive him soon; her need for his approval enough to assure that if reason and self-doubt weren’t enough. He looked forward to rewarding her.

Amidst the restless tossing and turning of his girl on the sofa bed and the wheels of Trygve’s desk chair upstairs rolling over hardwood, however, he heard the creaks and thumps of motion elsewhere in the house. He stopped humming and listened more carefully, the knife poised still over the fresh herbs bundled on the cutting board. The slide of a windowsill. The fall of a foot. The shuffle of cloth. Silently, he shifted his grip on the knife handle and rolled his steps to muffle them as he crept into the hallway leading to the living room. Simone looked up from the book she’d been trying to distract herself with, her question frozen behind her lips when she saw his finger pressed to his. All at once, her entire demeanor slid away from the mopey girl into the alert fugitive as she moved silently from the bed to his beckoning hand.

Good girl.

He tucked her close behind him and they moved through the house, his suspicion that they were very much not alone confirmed as those slight sounds of movement grew clearer. The slow squeal of a door drifting open on its hinges. The clink of metal on metal. Then, peering around a corner, he saw the broad back of a man in black, semi-automatic assault rifle held steady with his searching sweep. Reaching behind him to gently corral Simone against the wall and signal for her to stay, Leif waited for the man to take a step forward before moving in. The blade slid clean between the atlas and axis vertebrae and the man went limp instantly, too quick for Leif to catch both his body and the rifle. A blur of motion ran past his side as he caught the corpse and he wasn’t sure whether to admonish or praise his girl for disobeying his command to stay behind when she snatched the rifle before it hit the floor. After he slowly lowered the body, she handed the gun to him and he couldn’t help but smile with a glowing pride when she yanked the knife out of the corpse’s neck. She held the blade ready as she fell in line behind him once more, and they moved.

A scuffle, a shout, and a heavy thump upstairs told him there were more intruders and they’d found Trygve. No gunshots. They were keeping quiet on the chance they were yet detected, and Leif had no interest in correcting that false confidence. The safety had been on when Simone had handed the rifle to him, telling him lethal measures were discouraged, though clearly not out of the question. They wanted him alive, at least for a while. Law enforcement would not have used this much stealth. Either bounty hunters, Ouroboros field operants, or one of the groups that had splintered off when the organization had been taken over. Each held their own dangerous agenda, ranked least to worst, and Leif could not allow himself or his daughter to fall into any of their hands. He clicked the safety off and crouched to the side of the stairs, waiting, Simone mirroring his posture with the knife held low and away from sources of glare. There was a slight shiver in her breath, but she exhibited no outward signs of panic. She would have made an excellent hunter, as good as Bjørn or even himself with more training. His Simone was a natural and he’d forgotten how exhilarating it was to be presented with such succinct proof of that. If they survived this, he might have to rethink his stance on how to best channel that nature. Even a tamed wolf knows her sharp teeth were meant to hunt with, after all.

The groan of floorboards announced the guests’ arrival before the first boot stepped down into his sight. Three targets. It was odd that they had moved in a group upstairs while he and Simone were
both readily unaware downstairs. When he heard two other intruders round the corner at the end of
the hall, that answered his wonder at it. They had entered through various points, scattered to herd
them in and mitigate the likelihood of escape. Pack hunters. He had only seconds to make a decision,
and he decided on clearing an exit path. The rifle muzzle flashed in three-round bursts as the bullets
sliced through the two ground-level intruders while he and Simone bolted toward the door, a ruckus
of shouting and stomping feet behind them. They turned the corner just as a hail of gunfire followed,
and they stopped at a wall of three men with their rifles aimed squarely at them. Leif’s gut clenched
cold as he froze. They were boxed in on both sides, five rifles trained on them.

“Papa?”

He heard his daughter’s voice, tiny and so uncertain, and felt her wide eyes looking up to him for
direction as though she really believed he might have a solution to get them out of this. Her knife
reflected a glare in a winking glimmer as her hand shook, but she still held it ready, crossed tight in
front of her body. She would go down fighting if he let her. He couldn’t let her. Everything in his
body resisted him as he slowly lowered his weapon, going against every raging instinct except for
the one that put her first. They might let her live, they might torture her to death in front of him, but
either were less certain than the death that resisting here would guarantee. He smiled down at her
terrified face as he raised his arms in surrender.

“I love you, Simone,” he said.

She shouted something he didn’t quite hear over the commanding barks of the intruders when the
bag was pulled over his head and he was forced to his knees. Sounds of her shrieking growls grew
distant as he was cuffed and dragged by two sets of strong hands, but it sounded like she was giving
them a good fight no matter how brief the effort was against multiple men more than twice her size.
Good girl.

Between fitful bouts of sleep and the nightmares that kept him from succumbing to the exhaustion as
much as his body demanded, Anders struggled for anything to distract him from needing a drink.
Every hour plunged him deeper into that need until all he could do was sweat and shake. How much
of the pain and sickness was withdrawal and how much was from losing roughly half his blood
volume over several hours was impossible to know, but if this was anywhere close to how Simone
had felt as she was withdrawing from whatever Leif had her on, he held a new understanding of her
stranger reactions. Thinking of her brought a fresh wave of a different pain, one only physical by just
how powerfully it affected him emotionally, and he stuffed it back down into the blackened space
where his heart once was. He didn’t deserve her, didn’t even deserve to think of her. He was too
insane to love her and she was too insane to accept his love. Saliva gushed alarmingly under his
tongue before his nausea spilled what little he had managed to eat into the steel bowl at his bedside.
When he recovered enough to lift his face from the bowl in his lap, he saw that he wasn’t alone.

“Vid,” he rasped, the relief of seeing his brother whole and unharmed not doing much to aid his
ailment. “Where have you been?”

“Having tea with the doctor,” Vidar answered as he pulled the vomit bowl away and replaced it with
a bottle of water.

Confusion worsened his headache as he tried to reconcile all of the worries that had tormented him in
his brother’s absence from this lavish prison cell with the knowledge that he had been out to tea with
a doctor. Stranger still was that the doctors, if they were doctors at all, who had been in and out of
this room to redress his wounds and check his vitals had all seemed mute. Having afternoon tea with any of those standoffish sentinels was as surreal a thought as the Mad Hatter’s own tea party.

After dousing his parched throat, he asked, “Which doctor?”

“The doctor. Dr. Aguiyi,” Vidar answered. There was something strange in his smile as he spoke. Anders leaned forward, nearly squinting to see what was so odd, but his older brother avoided his stare by busying himself with straightening the bedding as he spoke. “He more or less runs this place. Runs everything, everyone, everywhere. You’ll meet him when you’re a little better. Maybe. I don’t know if I can trust him with you, honestly, but he’s been a gracious host to us. Just dangerous. Very dangerous. Like an old god, in a way; he gives whether you want it or not and sometimes he gives by taking, but you must always be grateful. I never could get over my resentment to be grateful to any god. Now here I am, in direct service to one. Funny how that worked out. Funny how everything works out.”

Anders leaned back into the plush pillows stacked against the headboard, his brain aching and spinning with both the motion and the dread of seeing Vidar like this again. It had taken him hours to start acting normally yesterday, and even then, he was avoidant and strange. Anders couldn’t take a second day of the Jekyll and Hyde act, especially when he was his only comfort in this god-forsaken place.

“You’re not making any sense, Vid,” Anders frowned. “God or not, there’s nothing gracious about a ‘host’ that keeps his guests locked in a room.”

“Oh, no, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong. I lock the room,” Vidar grinned, shaking his head emphatically. He reached under his shirt collar and pulled out a brass key on a chain necklace, holding it up as proof. “I worked very hard to get the key, and now only I and the medical staff have one. Not even Dr. Aguiyi has a key to this suite.”

Anders’ jaw hung open in disbelief, his wild bewilderment making him stammer, “What... What the fuck, Vid! You mean we can just— we could leave?!”

“Oh, no, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong. I lock the room,” Vidar mumbled to himself as though trying to recall the meaning of the word, then laughed out a loud and sudden, “HA! Oh! No, certainly not! No, no, no! I keep you inside and I keep them outside, that’s what this key does! ‘Leave’, haha! What a preposterous idea!”

“There’s got to be some kind of way out of here,” Anders argued, pulling himself up and tossing the bedding off him. He reached under the thin hospital gown and braced himself to pull out the catheter, but Vidar’s long hands pressing him back down to the pile of pillows stopped him. “We can’t stay here, Vid! Do you think a locked door is going to stop them?!”

“No, of course not,” his older brother chuckled. He did not remove his hands from his shoulders and his face was half-hidden in shadow as he remained looming over him. Anders tried not to let his brain tell his eyes to see all the ways he looked so much like Leif had as he’d slowly pushed a knife into his chest. “There are many things I must do to ensure that they don’t come in here. Don’t worry, littlest brother, I’m taking care of everything to make sure that never happens. I even brought you some medicine to make you feel good.”

Anders’ teeth ground in frustration at his weakened state, at his brother’s insanity, at his own insane mind churning with a hundred conflicting thoughts until it produced one that made some modicum of sense: he had to recover if he had any hope to survive, let alone escape.

“Medicine?” he asked.
Vidar’s grin widened as he pulled out a small tin from his pocket and opened it to reveal several neat rows of sugar cubes.
Anders stared down at the water, mesmerized by the swirling colors on the surface, and laughed at the little creatures below. He wasn’t sure why he was laughing, but everything felt so good for a change. There was no pain, no guilt, no fear, just goodness and light all around and within him. He hadn’t felt like this since… He’d never felt like this, he realized with a louder laugh that echoed off the marble. Vidar paced around the edge of the sunken bath, his barefooted steps slow and fluid as a cat as he continued his aimless wandering, but his restlessness no longer perturbed Anders. He leaned back against the slanted walls of the deep bath, stirring the colors and creatures into a brief frenzy with this motion, and smiled up at his older brother as he stopped his pacing directly above him and met his gaze.

“You seem to be feeling better,” Vidar grinned. Anders nodded, letting himself sink lower until just his head and neck were craned back over the edge onto the floor. The older man’s darker blue eyes seemed to bleed into in the steam as he lowered to sit, his long legs on either side of Anders’ head as he dipped his feet into the water all the way up his shins. He didn’t seem to mind getting his pant legs wet. Neither of them seemed to mind much of anything at the moment. “Better than getting drunk on gin, isn’t it?”

“Better than anything I’ve done,” Anders smiled, then laughed again. “Not that I’ve done as much as you, I think.”

Vidar tilted his head curiously. “How do you mean?”

“You’ve done so much more than I have. I believed I was pretty open-minded, but you… you’ve opened up parts of myself I never knew were there. I always thought we were so different before, and… I was wrong. I didn’t know how wrong I was until you showed me.” He giggled. “Sorry—am I making any sense?”

Vidar leaned to the side, dragging the basket of toiletries to him and digging out a can of shaving cream. He began to apply it gingerly to Anders’ face, making him snort and laugh as the foam and his older brother’s light touch tickled, as he responded with a placid, “Of course we’re alike. We’re Valstads. You, me, Leif, Henrik… we’re the same, the same nature, the same function. You just needed a push; we all did at some point. Leif was just pushed farther and earlier than us.”

Anders’ laughing tapered off at the odd comparison to Leif. Usually, this prompted a raging denial or a despaired acceptance, but now, he was only curious.

As his older brother dragged a straight razor slowly and carefully over his neck, he asked, “What do you mean, he was pushed earlier?”

Vidar continued to slide the sharp blade up Anders’ cheek in a long, smooth stroke before rinsing it in the bathwater and starting again at his neck as he answered, “Leif wasn’t taken to the US to learn architecture. Einar and Bjørn… they taught him to do what he does, because they were like he is now. Just as the Valstad men have been taught by their fathers before them, going back… I’m not sure. A long time. Long enough that we scarcely have to be taught anymore… we merely have to be pushed into our full becoming. To kill, to control, to… take, possess… conquer… All of this is part of our blood. We’ve never quite fit into the world because the world isn’t made for things like us. But here… here, as killers among killers, we can be what we were born to be and we don’t have to be alone so long as we have each other.”

The euphoric calm coating Anders’ mind remained oddly unaffected by this news. He absorbed it as
he would a history lesson. His father was a serial killer who trained Leif to become one of the deadliest men alive. That made a strange amount of sense. Overall, he was relieved it hadn’t been himself to have been sent to America, and he really always had been thankful of that, although for different reasons. His father had left home when he was still an infant, so there wasn’t a terrible amount of love lost there. The past was the past, but there were matters of more current relevance in Vidar’s answer.

Anders waited for the blade to finish shaving the stubble above his lip before asking, “What is it about this place that makes you so sure we shouldn’t leave?”

“This place is where we were made. Bred like dogs into prize fighters to serve this cult for generations,” Vidar answered, then chuckled dryly. “You would think I’d resent all that, but… It’s rather nice to finally be home.”

Vidar set the razor down next to him and gently pushed Anders’ shoulders. The youngest Valstad brother took a deep breath before letting himself be submerged, those words swirling in his mind as the water rushed over him.

Simone could not see anything through the black material over her head, but she knew two men were in the room with her, one standing facing her to her right and one just outside the open door. Her arms were bound behind her, but there was nothing keeping her bound to the chair she sat in. In her fear, it was impossible to guess how much time had really passed when every minute felt like an hour. Judging by how her leg had fallen asleep, she guessed it had been long enough to give some level of believability to her ruse.

She shifted uncomfortably in the wooden chair, crossing and uncrossing her legs several times before saying in a frightened, embarrassed whimper, “Um… excuse me, but… I have to go to the bathroom…”

“Piss yourself,” came the gruff, oddly accented reply from the doorway.

The man to her right berated him in a harsh, throaty language she could not hope to place, and a short argument went back and forth between them before she was lifted none-too-gently by her elbow. She strained to hide just how loose she’d managed to keep the zip tie at her wrists as he all but dragged her along. Ten steps, left, nine steps, another left. This placed them outside of the other man’s line of sight, if she was correct in the layout of the house. Her hammering heart calmed when her bare feet touched the tiles of the bathroom, only to redouble in a panic at the man’s hands grasping the waistband of her boxers and yanking them down. He shoved her backward and sat her on the toilet, his rough treatment less out of meanness than impatience. She could use impatience.

“Do it,” he ordered.

“Um…” she started timidly after a moment. “I can’t… go with you in here.”

“Do it,” he repeated in a growl.

She flinched, not needing to fake that, and asked, “Maybe… if I could see that you weren’t looking…?”

With an irritated sigh, he pulled the cloth bag from her head and she blinked away the ache of the sudden brightness assaulting her vision to see him standing nearby, though with his back to her. She
swallowed her terror. This was her only chance, and so far, it was working. A selfish, short-sighted, cowardly part of her resented that it was working, but she squashed it with the memory of her father being dragged off. He needed her. She needed him. A new, strange little feeling demanded that their baby needed him too, despite all the confusion surrounding that. She no longer cared if she was his daughter or his dog; it didn’t matter what they were to each other, only that they stayed together.

She pulled her hand free of the zip tie with one final painful tug, and as she crept up behind this man, the fake lilac air freshener was overpowered by the sour chemical stench of the darkroom. In the corner of her eye, she could see Bjørn’s long, distorted body watching her through the mirror. His desiccated lips were curled back from his jagged teeth in a grin. He stood there facing the mirror and smiling at her, and though he did not move, she could feel his dry leathery fingers push her gently towards the intruder. His icy touched numbed her mind and filled her with the dreadful certainty of a strange, ancient instinct.

You were given a gift and it compels you to use it.

She looked up at the intruder and could see through his skin, see the stack of his cervical vertebrae and the narrow margin Leif had managed to force a knife into. She did not possess the strength and leverage he had in penetrating the spinous process even if she managed the same accuracy. Her gaze shifted lower to account for her height, looking through him to the fragile little things nestled behind the protective bow of his clavicle. Softer flesh there. Bjørn gave her shoulders an encouraging squeeze, his fingertips as sharp as spikes as they dug into the hollows behind her collarbones, mapping just where she needed to carve.

Before the rising crest of fear could crash over her, she snatched the knife from the intruder’s belt and circumvented his reaction by driving her knee into his sciatic nerve at the back of his thigh. The nerve disruption, if not the pain itself, dropped him sideways with a guttural grunt and she was on him immediately. The knife sawed into the flesh behind his clavicle between his neck and shoulder, her movements quick like a sewing machine needle, ravaging the brachial plexus and severing the subclavian artery in a geyser of blood. The warm spray hit her face and coated her hands and wrists as she sawed, the wet disrupting her focus with memories overlaying this disgusting task. Nightmares rushed in from the corners of her mind, slipping into her vision, but she couldn’t let them drag her under. Not while her father needed her. Not while this pig was grunting and recovering from his shock to unholster his pistol with the hand she hadn’t paralyzed. Catching the sight of the black sidearm raised into the edge of her peripheral, she pulled the knife out of him and drove it hard into the offending arm’s axilla. The gun clattered to the tiles. He sank back, his body almost seeming to deflate under her, and she watched his wide eyes stare up into nothingness.

Between the spark of life and the glaze of death, Simone thought she saw something. Not something to be seen or felt; there was something there that was and wasn’t. A leaving. She leaned in closer, trying to find it again, but it was gone and left only a dissatisfied curiosity burning in her brain. Bjørn’s breath chilled the blood on her face as he rattled out a dry, knowing chuckle.

Nausea buzzed in her belly as she picked up the pistol and staggered away from the corpse. Whether it was remorse at taking another life, the grisly method she’d done it, or fretting over the noise being investigated by the others, she couldn’t give herself time to think. Thinking might kill her right now. There was no room left for her to acknowledge the atrocity of murder where this instinct to protect her family eclipsed all feeling. Her feet were sticky with blood as she quietly padded out into the hallway, creeping through the house with the pistol raised ready and the knife held low. There were still five more between her and her father’s safety.
Leif could feel the pain radiating from his back and smell his flesh cooking under the heated metal. He allowed the pain to move through him in a continuous flow with no resistance or avoidance. Pain was circumstantial. His word was not.

“Who is it?” the man seated across from him asked again, pushing the photograph closer along the kitchen island counter.

Leif lifted his head and blinked the sweat away from his eyes, regarding the picture of a dozen or so men in their bad suits and dour grins with a marked disinterest before responding, “I’d rather avoid the topic of politics, actually. Those discussions can get a little heated.”

Not even a twitch of a grin under that balaclava. Leif frowned, disappointed in this dull band that not one of the four of them had appreciated his pun, not even as the stove-heated metal once more seared the skin of his back. This time, he groaned and struggled against the zip ties binding him to the chair, lest his stoicism rile them to do damage beyond the merely cosmetic. He needed to buy time, but he didn’t know this group’s motives, only their goal of obtaining information regarding the political espionage efforts Ouroboros took over once the old organization was unofficially disbanded. Likely mercenaries, then, a category that he hadn’t considered but didn’t surprise him. Ouroboros’ political efforts have made them many powerful enemies in the industries that had long profited off those developing and at-risk countries. It was unfortunate that his involvement in those schemes had been witnessed by so many outsiders during Mrs. Marceau’s brief reign. Then again, considering he was supposed to never have left the protection of the estate, he had a hand in making his own misfortune here. Protection or freedom, the old scapegoat of fascism held some merit where there was true danger applied. The heated metal tugged where his skin had been cooked to it when it was moved away.

“Which one is it?” the interrogator asked.

Leif looked at the photo again, those grinning faces blurring together in his body’s response to such mutilation and pain, and said, “If you would pass the suggestion along to your client: Rather than trying to weed out Ouroboros’ infiltration, just firebomb the entire parliament.”

“Well, I suggest we bring your girl out,” the interrogator responded, a harder edge to his impatience as he leaned in close. “Maybe putting the heat on her instead will do better to loosen your tongue.”

The wrath rising abruptly in Leif at this threat against his Simone was unexpectedly outside his control to manage as all pretense of his humanity fell away with a lunge at that leering face. His teeth locked onto the nose beneath that cloth mask before the interrogator could even flinch and the man yelled out as those teeth crushed and twisted through the skin and cartilage. The torturer behind Leif seized his shoulders and tried to pull him back, but it was only by Leif’s tearing at that flesh along with the mask that he let the shrieking man go. He spat out the bloody balaclava and grinned to bare the long, sharp teeth that marred the interrogator as the man stumbled back, clutching his wounded nose, or what was left of the crushed and mangled flesh. The punch to Leif’s face from the torturer resounded with a loud boom he thought was contained mostly within the impact his skull absorbed, but more loud pops immediately after that drew his attention to the panicked shouting that was cut at the fourth deafening bang of pistol fire. Four shots, quick succession, their accuracy confirmed in the silence from the four targets in the room before he could recover from the heavy blow to his head.

He blinked the stars away from his vision expecting to see an Ouroboros agent come to collect him or an organization defector come to avenge the colleagues he might have executed, but it was Simone. His mind resisted this reality even as she stood there splattered and smeared with blood, panting in uneven breaths, pistol still held forward in the Chapman stance with a hunting knife.
gripped aloft the handle. This couldn’t be the same Simone who went into anxiety attacks at the mere thought of having killed. When she locked eyes with him and lowered the gun, however, he knew it somehow had to be. Whatever had happened to her here in Norway was more than what his brothers did to her. This was a new part of her, one that took life according to a cold necessity rather than trained hypnotic suggestion or a panicked moment of self-defense. He could see the germ of the hunter in her; not the hunter he was crafting, but the hunter she was born into becoming. She was developing her own judgment and principles on how and when she chose to slaughter and he could see, through the narrow window of this moment as she assessed her quick and efficient work with a haunted stare, the beautiful beginnings of her design.

“Papa…” she whispered, her nightmare-glazed eyes focusing on him as her arms wilted to her sides.

“Cut me loose, darling,” he said, keeping his voice calm and even. There were still two other intruders unaccounted for. “Hurry.”

Her steps were stiff and disjointed as she rushed to him, her hands shaking as she put the gun down on the counter. When she sawed through the zip ties binding his wrist to the chair, he took the knife from her increasingly unsteady grip and made quick work of the rest. Her panting was becoming even more erratic, on the verge of hyperventilation, and he knew it wouldn’t be long before she was reduced to a quivering mess now that the demand of a fatal threat was no longer immediately present to keep her together.

When the final tie was cut away, he took her hand and whispered, “Listen to me, darling, we must-”

A small click prompted him to snatch the pistol from the counter in a reflexive movement, too slow to turn and pull the trigger before the fifth intruder opened fire. The shock of having a gun aimed at him go off in such close quarters quickly dispersed into rage when the shot missed as he put three bullets in the mercenary. That fatal wrath simmered in him as the intruder collapsed, choking on his own blood, and he squeezed the trigger a fourth time to end that pathetic struggling through the center of the mercenary’s masked face. Leif breathed out that reactive rage like smoke from his lungs, harsh and heavy, and turned to gather his girl to escape before any remaining intruders charged in. Except she wasn’t standing next to him anymore.

“Darling…” he heard himself breathe.

A cold, hard knot tightened in his chest as his eyes followed the trail of red smeared down the cupboard doors to where Simone laid curled and shivering. He dropped to his knees, pushing her out of her defensive curl to see her injuries and, unable to differentiate between her victim’s blood and her own, ripped her stained shirt down the middle. There was a hole in the right side of her chest roughly the size of a dime, gushing blood that frothed and bubbled. Her breaths were shallow and fast, wheezing wetly, her chest convulsing in what might have been an attempt to cough only to succeed at expelling blood from her mouth in a dribble. Her lung had collapsed. He shot up and grabbed the roll of plastic wrap he was going to place over the apple slices earlier, breaking off a length to seal the sucking chest wound before feeling for where the bullet exited under her. There was no exit wound; the bullet was still inside her. He couldn’t fix this. This was going to worsen and she was going to suffocate or drown in her own blood. He couldn’t fix any of this.

He leaned her back against the cupboards and grabbed her face, forcing her to look at him as he said, “You’re going to be alright, darling girl. Air has entered your chest cavity and collapsed your lung, that is why you’re having difficulty breathing. You need to keep the wound sealed. Here.” He took her shaking hand and pressed it flat against the gunshot wound. “Apply constant pressure. Stay with me, don’t go to sleep. Do you remember what the medical term for a collapsed lung is?”

She nodded, a brief jerky motion, and winced as another trembling little convulsion made her
wheeze in short panting hisses when she attempted to answer. The blood that dripped down her chin was thick, twisting that knot in Leif’s chest tighter with each desperate wheeze. There was no deliberation in his decision.

“I’ll call a paramedic,” he said, rising to his feet only to be stopped by her hand latching onto his.

“D-Do-on’t…” she rasped, barely audible. “They’ll… catch you…”

He squeezed her hand, surprised by how both touched and horrified he was that she put his freedom before her own life. He couldn’t have that, couldn’t let her think that his life or freedom had any value to him without her, but they didn’t have time for that conversation. He pulled his hand away and ignored her more panicked wheezing as he picked up the landline phone in the kitchen. Whatever terse instructions he gave the emergency operator were lost to his memory the second he hung up, his heart and mind entirely with his wounded girl, and he could barely hear her pained whimper as he gathered her up in his arms. This was the right thing to do, even if everything in him resisted the idea.

He carried her out to the front yard, laid her on the grass, and kissed her blood-wet mouth before pressing his forehead to hers and whispering, “I’ll come for you, I promise.”

“Papa…?” she squeaked, the effort throwing her into another coughing fit.

Leif held her through her trembling, hugging her close and etching this moment into the vast archive of his memory. The sound of sirens in the distance came far too soon. He wasn’t ready to let her go. All at once, instinct rallied against his rational mind and he clung to her tighter, unable to leave his daughter’s side while she laid injured. Every paternal piece of him he had ever denied existing came alive with an overwhelming drive to protect his child. No, *children*. The terror of losing both his daughter and their unborn child to this senseless, unforeseeable tragedy was unbearable in the rawness these instincts exposed. Their future together couldn’t be lost by such dire happenstance, but he of all people knew the unfair capriciousness of death. The sirens were drawing nearer. He knew what needed to happen to keep that future possible. She had to live, and he had to leave.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his strained voice muffled against her hair as he hugged her to his chest. It was strange to hear his own voice clogged with such emotion, stranger still to feel his eyes sting with tears.

“G… g-ohh…” she wheezed. “N-ow…”

Those strange tears trailed searing tracks down his face in the vindication of her demand. She understood. Of course she did. The only path left to them led them apart, but he would find her again, even knowing full well what likely waited for her on that path. He can’t go with her. He can’t protect her. With one last blood-tainted kiss, he eased her onto her injured side to aid her collapsed lung. She looked up at him with the reassurance of her resolve knit into the pained furrow of her brow. They would not be parted again for long; they both had to believe that. Tucking her hair behind her ear in a soothing caress, he left his love bleeding alone in the grass.

Blood choked Simone the more she struggled against the men trying to hold her down, the sensation of drowning bringing yet more panic to her flailing. Their voices were loud in this cramped and swaying space, their shouts incomprehensible gibberish above the roaring pain. She bit and thrashed, her teeth snagging on a latex glove and puncturing the meaty palm underneath as it tried to affix a
plastic mask over her mouth. Her muscles were weak with want for oxygen, her struggle waning as her vision blurred. She could not keep fighting much longer. She had to kill them before they subdued her.

The vehicle turned and her head spun in disorienting vertigo with it, the din of sirens smearing into one slow drawn-out drone as she felt herself dragged down into this sea of blood. The burning in her chest became an anchor wedged in her ribcage dragging her under. Deeper and deeper she sank down into the darkening red depths until the world was black and quiet. Death swam in these strange waters with her, circling her weak, useless body. A sharp, new pain deep in her belly pulled her out with a powerful yank. She blinked the illusion away to find the mask fixed over her mouth, the hiss of oxygen feeding through the line, and her body strapped down to the stretcher. Noise and panic slammed back into her and she pulled at the straps binding her and those gloved hands pressing her down, her teeth bared in a growl that her single shallow lung couldn’t supply. That deep, low pain bloomed in her again and opened her silent growl into a silent scream. Something else was wrong, very wrong.

A thick needle plunging between her ribs on the side of the collapsed lung drew her attention and she heard the release of air from her chest. It suddenly occurred to her that she was in an ambulance and the men assaulting her were EMTs just doing their job. Exhaustion rushed in where panic receded, the comfort of a less harrowing unconsciousness tugging her eyelids to close before that terrible cramping deep in her abdomen pulled a strangled scream from her. Wetness rushing from between her legs made her think that the pain and stress had caused her to spontaneously void her bladder, but this was stranger than that. That awful wrongness coated her mind, a thick and weighty dread that worsened her trembling and pooled a cold nausea in her gut. Something else was happening in her body. That pulsing, blinding pain twisted in her again, holding her under the agony until unconsciousness finally pulled her all the way under.

She surfaced again under blindingly bright lights, the beeping of a heart monitor echoing in her skull and the murmuring of voices bubbling around her. Everything seemed far away, even her body. She wondered if she had died, but she didn’t think the dead could hurt this badly, even this far from herself. Her ribs hurt in new places, her body so cold. She tried to lift her head and, finding it too heavy to budge, attempted to lift her hand instead. She thought she felt something brush against it, though whether this was her movement or something moving against her, she couldn’t tell. The wide, surprised eyes of someone wearing a surgical mask and cap eclipsing those bright lights made her consider it was perhaps both. The face pulled away quickly and, after a startled chorus of voices, she felt the pull of unconsciousness begin to drag her under once more. She tried to tell them about the other thing, the awful thing happening inside her, but there was a tube in her throat. She floated further away from them, from herself, from the pain until there was nothing.

The third time she woke, it was finally quiet. She rose through the layers of waking languidly, each unobstructed breath raising her to the placid surface. When she breached that last layer and opened her eyes, feeling soon followed. There was no more pain, just a vague discomfort and weakness. There were no hands holding her down, just exhaustion. There was no more urgency to seek help for what was so terribly wrong. Everything had already passed in the long span of time between those nightmares and this awakening. Little aches began to stir, warning her against movement, and she tested her body slowly. The tenderness of her repaired lung, the stiff ache of the chest tube inserted between her ribs, and the sutures pulling her skin tight above the gunshot wound all threatened pain at the attempt to sit up or move her torso. Lying there in groggy confusion, she became aware of a familiar ticking. Cautiously, she lifted her arm and was surprised to find Bjørn’s watch on her wrist. Her brow furrowed in bewilderment. She was sure she’d left it behind with her uncles during… She couldn’t remember. Her mind was dense with fog, showing only shadows of memories she couldn’t grasp. She’d gone somewhere far away and left it, she was sure, but her head throbbed when she tried to piece together anything more than that.
A sound made her turn her head, a motion that thankfully wasn’t accompanied by further agony than the common stiffness of a too-long sleep, as a beautiful woman came through the curtains lining the room. Her dark brown skin and full-lipped smile calmed the calamity of her heart instantly where the obviousness of her gender was obscured by the intricately woven robes she wore. Not trusting her voice, Simone tried to return her smile and, when her shyness failed that effort, nodded to her in greeting.

“You are awake,” the woman said, her words carried on an accent blessedly nowhere near European. She tilted her head, the beads decorating her braids clicking together pleasantly with the motion. “I hope you have not been awake too long? Is there anything I can get you? Water?”

Simone could only nod, unable to take her eyes away from this woman. She’d never seen a nurse dressed this way. She’d never been in a hospital with such high, intricately-carved ceilings either. This place and this woman in her beautiful foreign garb reminded her of two very different sections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art rather than anything to be found in a hospital, or even in all of Norway. The woman brought a cup close to her face and held the straw still for her to take, a gesture of such intimate nurturing that Simone felt the heat of a blush warm her cheeks as she tucked the offered straw between her lips and sucked. The smile gracing this woman’s face eased into something warmer as she drank.

“My name is Bisi,” she said, those beads clicking again as she tilted her head to the other side. “Do you know where you are, darling girl?”

Simone’s blush deepened into a mortified heat at that particular endearment, but her throat had been moistened enough for her to answer a timid, “N-No.”

“Do you remember how you got here?”

“A, um… ambulance?”

“Do you remember what happened that brought you here?”

Simone’s brow furrowed again, that thick fog stirring more shadows until she gave up and answered, “I… don’t.”

Everything she could remember was jumbled. Smells and sounds melded into sights and textures. Images of her father flickered between him and her uncles, each trading places and times until she wasn’t sure who she was with and when. Nothing seemed quite real or right. It was better not to think on it, not yet at least.

“Where am I now?” she asked.

Bisi straightened her head and leaned forward, bringing the fragrances of sandalwood smoke, black cardamom and woman to tantalize Simone’s nose as she smiled, “You are home.”
Chapter 80

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the early update, but I intend on being very busy this week with both Pride events and my birthday, so it was either early or late and I suppose we know where I stand on that side of the fence. Don't forget to check https://dissonancedance.tumblr.com/ for more of my extraness!

Leif pulled the brim of the baseball cap lower as he passed a policeman in the busy train station. The likelihood of being recognized in Munich seemed low, but he couldn’t risk being discovered after everything it took to get this far. He kept his steps brisk despite the exhaustion that weighed on him more heavily with each passing hour and held himself with the air of a frantically predisposed man to discourage any meddlesome friendliness from the workers he was forced to encounter. Four days of dodging checkpoints and maneuvering around border agents had ingrained an aversion to being seen at all. Four days of cat napping on trains and buses between crouching in alleyways and bird bathing from public restroom sinks had ingrained a surliness that aided this hermetic avoidance of people in general.

“Large coffee, black,” he said, his German bitten by the hoarseness in his voice.

“What roast would you like?” the young barista asked.

“Black.”

“We have-”

“Black,” he interrupted a bit too tersely as the poor girl visibly flinched.

She took his payment in tense silence, tears condensing in the corners of her eyes, and he held back an aggravated sigh. Fatigue and personal crisis were no excuses to be rude and he couldn’t very well keep himself unmemorable by striking terror into the hearts of undeserving service workers all the way to France, but patience was the first of his social graces to have eroded after learning his daughter had vanished from the hospital.

Vanished, as though a high-profile patient under sedation could simply disappear in a puff of smoke or escape the police-ordered bed restraints on her own. The news broadcasts were as vague as they could be to refrain from allowing the public to know just what little grasp the authorities had on the situation. No mention of the invasion on the Wallis residence or the half dozen bodies therein yet, nor any press release from either police or intelligence regarding the now well-established habit of hospitals losing Valstads. Whatever investigation was taking place in Norway, they were playing it all close to the chest now and keeping the reporters firmly out, likely meaning they’d gathered enough evidence to be certain that he had crossed into their borders. With any luck, they remained unaware that he’d since crossed out.

Leif took his cup of whatever roast the frightened barista placed before him, perhaps with a little quicker service than he otherwise would have received. There was still 45 minutes until the next train for Paris, so he took his beverage and backpack to find some secluded space in which to distract himself for a moment. The burner phone he had picked up in Denmark navigated the station’s WiFi
sluggishly as he searched for any further news of his missing family, scouring conspiracy-theorizing tabloids and message boards when the more reputable sites bore nothing.

There was still no sign of the video that had led the mercenaries to them. He swallowed down the bitter taste of stale anger with the bitter coffee at recalling the close-up images of Simone with his cock buried deep in her throat spread all over Trygve’s desktop when he had made one last sweep of the house. He hadn’t had the chance to stick around and see where the insolent young man had uploaded that video for all the world’s mercs and bounty hunters to find them, but it wouldn’t be long now before it surfaced to these creepy message boards and then became the featured headline of the tabloids.

It could have been worse, though; at least Trygve’s camerawork had adequately captured just how lovely Simone looked with a mouthful of cock and tears trailing down her face. Leif huffed out a half-delirious laugh at the crass thought. His downfall was by a creep-shot sex video, like some fading starlet or rising Republican. Leif Valstad, the organization’s finest hunter, the spiritual figurehead to an international murder cult, and now, the amateur adult film actor. He laughed through the dizziness that accompanied the act, aware that he was giddy from lack of REM sleep and worried about how else this might have been affecting his perception. Four days used to be quite doable for him on a hunt, even six days was fine with the right amphetamines, but he wasn’t 42 during those long-haul days.

He was supposed to have a young protégé well-trained by his hand to share the effort of those hunts by now, and he would have if he’d stuck with the original plan. His mindless laughter finally subsided as he remembered the dread that had always held him back from turning his sweet, reckless, gentle little girl into the cold-blooded killer she was supposed to be. He loved her even back then, even when he’d sworn he hadn’t a heart to love with. Without ever meaning to, she’d changed his entire world and gave his life a meaning he’d never known it was missing. He would find her again, as many times as it took until they found a life where they could stay together forever, no matter what that life was.

A distinct stillness across the stream of people rushing through the station caught his eye and he observed the gawker in his peripheral as he looked up as though idly lost in thought. When the man immediately looked away as soon as Leif turned his gaze up, he knew he had been spotted.

“Let me see it!” Bisi demanded, grinning as she tried to look over the drawing pad Simone propped up in her lap.

“Hold still! I’m not done yet!” she scolded teasingly as she moved the drawing out of view. “It’s not going to look right if you keep squirming around like that.”

Bisi stuck her tongue out at her before abruptly snapping back into the regal tilt of her profile Simone had wanted to capture in charcoal, the sunlight of the courtyard highlighting her high cheekbones and the rounded crown of her forehead. The men that passed them only ever regarded them with respectful nods that expected no response, a level of interaction Simone grew more comfortable with the longer she went unbothered. Even the doctors, if those strange and quiet men were doctors at all, that had removed her chest tube and inspected her wounds were patient and respectful of her blatant distrust and fear. Bisi was never afraid and had laughed at her when she’d snarled threats at the doctors at first, her amusement at that knee-jerk hostility helping Simone to remember how unwarranted it was. No one here wished her harm. No one here came to her with lies on their tongue and lust in their eyes. So long as Bisi reminded her it was safe, Simone could believe her.
“There,” Simone announced, tearing the sheet from the pad and passing it to the woman.

Bisi held it in front of her, eyes wide with awe as she examined the portrait. Simone waited in eager anticipation of the verdict, smudging charcoal on the hem of her plain linen kaftan as she fidgeted. When at last the woman spoke, she exclaimed, “Look at those big ears! It looks exactly like me! Why didn’t you make me prettier than I am?” Simone laughed as Bisi pouted, the woman’s act cracking with a grin before finishing sincerely, “Thank you, darling girl. My sisters are going to hate seeing me frame this up on our wall. You can expect them coming around asking you to do each of them soon enough.”

“Send them over,” Simone offered, eager for more company that didn’t make her want to hide away or lash out violently. The thought of having more women like Bisi around to talk to made her realize just how desperate for friendly human contact she’d been all this time.

“There are eight of us,” Bisi warned.

“Eight…” Simone breathed, astonished. She looked down at the fresh sheet on the pad in her lap, trying to imagine what having eight sisters could have been like. She would have never even gotten a chance to know loneliness.

“Eight of us, one bathroom, and one grumpy, busy husband,” the woman said.

Her eyes rolled dramatically at the hardship this implied, a hardship that Simone struggled to understand. Even as unpleasant as her imagination could make that, nothing was as terrible as being alone. Nothing. She looked out over the courtyard of this beautiful place, at the men in the distance training their marked and marred bodies and the peacocks strutting through the grass between shady olive trees, and lamented that this dream would soon have to end. Her lung was healing, her recovery was over the worst of it, and each morning brought more strength and vitality along with an increasing need to return to Leif’s side. He would be coming soon. He’d promised he would as soon as she was well enough, and he always kept his promises.

“Bisi…” she murmured.

“Hmm?”

Simone ran her charcoaled fingertips over the blank paper nervously. “Why do you call me ‘darling girl’?”

“Because you are a darling girl.”

A hard reluctance warned against this line of thought. The pond reflected the open sky with the colorful fish lazily swimming under the glittering surface, their long fins dragging through the water as ethereal as this peaceful dream. It was easier not to ask, to just keep pretending this was fine, but she knew the drugs they were giving her kept her relaxed and Bisi kept her distracted. She could not concentrate on why she needed to be kept so calm or what Bisi was distracting her from, but where there was effect, there was bound to be cause. She had to wake up.

“This place… isn’t a hospital or rehab facility,” Simone said, the words coming out slow under the weight of her regret to give them voice. “You’re not a nurse. These men… aren’t patients, or attendants, or… normal men. Where am I, Bisi?”

“I already told you,” the woman smiled softly, placing her hands gently over Simone’s nervously fidgeting ones. “You’re home.”

Her skin was warm and weathered from work but smoothed with diligent moisturizing and well-
maintained manicures. So very much like her mother’s hands, it deepened the ache in Simone’s chest.

She shook her head, biting at her lip to keep the tears pricking her eyes from pooling further before saying, “My home… is with my father. I can’t stay here much longer, Bisi, so please… Tell me the truth.”

Bisi rubbed the backs of her hands soothingly, her voice wrapped in a silky compassion as she offered, “We could make it easy for you here. You don’t have to know if you don’t ask, you just have to stay and we’ll take care of you.”

“Please…”

The kind woman squeezed her hands comfortingly, their silence stretching a long moment before she rose and Simone followed at her quiet, “Come.”

She led her through a different entrance into what seemed to be the main building, walking slowly through the vast ornate hallway to not disturb Simone’s tender lung and sutures. Bisi kept her gaze forward, not even seeming to notice the odd things around them— the wreckage, the knives and bullet holes puncturing the walls, the makeshift altars erected of human bones, the murals of blood— but maybe those things weren’t really there. Simone was very used to that idea, so she didn’t remark on the savage beauty of it all amidst the garish opulence of this sprawling mansion. They entered through a small foyer that looked as though it had been blown out by an explosive, stepping carefully around the jagged lumber and fallen stucco to an old elevator that jerked and creaked hideously as it descended.

As they were slowly lowered, Simone couldn’t keep this silence up any longer. “How long have I been here?”

“We transferred you from St. Olavs seven days ago,” Bisi answered, her voice still soft and pitying in a way that made Simone more nervous. “It took two days for you to reach us by ground and boat. We couldn’t fly you in with a collapsed lung.”

Simone tried to absorb the length of her sedation implied in this explanation. That she could have been so unaware and vulnerable through so much brought a familiarly unsettling feeling and she wrapped her arms around her torso in a shudder. She’d known she wasn’t in Norway by the placement of the sun in the sky, but to have a knowing confirmed was so often a heavier weight to bear than anticipated. All the little clues clicking together brought another shiver up her spine.

“This place… is it-”

“I can still take you up to your room,” Bisi interrupted hurriedly, turning to look at her. Simone avoided meeting her sympathetic gaze, afraid that she would be convinced by whatever she saw there. “You don’t have to find out about this place. We are prepared to do that for you, but I need you to say it before I open these doors to the underground. Tell me you want to go back.”

Simone couldn’t say anything. There were too many truths she had hidden from and were hidden from her, both here and throughout her life. She had to know for certain just what was happening if she wanted to have any hope in helping her father find her. Bisi fixed a long, hard stare on her before she pried the elevator doors open to a narrow stone passageway, but she did not move to lead her through. Simone stepped past her, the doors creaking shut as soon as her sandaled feet both touched the worn stones and leaving her alone in the dimly lit passageway. No, not quite alone. Voices echoed through this place. She sighed out the fear that rose in her at the sound of men and forced her slow, careful steps to carry her toward them. She had to be brave.
“Fear is your crucible,” she whispered to herself, gently pressing her palm over where her gunshot wound was bandaged under the gauzy cover of the kaftan. “Overcome its influence, and you are free... You are free... You are free...”

As she drew nearer to those voices, her other palm came to press protectively over her lower belly before she remembered there was nothing there to protect anymore. Remembering left an emptiness that was unfathomable to her even as she felt it, and somewhere in that emptiness, a lamenting scream wailed silently to never quite reach past her throat. No one had mentioned the loss to her, but she knew. In the thin blood that stained her sheets and the passing pains that gripped her empty uterus, she knew. In the sorrowful silence when she awoke at night so very, very alone, she knew. Her body could not keep them both alive and, though she would have given her own life to allow the life that could have been continue into being, it was not in her power to decide. Creation was not part of her nature; all she could do was kill and ruin.

Her hands dropped away from her pain and she stood open and unprotected at the threshold where those men burned her with their stares. The old man studying the map projected onto the wall turned slowly at the interruption, his heavy brow raising in a delighted surprise once his attention latched onto her. In that time-ravaged face, Simone saw a strange, dark forest. The light of the projector reflected off the milky cataracts clouding his eyes like moonlight on fog beneath the pale, spiny brush of his overgrown eyebrows and his skin was as deeply grooved as the gnarled roots of an ancient oak. She suppressed the impulse to run when a smile split the thicket of his wooly beard.

“Gentlemen, you will have to excuse me from the remainder of this meeting,” he said, his brittle, whispy voice commanding a calm authority that the others turned to with careful attention. “I have a guest to attend to.”

Leif walked unhurriedly down the busy block, stopping every so often to look into shop windows or glance at menus in this commercial tourist hub to ensure his stalker was still following. He hadn’t noticed anyone with him, but doubted his presence was known solely to this man even if he currently acted alone. He had to reroute, replan, reorganize, and as he turned down a secluded alleyway to immediately duck between two dumpsters, he considered the narrowing list of options available to get him to Neuilly.

Trains were a fine compromise between the high risk and high speed of air transport and the low risk and much slower option of driving, but he couldn’t continue on train since being discovered. The man walked past where he crouched in the shadows, alarm and bewilderment at losing his quarry plain in his expression, and Leif rose behind him. Now that it was known he was in Munich, he would also have to avoid a direct route to Neuilly. He pulled the man into the space between the dumpsters, one hand clasped over his mouth to stifle his surprised shout and his other arm wedging the man’s neck into a blood choke. A detour through Luxembourg should be enough to throw them off his trail, but that might add another day of travel and that would make it a solid week since he’d seen his Simone alive and more or less well. The idea of allowing an entire week to pass didn’t sit right with him on either principal or practice.

The man struggled through the blood choke and Leif allowed him to pull a knife out, gladly twisting it from his grasp and plunging it promptly into the man’s gut. Leif squeezed the neck tighter to keep the screams inaudible. He supposed he could rent a car using his French identification rather than continue relying on buses and the drive through Luxembourg was quite lovely, if he remembered correctly from his days of studying abroad. Blood and intestines spilled out through the split as he
sawed downward, coating his hand and wrist in the warm gore, and the man’s struggles became a spasmodic fit between the agony and the oxygen deprivation. The only sounds in the alleyway were the scrapes of the stalker’s shoes on the pavement as his legs jerked stiffly until that funny jig slowed to a stop.

Leif waited a minute afterward for the death to stick before lowering the body and carving out the eyes. He usually preferred to carry out this gesture while the victim was still living, but the message would get across just the same: this man was guilty of seeing something he shouldn’t have. He wiped his hands and the blade on the corpse’s shirtsleeves before gathering it up and sliding it into one of the dumpsters, maneuvering a few trash bags to cover it. The body would likely go undiscovered until garbage day at the latest, but even if the man had cohorts that were dedicated enough to search him out, Leif intended to be very far away before either occurred.

He tucked the knife into a side pocket of his backpack and walked back into the flow of foot traffic, the bit of violence reinvigorating him and the threat of discovery chasing his fatigue in a wash of adrenaline. This incident would stand as a warning to those who thought they could hunt him, but any warning also provided a lesson; they would be more discreet and harder hitting now that he’d set the standard of engagement. The next hunter he encountered would likely not be so ignorant as to what he would do to deter him.

“Are you sure you’re well enough to walk with me, child?” the old man asked.

Simone slinked away from his reach as he offered her his elbow for support while they walked through this claustrophobic maze, forcing down her fear and hostility to say, “I’m alright, just… Bisi brought me here to… um…”

“To find out the truth,” he finished for her. She nodded, swallowing that wad of nervousness choking her words. He smiled warmly, that grandfatherly regard feeling so strange from this man she was certain she’d never met before. The familiarity in his stare sparked a mysterious response in her brain as though it tried to dredge up memories of him that simply weren’t there. “She led you to the right person. My name is Dr. Francis Aguiyi and I am responsible for your family’s care.”

Her breath hitched painfully in her chest. “My family?”

“Yes. The Valstad bloodline is something I have been tasked to see thrive,” he answered, his smile falling as he added, “I’m sorry to say that I’ve been slacking in that task, but we’re well on our way to remedying that.”

Simone eyed him warily as they descended the wide stone steps into a gaping room lined with what looked like large iron drawers in the walls. He was implying far too much and she couldn’t tell if she was supposed to already know enough about what he was saying or if he was being purposefully obtuse. With the frequently shifting gaps in her long-term memory, she was often confused as to where that distinction lied. Either way, it further irritated that frustrating sense of helplessness.

Her shortness of breath took all the bite out of her direct, “What the hell is this place?”

“A crypt.”

“What?”

He pulled out one of those drawers, the heavy iron screeching loudly along the slides and revealing
his startling strength to have pulled the rusted thing open so easily. What was inside startled Simone into a gasp that was cut off abruptly at the sharp pain in her chest.

“This… was Bjørn Valstad…” Aguiyi said, staring down at the mummified corpse with a sorrowful expression that did not match the horror such a sight inspired in her.

She buried her face in her hands and turned away from this macabre scene, but the image of the decades-old corpse was burned in her mind. She didn’t need Aguiyi to introduce it to know that it was once Bjørn; she’d recognized those features even dried-out and decayed as they were after having been haunted by hallucinations of him since all this horror had begun over two months ago.

“Why is he here?” she asked, forcing the question out past her complete reluctance to know. “What is this place? What am I doing here?”

“The answer to all of those questions are too complicated to explain here and now,” Aguiyi responded. “To know the truth, you have to know the beginning. For me, and in many ways for you, the beginning started with Bjørn.”

Overwhelmed by the dread she had managed to keep at bay until he pulled out that drawer, Simone leaned against the wall, recoiling from it with a powerful flinch when the low back of the loose kaftan touched rusted metal. She wilted to her knees, face still buried in her hands, and rocked in a self-soothing motion as Dr. Aguiyi’s brittle whispers crawled into her ears.

“We met in the Congo, hired onto the same mercenary company and contracted to aid in a rebellion against a mining corporation. The exact politics were a bit more complicated than that, but we were young and didn’t care about such matters back then. We were there to kill, and kill we did. No one that goes into that line of work arrives there by normal circumstance, but Bjørn was abnormal even by our standards. Rifle in one hand and camera in the other, he was after something more than gore or glory... He was brilliant. He had this glow to him that made you really believe he was a demon and when you watched him work, you didn’t need to just believe. Nothing touched him, nothing escaped his crosshairs, and nothing could stop him from doing whatever he wanted. We grew close, stayed close after the Congo. I had just started my own company when he brought me here and showed me what all of this was. He showed me what he came from… My life changed after that. He gave me purpose, a higher calling than simply killing for cash. We started creating something here. A society, an entire culture with its own code of social norms, philosophies, customs, and values!”

Simone’s hands slid through the roots of her hair to grip her skull as it throbbed with a confirmation of something far more horrible than she was prepared to face. She’d heard this story before. In the hotel in Vermont, with Maier’s blood in her mouth, she had heard this story told in his flat, passionless tone.

“The framework was already there in the mythology and community of this organization, we merely expanded it into a more fully formed social consciousness… but there were those who opposed this shift. They killed him, poisoned him like cowards, thinking what we had built would fall without his leadership. All they did was create a martyr. On his deathbed, Bjørn asked me to look after his family if anything should happen to his brother after his passing… I am fulfilling that promise now.”

She pushed herself up onto her feet, her whole body shaking in rage as she filled in the pieces of this story where Leif fit.

“Was replacing Bjørn’s role in this ‘society’ with my father part of that promise— even if you had to destroy his life to do it?” she sneered.

Dr. Aguiyi turned to her, a quizzical frown deepening the grooves of his forehead beneath the brim
of his cap. “What are you talking about, child?”

“I’m not a child!” she growled. “I’m a grown-ass woman and I don’t need your type of looking after! None of us do! You leave my family the hell alone!”

The squeal of metal on metal as he slammed Bjørn’s coffin drawer shut set her off running, her pulse throbbing from her aching chest to her pounding head as she heard him bark, “Wait! You shouldn’t run!”

“Fuck off!” she spat hoarsely.

Her breaths were too shallow and too quick as she ran through the narrow passageways, the sound of her sandals slapping the stones echoing through the twists and turns of these tunnels. She had to get out. The ache in her chest began to burn warningly and the stitched wounds where they pulled the bullet out and put the chest tube in hurt with a pain that broke a cold sweat all over her body, but she had to get out. She would not let herself be a pawn in that man’s games any longer.

She staggered at Aguiyi’s shouted, “You’re going to hurt yourself!”

She didn’t need him to tell her that, didn’t need him to tell her anything. His voice echoed from all directions, all of them too close and none of them giving her a hint of where to run, so she just kept running. The tunnels grew darker, narrower. She wasn’t sure if that was real or her vision narrowing from the pain and demand for air her shallow breaths could not fully supply.

“Stop this, Simone! We only want to help you!” his dry, guttural voice echoed around her.

Each turn felt like the wrong one, leading only into more curving hallways and dead ends, but this only fed that panicked need to escape. Wheezing, sweating, her run reduced to a lurching walk as she gripped her chest, she had to keep moving. This place, this cult, this man might never give her another opportunity to escape.

“You don’t know the truth, Simone! Your family needs you!”

At last, this maze led her to an iron door. It stuck when she pulled the handle and her burning heart skipped a beat at the horrible suspicion that it was locked, but with a few desperate tugs, it budged on its ancient hinges.

“Come on…” she grunted, yanking the rusted metal with what meager strength her broken body had left.

It squealed open just enough and she slipped into the inky darkness, pulling that heavy door to slam shut behind her. The high-pitched ringing in her ears receded as she leaned against the solid iron to catch her breath, but she couldn’t rest. Completely blind in this darkness, she kept her hands held out to feel her way through this room. She didn’t have to feel far. Her fingers brushed rough stone and her toes were stopped by a metal slab. Hesitantly, she stepped onto that slab, then the next above it and the next as her hand slid along the stone column next to her. Stairs. Hope flickered to life amid her rage and terror. She climbed higher and higher through the dark, her shaky feet nearly stumbling at every other step, but her body responded only to that need to keep moving. Minutes crawled slowly, time kept only by each step to tell her that it wasn’t the hours it had seemed to take before she found a landing. She found a door and pushed it open, nearly falling forward by how unexpectedly easy this one was.

Light dazzled her and she blinked the glare away to find herself once more in an opulent hallway, the door flying open startling a group of peacocks that had wandered indoors. She was not alone. Men
stopped to look at her, their eyes wide with wonder and curiosity as she stood frozen at the doorway. *Keep moving.* She tucked her head low and wrapped her arms tighter around her torso as she walked past their curious stares. There had to be a way out of this place somewhere; she just had to keep moving.

“*Est cette petite fille de Old Scratch?*” she heard one of the men ask as she passed them, keeping her face lowered and shoulders hunched in a desperate wish to become invisible.

“*Devrions-nous parler à quelqu’un?*”

“*Obtenez l'une des femmes du Docteur!*”

“*Non, les frères sont à proximité. Ils prendront soin de la fille.*”

“*Ah! Bonne idée!*”

She fell against the wall in a startled flinch as one of those men raced past her, his sprint not at all impaired by the prosthetic that finished his leg from the knee down. The rapid tempo of her heart battered that dangerous ache in her chest, her tender lung still burning with each shallow breath. Her shaking legs refused to push her back up. *No.* She couldn’t stop, not here, not until she had escaped. She managed to pull herself up by gripping the decorative moulding on the wall and leaning against it as she forced herself to keep moving, but one of the men followed alongside her sluggish pace. Her panicking mind could not think of what to do or say to ward him off.

“*Elle va s'évanouir… Où est un médecin?*” he spoke to the other men before turning back to her and slowly asking, “*Pardonne-moi, ma chère, as-tu besoin d’aide? Do you need help, Little Scratch?*”

“Help…” she rasped, the word thick with a bitter ash on her tongue. “Help… help…”

Rage flooded in to fill that hole left by so many who had tried to help. Her mother, unable to reach her across the chasm of her illness, had tried to help her. Her friends had tried to help in their way, showing her there was living to be had even within that illness that had tethered her to what she’d been taught was ultimately the end. Anders had tried to help by giving her what she’d never needed and never asked for. Vidar had tried to help by pushing her down into where he believed she belonged. Henrik had tried to help by taking her away from everything and everyone that might hurt, as well as everything and everyone that might heal. Not one of them had ever seen that she didn’t want their help and the help they had offered was never what was needed. Help only ever hurt. Now this place, this cult, this history tried to tether her to its help.

“No… No!” she cried, slashing out at the stranger extending his hand, his eyes full of a welcoming greed to unload his help onto her. He recoiled with a confusion that drew a snarl from her burning hatred. “You don’t give a flying fuck about what I need! What would you know? *Nothing!* Stay away from us! I’ll fucking tear you apart, motherfu- AH!”

A pair of arms strong and hard as iron bands trapped her around her middle, crushing her against a lean body and a mouth wet and sharp against her cheek as a terrifyingly familiar voice hissed, “Welcome *home, little bitch.*”

The last of her breath was squeezed out of her chest by that possessive hold, pressing out that flicker of hope with it. She’d woken from a dream right into a nightmare.
Chapter 81

“Why... Why are you here!?”

Vidar grinned at Simone’s frantic whisper, her words sharp with panic and quiet with terror as he pulled her flush to his body in an embrace he knew seemed only familial to the sparse crowd forming around them. Couldn’t risk having them know all his secrets.

“I might ask you the same, sweetheart,” he smiled, enjoying her halted gasp as he bent and tasted the sweat on her neck in a line of chaste kisses. She shivered against him, her breath coming in rapid and shallow pants, each innocent taste along that vulnerable flesh making her twitch. When he turned his nose into the soft waves of her hair and breathed in the familiarly enticing scent of her beneath the cloying fragrance of shampoo, he commanded in a low whisper, “Hug me like you missed me, for fuck’s sake.”

Her arms stiffly wrapped around his torso and he bit back a chuckle at her artlessness, but her obedience was heartwarming. They’d brought her back to him much faster than he’d been attempting to come to terms with after each inquiry regarding the search had brooked only vague assurances from Dr. Aguiyi that it was being taken care of. He’d also been expecting her arrival to have been more announced, but things here rarely tended to operate according to his expectations. It didn’t matter. His beloved slave was once more where she belonged; he intended to enjoy the splendor of this reunion. His family was one member closer to being complete, and that was cause enough to celebrate. Her stifled groan of pain did just as well to flood his body with sweet warmth as when he tightened his embrace to feel her breasts, soft and pliant without a bra to stifle them under that loose gown she wore, press against him.

“What’s wrong? Did your father fuck you too hard?” he cooed in mock sympathy, stroking her back. He crushed her harder to him, smirking at how she stiffened and coughed out a sharp sob. Her pain drew his curiosity along with his interest. Gripping her hair to keep her still, he drew back far enough to examine her expression and marveled at the agony that had her biting her plump lip and screwing her teary eyes shut in a grimace.

“Shall I fetch a medic?” one of the men, the one-legged man who had brought him here, asked in the simple French he could understand.

“No...” Vidar responded absently, fascinated by how she trembled and panted. The tiny grunts she made to silence the sobs that fought to escape made him want to draw them out; he had to get away from these prying eyes before his fascination became noticeable. Besides, seeing that he now had their girl back would undoubtedly cheer Anders up. “No need for a medic. I’ll take care of her.”

He bent to pick her up and carry her back to his quarters when she sprung away in the second he moved to adjust his hold. Her swiftness surprised both him and the men gathered around them as she darted past their reaching arms and lunging tackles. Her leap was impressive enough to drop his jaw in awe of her clearing roughly a vertical meter to reach the window, only for her to slam into the bulletproof glass and hit the floor with a thump and a grunt that made him cringe before laughter burst out of him.

“Wha-haha! What did you think you were doing!?” Vidar laughed, clutching his sides as he loomed over where she laid crumpled on the floor in a shaking ball. “Anders... pffahah! Anders tried the same thing two days ago! Hahaha! I can’t believe you both thought that could work!”

He laughed until it hurt enough to feel good to laugh, the sound echoing through the hallway off the
lavish oil paintings and bloody splatters of half-cleaned gore gone molded and brown. It didn’t matter that he was the only one who was laughing. Nothing mattered in the way any of it used to anyway, and everything was better now. She twitched, coughed out a wet bark that sounded too guttural and broken to be human, and her body uncurled as another cough sent out a splash of bright red onto the marble. The red hit his mind like a chemical reaction, stopping his laughter and changing the men standing around gawking at this scene into threats. He wasn’t thinking. If he needed to protect his brother from these men and this environment, then he absolutely needed to protect his delicate slave too. He gathered her up in his arms, the bridal style carry less evocative of matrimonial sentiments and more that of a wounded animal as her tiny form trembled violently against him, and he rushed back to his suite.

As he fumbled to fish the key out of his pocket while maneuvering her in his hold, her bloody mouth opened and twitched to wheeze, “Get hhau… out…”

His acidic response dried up in his throat when he leveled his disapproving glare down at her to deliver it and he heard himself ask instead, “Weren’t you tired of running?”

Her hand lashed out and twisted the front of his shirt in a clawed grip, startling him, and she slowly rasped, “You. Leif… will… c… come…”

“I know,” he said, slipping the key into the lock. It turned with a heavy clank. “We have been waiting for him.”

She curled and coughed in tight, pained shakes that dribbled red down the front of her gown and wafted up an iron sweetness. Everything Dr. Aguiyi had told him eventually became truth. That fierce protectiveness that bubbled up from their shared hereditary drive to preserve their bloodline was something he could recognize so easily now where before he could not. The scent of her blood, their blood, drew him to protect her as much as it made him hunger to sink his teeth into her helplessness. He kissed her damp forehead and carried her over the threshold into their happy little burrow, safe and sound.

“ Anders!” he called out into the cavernous room. There were no windows, making the darkness that filled the space absolute, but he didn’t need to see to know where his brother was. “Are you awake? I brought us a present.”

The warmth that came with bringing Anders such a wonderful gift elevated his own eagerness to share in it. She shuddered and made an odd, startled sound when he lowered her gently to the foot of the large bed, her body tight with a pain that kept her curled and shaking. A bit of disappointment seeped in through his glee; he would have preferred her to be more lively, give him cause to subdue her. This would be fine for now, though. His little brother was certainly not in any condition to wrangle a wild Simone, after all. He reached out, touching the cold metal of the chain before following it with his fingertips to the circle wrapped around Anders’ ankle, then followed the warmth of skin all the way up to a smooth-shaven cheek. Not even a flinch.

“Out cold…” Vidar murmured regretfully.

He turned on the bedside lamp, the sight of his brother passed out with the needle still in him no longer alarming, and removed the syringe and rubber hose from his arm. Between Anders and Simone, he was beginning to wonder if perhaps he was the odd one for not having any trouble adjusting to this life. They would settle in eventually. They had no choice.

“What…” she started, stopping to swallow a coughing fit before finishing in a quiet wheeze, “What did you… do to him?”
Vidar huffed out a chuckle at the accusation, smirking as he dug out a few coils of silk rope from the
nightstand and walked around to the foot of the bed, “What I do to him is for his own good. What
I’m going to do to you, however… will be for my good.”

He grabbed her feet and pulled her until her ass hung halfway off the edge, keeping her spread wide
as he looped the rope around each ankle. Her struggling kicks were inept and uncoordinated as she
fought through more of that wet coughing, and though her manners were abhorrent, he smiled at her
pathetic attempts to push him away. Even after everything she’d been taught, she never quite learned
that she could never win. It was adorable how hard she still tried when properly motivated. With a
few tugs, he was satisfied with the knots that kept her splayed and bound to the clawed legs of the
bed before crawling over her to straddle her chest and bind her arms together above her. Nothing
fancy, but when he stepped back to check his work, it was quite a pretty sight. It could be made
prettier, though. He unfolded the knife from his pocket and dragged the side of the blade up her leg,
grinning at how she quivered and whimpered.

“You nearly killed Uncle Anders with that bite, naughty bitch. How should I punish you for that?” he
mused, tapping her inner thigh with the steel as she watched him in terror. He would never tire of
seeing fear in those frightening gray eyes.

She cringed, a startled whine squealing out of her shallow breath as he gripped her gown and sawed
it in half down the center, revealing the gauze taped above her right breast and the side of her chest.
He peeled back those bandages only to quickly smooth them back down at glimpsing the crooked
wounds stitched shut at the center of dark bruises beneath. He would deal with that after his fun.

“How should I punish you for that?” he frowned, tugging at the elastic of her plain white underwear.
“No, no, this won’t do at all. There will be nothing blocking us from what belongs to us, understand?”

She winced pathetically when he sawed through the stretchy elastic at the sides and yanked the
ruined garment off her, leaving her delicate cunt bared to him. The sight of that little pink cleft was
enough to nearly melt his cold resolve under the flood of heat demanding he devour her. Nearly. Just
a taste, then. He hummed in amusement as she whimpered at the touch of the blade ghosting over her
cunt, his fingers spreading her open to let the knife gently tap along the edge of her labia. Just as he
imagined she would, she squeezed her eyes shut and cowered, exactly the cue he was waiting for to
bend down and replace the knife with his tongue.

Her startled yelp as he fit his mouth over her cunt was almost as pleasing as the surprising wetness he
found past the slit of her entrance. That she’d gotten wet at all through the torture and pain rang a
thrilling happiness through him. However it had been manufactured, her masochism and lust suited
his tastes perfectly. He pressed his tongue further inside her, groaning out his approval at her taste
and how her little clit swelled and hardened under his teeth. She was still shaking, her muscles
quivering and twitching to the wavelength of both fear and pleasure above the pain that kept her
panting rapid and shallow. The high, girlish grunts punctuating each shaking breath tingled
pleasantly down his spine as he pressed his teeth harder in a teasing bite. Her thighs strained against
the ropes holding her legs open and she twisted her torso, but all her struggling did was wriggle her
under his mouth. Something in her taste and scent made a primal piece of him want to bury his length
deep in this girl and keep her cushiony little cunt filled with his come. He didn’t want to wait to feel
this soft female stretched snug and sore around his cock.

“Fuck…” he muttered, breathing heavily under the weight of that desire.

He palmed his erection, shocked to find the wide wet spot that had soaked through both his
underwear and the thick material of his pants. He reached under his waistband and confirmed that the
viscous fluid was a staggering amount of pre-ejaculate oozing from his throbbing tip. Not even
during his hormonal adolescence had he leaked this much, and he was still dribbling out at that alarming rate as he yanked off his clothes. Part of him wanted to see if this excess was enough to lubricate his way into the tempting pucker below her pretty little cunt, but he would have to find out later. It was far more important that he spill his first few potent loads deep in where it most mattered before moving onto other fulfillments.

He wondered at what in him was demanding he claim her in this savage, basic way; it wasn’t as though he could get her any more pregnant than she already was or override Leif’s half of the baby growing inside that womb he so wanted to taint. That wasn’t even usually his kink. Logic and reason never applied in the bedroom, however. He gripped his shaft and smeared that slick around the outside of her opening, watching in rapt fascination as his throbbing cockhead parted the cunt that was, in both appearance and reality, too small to take it.

“Wait! Wai-” she choked out, trying to twist her hips away from where he was about to split her open. He grabbed those shapely hips and held her still in a rough grip that dug his nails into that feminine flesh, pushing into her with an exorcizing slowness to hear her sob and beg, “No, please-please don’t! I’m not... I could get... Please don’t fuck me there; I’ll do anything you want! Please! Let me suck your dick, I’ll make it good, anything else just-just stop! Stop! I can’t do this again, I can’t lose another baby, I can’t I can’t I can’t-”

He rammed into her before her babbling snagged onto any thought that could germinate past the idea that her womb was empty, tender and primed to take his seed. Her back arched as high as the ropes allowed, every muscle drawn tight in agony as she squeezed hard around him and he moaned above her ragged cry. He drew back enough to snap forward, setting a brutal pace that rattled the bed and knocked strangled sounds from her and bestial grunts from him at each exquisite slide of warm, soft, fertile flesh.

His hands moved up her torso, nails dragging dark pink lines into her skin before sinking into the breasts that quivered with each rapid thrust. These soft, pert little breasts filled his palms, gave and took nothing but sensation. Sensation was all sex had ever been for him, just a physical means to a physical end, never daring or bothering to find greater meaning than to reward and punish. This was new, different. Leaning down, he took one of those soft mounds into his mouth and bit, laving the flat of his tongue over her nipple as she cried out a ragged wail. Her dormant breasts gave nothing, but he could take blood and he sucked greedily for what she could offer. With that coppery tang on his tongue, he reached under her and pulled her into an embrace as he licked the salt of her tears from her cheeks before sharing those tastes in a kiss. She took his kiss passively, her groaning sobs vibrating in his mouth as he licked past her plump blood-reddened lips. He shivered at that thread of their kinship stitching a sickening pattern over his heart, curling his arms tighter around her in a possessive thrill of correctness and belonging.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” he whispered against her mouth, hoarse and breathless. He watched her face, scrunched with misery, eyes screwed shut, lashes mottled dark and glittering with the tears that slipped through, brown skin smeared and speckled in scarlet; a beautiful portrait painted in pain. “We’re going to do this as many times as it takes to get it right.”

He leaned back, anchoring her with one hand pressing down between her collarbones, fingers framing the base of her neck in a threat as his other hand slid down her sweat-slicked body to where they were joined. With just a few rubs of his thumb on her clit, her eyes opened wide in horror and her cunt tightened hard around him. He couldn’t help but smile, his breath huffing out in blustery sighs at the cresting rush of his inevitable completion. Her back arched again, this time more in pleasure than pain, her head tipping back and her body bending upward in offering as her cunt flexed to draw him deeper. He took that offering and mashed against her cervix as he leaned into the pull of his orgasm. The hand at her neck squeezed her cry into a pathetic quaver, the wounded noise barely
audible under the roar of his pulse whooshing loud in his head.

“Take all of it, little bitch,” he growled, his hand squeezing tighter until that crest crashed over him and he spilled in her.

A sharp, brief moan shoved out of him with each pulsing release until he was panting and still, the air around him too thick to draw in enough breath. Dizzy, his mind sluggish and body floating in satisfaction, he swept his hair back from his forehead and watched his beloved slave weep openly under him. Beneath that cloud of euphoria, a strange, heavy numbness coated him. Although his sweat did not sting his eyes, he found that he had to blink away the tears blurring his vision.

You can’t resist your nature.

Simone woke with a start, the sound of the shower growing louder as reality bled into her from her surroundings. Heavy, wet, the spray of warm water pushing down from above, hitting numb skin until pain colored her body in bold splotches. Her chest ached, each breath stabbing sharp, something pulling, something torn. Pulmonary contusion, not another pneumothorax. Blood thick in her mouth, misty in her lungs like a swarm of stinging gnats. Coughing made it worse, but as she held the slick wall of the shower stall and hacked herself dizzy, only a few speckles of red hit the glass. When her aching lungs had no more air to cough, she shook, mouth open in a silent scream until the pain receded and she could breathe.

Panting cautiously, she came back to the world and noticed the straight razor clutched in her fist. The lesser aches joined the chorus of her body, the steady throb between her legs feeding down from a bruised and swollen place deep inside, but her mind was numb. There was nothing, no panic, no calm, not even as she knew what had happened. What was going to happen. No, not again. She looked down, seeing through to the bouquet of fresh, pink, living organs nestled in the cradle of her pelvis. Destruction wasn’t always cruel, creation wasn’t always kind. Her hands were steady as she unfolded the razor.

A little above her mons pubis, she pressed the blade into her skin. It burned with a searing agony as she pushed it to sink in further, blood bunching up around the steel and carried away in the flow of water. With a tug, she dragged that burning blade a few inches across, making a polite red smile between her navel and genitals. The blood rushed out faster than the water could carry it away. Wooziness from the pain swayed and blurred the swirl of red reaching for the drain between her feet, but her hands were still steady. She was the monk immolating in the street, benevolent in destruction. She reached inside that smile, the trimmed edge of her nails barely wriggled past the smooth incision when a loud noise drew her attention.

Anders was screaming in the open doorway, his pale skin paper white and his hands clutching his mouth. Simone stood frozen, her fingertips tucked into the red smile, the blood streaming down her legs and swirling on the tan marble tiles. The razor shook in her other hand as his horror seeped into her mind.

“Anders! Hva i helvete?!?” Vidar yelled, bounding into the doorway and gripping the younger man by his shoulders.

His sharp features were pinched in irritation and bewilderment until he turned to look where Anders was staring. Simone’s trembling spread as that cold glare fixed on her, his frown wilting and eyes widening as they trailed down the stream of blood leading into the drain.
“Simone,” Vidar started, his smooth voice rigid and stern, loud enough to be heard above the shower and Anders’ strange panicked noises. Her stare drifted back up to him, surprised to hear her name from him for once. “Come here. Give me the knife.”

She slid her fingertips out of the incision and covered it with her hand self-consciously, struggling with how distract them from what she had to do as she responded, “Not a knife. It’s a shaving raz-

“COME! HERE!” he roared, making her nearly drop the razor in a flinch.

“Please, kjære! Don’t do this…” Anders pleaded softly, his quiet voice thick with anguish.

Both men were just as threatening as the other no matter how they came to her, no matter how kind or cruel they seemed. They held the same weapons, the same intentions, the same means to achieve them. She gripped the handle of the razor more tightly and backed into the furthest corner, fear fermenting into hostility as she watched them.

“Get out,” she demanded.

“Simone,” Vidar growled warningly.

“Er dette et mereritt?” Anders muttered frantically.

The older man shot him a glare that made his breath hitch as he grit, “Ta med meg de blå piller.”

“Vil det skade barnet?” Anders asked uncertainly.

Vidar huffed out an aggravated sigh, his lip curling with a scolding click of his tongue as he turned and left. Simone crouched lower in the shower, the blade held low in front of her defensively when Anders stepped closer.

“It is true, kjære? You are here?” he asked, hushed and hopeful.

Deceptive.

“Get out,” she repeated.

He stopped mid-step, his watery eyes crinkling at the edges with hurt. “Simone… Do not... I will help you, please…”

“I don’t need your help!” she snapped.

His sad little smile worsened the ache in her chest with a heavier weight as he softly responded, “You do. I will help you.”

It was a lie. Everything he said or did only hurt in the end. His approach resumed in slow, cautious steps and she coiled lower.

“You are okay, kjære.”

She swiped angrily at the tears in her eyes, that weight inside becoming too much to bear. She was so tired and lost. He opened the shower door and she was frozen, cowering in the corner as he stepped inside, but there was nowhere to run. There never had been anywhere to run. Her heart throbbed all the way up into her throat, strangling her, making it even harder to breathe as he drew closer. The spray of the shower soaked him, made his cloth shorts shrink wrap to his body, and though he wasn’t visibly aroused, he was getting too close. She tried to swallow her aching heart
back down. He reached out to her, near enough to touch if he wanted, but he didn’t.

“Come, kjære,” he said, warm and soothing.

His hand was held open, palm up; offering, not forcing. She looked up into his sky-blue eyes, that melancholic kindness still so full of the same compassion that first drew her to him. He looked as tired as she felt. Her hostility crumbled, her will to keep her weeping at bay along with it as she broke down and lowered herself down to kneel on the floor. The razor fell from her grip in a clatter. It was too much, all of it was too much and it never stopped.

“I’m sorry… I’m so s-sorry, I…” she wept, stopping with a shivering gasp when his hands gently gripped her shoulders and pulled her up.

Her heart beat fast in apprehension at his touch as she staggered to stand, that fear receding when he wrapped his arms around her in a hug. The sound of his own heart beating rapidly near her ear and the feel of this gentle affection relaxed her. Hesitantly, her breaths still shaking from the pain that now seemed a permanent part of life, she lifted her arms and hugged him back.

“Ssh, ssshh… Jeg elsker deg, min kjære. Aldri tvil om det,” he cooed, his soft tones a calming balm on the turmoil of her mind. “Nå, bror.”

A shift in the shadows around them was all the warning Simone noticed before he crushed her to him in a restraining hold and Vidar stepped in quickly behind him, a horrifyingly familiar blue tablet pinched between his fingers.
Anders supposed it must have been over one week since he’d last seen their dear heart, but he was uncertain. He was often uncertain, even before the room, before day and night were determined by a light switch and the world beyond the locked door had already faded. He could only suppose it had been a week or so, which was why the slight curve of her belly had not bowed any further. The roundness that had just begun to show from within could not have receded despite the soft plane of her abdomen having gone flat again. They’d gotten to her before she’d accomplished anything more than a thin cut through her skin, a shallow mark they would close and keep sealed away from her reaching fingers. She would not have done that to her baby, could not have done that to her baby, not according to every instinct that ruled her broken mind. She couldn’t have done that to them no matter how they had justified the terror in her eyes. However, they’d long since seen how terror was not enough to stop her madness.

Their bodies were slick against each other as Anders pressed Simone to the glass, her smooth skin wet and slippery under his hold as she wriggled and bucked. Pushing her up with his thigh wedged between her legs, her chest heaving in the effort of struggling and the smell of blood carried on the warm steam in the air, memories of a similar circumstance bubbled to the forefront of his fogged mind. This was a dark reflection of their frenzied fumbling in his father’s bathroom; her pursuit to subdue him with pleasure and pleading reversed to him pursuing to subdue her with pain and force. He lifted his knee higher, pushing harshly up against her crotch, and she stuttered out a low groan at that sensitive flesh being crushed. The woeful sound tugged at some useless piece of his heart, the brief pity fizzling into nothing next to the heat of his anger.

“What the fuck were you going to do, dear?” he sneered, his fingers digging inward on her thin wrists he pressed to the glass until he could feel his nails pierce skin. This time, her pathetic noises only fueled his wrath with a vengeful gratification. “Don’t you ever try to hurt our baby again! You will not hurt the child, understand?”

She made a strangled noise, but whether that was in response to his clumsy English or her pain, he couldn’t tell. He had to get through to her; there was only one way a creature like her learned. Vidar had taught him that among so many other things he had once refused to listen to. Back at the cabin, he’d warned him that among so many other things he had once refused to listen to. Back at the cabin, he’d warned him she might do something like this, though in his horror, Anders did not want to believe him. He no longer had the luxury of that denial; their sweet, soft, gentle girl held a savage madness that would never allow them to trust her. She needed a firm hand, and in the rage that heated his blood, he was eager to provide it.

“Hold her still,” Vidar said from behind his shoulder, holding the dissolvable tablet far from the spray of the shower as he turned the taps to shut it off. “We only have one of these left.”

Anders pushed his body against her, crushing out an animalistic shriek from her that cut off in a high-pitched wheeze as he ground out, “Try not to get bit.”

She kicked spasmodically with the leg not smashed between them and her tiptoes skid uselessly along the tiles as Vidar grabbed her face. Without the noise of the shower, he could hear the odd rattle in the short, shallow breaths he allowed her. She tried to turn her head away, forcing his older brother’s long fingers to dig further into her cheeks. Her squirming and panicked little breaths prompted a chuckle from the sadist.

“Take your medicine, sweetheart,” Vidar smirked, his amusement grating Anders’ raw nerves. “We’re going to ‘help’ you, remember?”
“This isn’t a game, you fuck!” he snapped.

The older man frowned, then chided him with a click of his tongue and a hissing sigh, “Don’t be a buzzkill. We just got her here; let’s have some fun.”

Anders wanted to scream, but settled on snarling, “Didn’t you see what she was doing? This is serious; you’ve got to stop thinking this is all for your entertainment! Shit! She could have killed herself and the baby! You can’t fuck around with her!”

Vidar’s frown darkened into a scowl, his cold eyes heated with a smoldering cruelty Anders was surprised to see aimed at him. Motion broke through Anders’ foggy awareness, but he was too slow in his lingering drug haze to flinch back from it. Fingertips swiftly crowding into his shock-slackened mouth yielded the salty bitterness of the pill immediately melting behind his teeth, that damning taste slamming the full brunt of his older brother’s madness into his senses. He staggered back from him and spat the foaming tablet out, letting Simone out of his grasp only for her to fall into Vidar’s greedy arms as the older man turned that dangerous smirk on him. That bitter film had already coated his mouth in that sticky bitterness to work its way through his permeable flesh no matter how he spat and wiped at his tongue. It was too late.

He spat again, confusion wrinkling his brow as he stammered, “What… why did you do that? Why…?”

“When I say we have our fun, it’s not a suggestion,” Vidar smiled, his thin lips stretching back to show long, sharp teeth at the edges of his grin. Anders shuddered in a wave of nausea at how similar those teeth were to the ones that had once been bared above him as a knife had slowly broken through his flesh towards his heart. His older brother’s long hands curled around Simone’s shoulders to hold her up, leaning her against him as she hugged her torso and grimaced in a pain that kept her wheezing in shorter breaths. “It’s my fault for sheltering you from the truth. You don’t know what your purpose is, but I suspect she does… Don’t you, sweetheart? You know what you both mean to me, right?”

She didn’t answer, still preoccupied with clutching the ache in her chest. The sedative, no matter how brief it had been in his mouth, did not allow him time to unravel the tightly coiled nonsense that choked the sense from Vidar’s words. It should have taken minutes, but he already felt his limbs growing heavier, that fog thickening until only the closest and loudest thoughts could bleed through. What occurred to him then froze his gut in a sickening lurch. The strangeness that had come over his brother since being captured here, that overbearing protectiveness and affection, was not an odd offshoot of fear. His brother had not shared his fear of all the things outside this room he’d insisted were too terrifying to expose them both to. No, what his brother had always been afraid of, even before coming here, was the world outside. Vidar was not afraid of this place for all the horrors he’d hinted at witnessing beyond the door because he was not a prisoner; he was a warden. He was their warden. He was going to keep them there in this gilded cage, belonging to him, depending on him.

Anders swallowed the gorge rising in his esophagus, knowing all he had become so dependent on his brother to provide; the drugs he’d allowed himself to be plied with and the privilege of occasionally being allowed off the chain kept locked around his ankle. The bond he’d thought he’d formed with Vidar was not a partnership; he was owned by him, just the same as he now recognized Simone had been owned by them. Vidar’s smooth, pleased voice shook him out of his shocked daze to see him still grinning at him as he caressed their trembling girl.

“Don’t try to fight it, littlest brother. Go lie down and let the sedative do its work; we’ll join you as soon as she’s done getting stitched up.”

A fuzzy numbness was already encroaching at the edges of his consciousness, dredging up an urgent
panic at the idea of being laid so vulnerable near this maniac. Time was running out. The razor was open between his feet, the steel gleaming in the puddle of warm blood-tinged water. He had to do something. There was no stopping this madness, there was no escape from this Hell, but he had to do something now.

“Papa... please, please help me...” Simone whispered thinly, her shallow breath shaking with a sob that was hitched with pain.

Vidar chuckled at her pathetic whimpering, his arms curling around her like a serpent’s coil in a possessive hold that wracked a shivering sob from her. Anders knew she was not praying for him; she never would ask for his help again, and he began to doubt she had ever wanted it to begin with. Everything was a lie. A dream at first and then a nightmare, but never real. Not for them. Never for him. His brain sloshed and tilted in his skull as he bent and picked up the razor.

“What are you doing with that?” Vidar asked, all amusement gone as he watched Anders step closer with the blade.

Each movement was slow and heavy, as though he moved through water as he lifted the blade. His brother’s brow furrowed in concern and curiosity as the sharp corner kissed along her jawline, drawing her to tilt her face up. The rage burning in her teary eyes turned her stare into pools of molten steel, as sharp and glimmering as the razor he dragged lightly down her neck. She glared up at him, defiant despite her terror, when he stopped the blade at the broken ring of scar tissue marking Leif’s bite. He would make her regret this obstinace. He had to. Blood beaded around the steel and painted a curving line down her breast.

“What are you doing with that?” Vidar questioned warningly.

The blade split through the scars and her panting quickened, but Leif’s glare still burned up at him behind her eyes. The drug fog blunted his horror at what he was doing to her. At least, he believed it was an effect of the sedative, but perhaps it was not; it didn’t make a difference to his decision either way. He could either remain Vidar’s pet, or he could be his companion. Seeing how he treated Simone, there really was no choice in the matter.

“Just making sure she remembers who she belongs to,” Anders answered. He peered at his brother from under the droplets of water matting his eyelashes, seeing how Vidar’s uncertain frown split into an approving grin, and he returned his smile. “Can’t have our little pet thinking she has any right to hurt that which is no longer hers, right?”

“No, certainly not,” the older man said. His long fingers smeared the blood over the cuts, humming low in appreciation before saying, “Maybe I’ll wait to have her stitched until... after. She’s not putting up much of a fight now anyway. What do you think?”

“Wait much longer and I’ll be napping on the floor. Besides,” Anders smirked, tracing the curve of her breast with the blade teasingly, “I’m in the mood to have fun now.”

The tunnel Leif had used to leave the estate had been sealed off. This did not surprise him, although it was irritating how they had traced his tracks so thoroughly. Or more likely, his brief traveling companion Rupert had divulged this route to them. Either way, he tucked the binoculars into his backpack and walked along the river as he considered the vast network of catacombs formed from the natural quarries carved millennia ago by a sea that no longer existed. It was there in those jagged,
dark tunnels where the order had its primordial beginnings and it was well after those tunnels had been smoothed by manmade efforts of brick and cobbled stone that the order was then conquered. Time made room for the chaos of infinite chance to determine the end of anything, no matter how permanent or invulnerable it may have seemed. It struck him to be appropriate that the Valstad line had been gathered to end where it had been bred into its beginning, but Leif would not allow fate to take them yet. If time made room for chance, then somewhere in infinite chance was an outcome where he would win. All he had to do was create that chance.

As he made his way back to the rental car, he saw a young woman walking in his direction a short distance away. Certainly not a French native, by some quality in her posture or gait that Leif would not have been able to define if asked but discerned on sight. His uncle’s words came sprawling up from the depths of memory, fresher now than they’d been when he’d recalled them three months prior: *When in pursuit, don’t just look for a person, look for the human shape with its odd upright bipedal gait and flat shoulders.* As those words replayed, the young woman looked up at him, startled as though she’d heard Bjørn’s long-dead voice speak from within his skull. He met her dark eyes, seeing the light of recognition burst into fear before the contact was broken by the youth fidgeting away as though it was merely an unintentional glance as she was checking her surroundings. It was this ruse that sealed the young woman’s fate. Where there was concealment, there was something worth hiding.

They passed each other along the tree-lined street, the roar of the flowing water on one side and the noise of the flowing traffic on the other, and Leif allowed a little distance to open between them before turning around. Her stride had hardened, that fear injecting an urgency that quickened her step, but by the time she nervously looked over her shoulder, Leif was nearly upon her. There was no hesitation in the decision to run and Leif’s heart pumped the glee of chase to enliven his weary body as they sprinted. The youth’s bag was abandoned, thrown haphazardly behind her in as much an attempt to trip Leif as to lighten her load, and her sneakers beat the pavement punishingly. Youth was enough to ensure that the woman would be able to outrun him soon enough, however, and it was that bare fact that had Leif risk slowing down to pull off his backpack, take aim, and throw it. The scream that tore from her when the pack tangled itself at her feet and sent her careening to the pavement was perhaps more dangerous than letting her get away, the alarming sound sure to draw even more attention before Leif tackled her. The tussle was brief, the woman no match for Leif’s strength as he dragged her and his pack into a narrow space between two buildings.

“I am going to let you speak,” Leif said, keeping her pressed against the wall with a hand over her mouth. “If you shout, I will break your neck. Do you know who I am?”

He removed his hand and she coughed out a strained grunt before stammering in American-accented English, “I-I I’m sorry. I’m sorry! I was… I was surprised to see you here, Old Scratch.”

Leif frowned, his grip tightening on the arm he had in a restraining hold behind the woman’s back and pulling a groan from her. He should not have ventured this close to the estate, and certainly not while there was still daylight. “Is there anyone with you?”

“No… sir,” she ground out.

“Are you initiated?”

“Yes. Second year.”

“What’s your name and duty?”

“Ximena Cardona Torrez. I’m… hrggh… medical… data, research; not wetwork.”
Not a threat, he figured she meant by that. He didn’t release her, instead pulling that arm until the resistance and her restrained groans told him it was nearly dislocated at the shoulder. Her efforts to stifle her noise were an admirable bid for appreciation; she was certainly gunning to survive this. He could allow her that impression if it kept her cooperative. When she didn’t struggle as he patted her down to find only a few unused adhesive bandages and a half pack of gum occupying her jean pockets, he decided to let her live a while longer.

“What are they having you do at the estate, Ms. Torrez?” he asked, genuine curiosity leaking into the question. Research types weren’t often needed on site; it was a risk to have as many members housed there as it was already.

“New initiative… urgh… S-sir, if you would please-”

“I would not please. How long have you been coming to the estate?”

“Two days. No! This is my third day. I’m-”

“Who do you report to?”

“Gran Gregarious.”

“Where is Greg these days?” he asked conversationally.

“He went dark in Bucharest… last I heard. I’m here as his substitute,” she answered, her voice wavering.

For her position and age, she demonstrated a noteworthy amount of control over her physical response to pain, but Leif knew better than to assume the skill set of anyone allowed within the inner sanctum of Ouroboros to be limited to the qualifications of their position and rank. Even the most peripheral members should not be underestimated, and he kept this in mind as he eased the hold on her arm enough to reduce it from painful to uncomfortable.

“Did you have plans for this afternoon?” he asked. Is there anyone waiting for you who would report you missing, he didn’t need to add.

“I was on my way to meet with Dr. Aguiyi.”

His brow quirked in surprise. Thankfully, with her face pressed against the plaster, she didn’t see this. Whatever new initiative Francis had planned that required a face-to-face with a tech was as intriguing as much as it was no longer any of his business. Still, his curiosity was a greedy beast to feed.

“Well, I won’t keep you long in that case. Tell me, Ms. Torrez, I’m not terribly familiar with the research Greg was to be conducting for us. Would you please explain it in terms a layman such as myself might comprehend?” he asked.

A beat of silence passed, a noticeable tension running through her before she responded stiffly, “I’m sorry, Mr. Valstad, but I was not given clearance to divulge that information to you.”

This was only getting more interesting, but he didn’t have time for it.

“That’s too bad. There are only a few questions I have aside from that, if you would be so kind as to answer them. You wouldn’t have happened to have seen any of my family members at the estate recently, have you?”
“Um… I-I haven’t, but…” she stammered. He pulled her arm back a few centimeters as she paused, just enough to threaten, though there was no need to make good on that threat when she blurted out, “Y-Your brother- the tall one, Vidar, I saw him in with the Doctor a-and I… Little Scratch, she-”

“‘Little Scratch’?”

“Simone! Your daughter Simone!” Torrez corrected herself frantically. “She’s in recovery; stable, fantastic condition!”

The gnarled knot of worry that had tangled itself in his gut loosened a little at hearing this. Simone had not ended up in the many more hazardous clutches that had reached for them. He wouldn’t put it past the old man to have kidnapped her as a preventative measure against that likelihood, though that notion felt too close to appreciation. This was not a move motivated on pure benevolence; this was a cheap, rotten ploy to get Leif to return and cooperate and he would not play into it.

As he reached down and opened the side pocket of his backpack, he asked, “I understand you’re under orders to keep mum about your mission even to me, but might you be able to at least tell me your fields of expertise?”

“I, uh… I was specializing in cytogenetics, um… Dr. Aguiyi read my thesis on chromosomal and congenital disorders resulting from consanguinity, but it was my career as an embryologist that got me recruited.”

If she was trying to hedge, she was fortunately miserable at it. Leif weighed this information as he weighed the knife in his hand, his mind clicking through the clues that snagged a powerful hunch. This career embryologist specializing in birth defects from inbreeding had been summoned to the estate at the same time Simone had been taken there. With her pregnancy in mind, it would have been a thoughtful consideration on Francis’ part had it not been for the secrecy applied to it. Once again, where there was concealment, there was something worth hiding.

“Did you find something wrong with my daughter’s pregnancy?” he asked.

Another tense silence followed, that tension winding within him this time as well until it snapped when she finally, in that dreadfully soft and quiet way bad news was so often bared, said, “I’m so sorry, sir, but… Ms. Valstad suffered a miscarriage before her arrival.”

A weight pressed down on him, lowering his hold on the knife until it drifted to his side and he shut his eyes.

“Does she know?” he whispered. He sounded old, brittle even past the grief dampening his senses.

“Yes, sir.”

His continuous failure to be there for his child when she needed him most stung deep. He sighed, wishing he had a free hand to rub his aching head with, then cleared his throat and began to ask, “Were you able to collect anything to…”

“She would have had a healthy brown-eyed boy.”

A boy. His son. Their son.

“I see,” he muttered. “Thank you, Ms. Torrez.”

The sense of loss hollowed out a chasm within him, filled with the empty dreams of what could have been. He knew the pregnancy was risky, that the chances of the fetus coming to term were low let
alone the survival of the infant after birth, and yet so many hopes had sprung up without his permission. A healthy brown-eyed boy. Brown like Simone’s mother’s cinnamon irises, or brown like her grandfather’s black coffee glare? It was too much for him to wonder. Too much he would never get the chance to know. This dark trench in his mind would always be there, always echoing these questions about a son that never got the chance to be.

“I promise I won’t say anything about seeing you here,” Torrez said, her quavering voice pulling Leif halfway out of that trench.

He frowned, letting her arm go as he responded grimly, “I know you won’t.”

She was rubbing her sore shoulder when he cupped his hand over her mouth and sawed through her neck.

“Stop.”

Vidar smiled when Simone froze under the razor blade stinging along the side of her neck, her thrashing body going still as Anders sucked at the cuts on the other side. Seeing his brother’s lips and teeth stained red with her blood brought a strange pride to him; sweet baby Anders was finally understanding their roles. To think he was just about to give up on him; what a waste that would have been. Hearing this once gentle, kind man moan as he sucked at the wounds he’d made on their slave was the fanfare to this victory. The bedding had been stripped down to the sheet covering the mattress, leaving nothing for her to hide under or cover herself with in the short range the rope tied around her waist to the headboard gave her. It wasn’t quite the method of bondage he preferred, but the heated urgency of his little brother’s impatience after he encouraged him to wake himself up with a couple bumpers of cocaine was too adorable not to indulge. Stimulants really brought out a different beast in the typically easygoing man.

“God, I want to eat you alive, fucking sweet whore,” Anders growled against her neck, pushing a second finger into her cunt. She whimpered, then choked on a cough as he bit down on her harshly and pumped his fingers rapidly enough to make her forget about the razor. He laughed mockingly at her struggle, jeering as he finger-fucked her, “Feel good, dearest? You want to fuck now?”

“Hold off for just a minute, brother,” Vidar smiled. He reached into the nightstand and fished out a small brown vial, a plastic water bottle half full of a clear liquid, and the lube. “I want to try something on her.”

“It won’t hurt the baby, right?”

Vidar tried to keep the smirk off his face and, failing that, assured him, “No, no. This is rather tame. Just a few sniffs of this popper to relax her, that’s all.”

“And the GHB?”

“One capful won’t hurt anything.”

“Is that for all of us?”

The chuckle that had been simmering in Vidar boiled over into full laughter until tears pricked his eyes. “Hahahaa! You- You want to fuck or do you want to roll around drooling on the goddamn floor?”
“One capful won’t hurt anything,” Anders countered with an irritated pout.

Vidar shrugged, wiping his eyes. “I guess not. Don’t get mad at me if you can’t come, though.”

“That’s not going to be a problem.”

“Let’s get her warmed up first. Hold her mouth and nose shut so she whiffs this in.”

Anders pinned her down more securely, straddling her middle with his hand pressed over her mouth and his fingers pinching her nostrils shut. Vidar waited, watching for the right moment and, when her wriggling became jerking twitches, he leaned in as he unscrewed the cap to the amyl nitrite. Anders released her nose and cupped his hand over the vial, tunneling the fumes as she inhaled deeply, her desperate breathing wracked by shaking coughs.

“Goooood girl…” Vidar drawled, letting her take a few whiffs off the vial before pulling it back and inhaling the fumes himself.

The pungent, almost fruity stench stung his nostrils and hit him with a dizzying high almost immediately. It played well with the methamphetamine still spinning in his system, calming him without completely blunting that gleeful edge. He handed off the popper to his brother, switching to pouring a capful from the plastic water bottle. Their girl was no longer squirming so much as he squeezed her cheeks and tipped the dose into her mouth. She grunted and winced when the bitter liquid poured over her tongue.

“Swallow, little bitch,” he smiled. “I’ve got something sweet to share with you next.”

He plucked one of the sugar cubes from the crystal candy dish kept next to the bed and tucked it between his teeth as he bent down. Whatever was in these cubes seemed to mix nicely with everything, imparting a more pleasant dissociation in the right environment. Forcing the sugar cube into his slave’s mouth and licking that sweetness against her tongue, he could not imagine a more right environment to foster a pleasant high. He turned his head to deepen the kiss, encouraging her to return it with a slight growl and a punishing squeeze to her breasts. The coarse granules of sugar dissolved between them quickly as she shuddered and licked back. Behind the drugs, the familiar thrill of touching and tasting his beloved slave crackled down his spine to coil at his groin. When she whimpered into the kiss, he could feel his cock begin to drool in anticipation, craving to fill her with his seed again and again until it took. There was one small obstacle in the way of achieving this strange new goal, however.

He pulled away from her lips with a playful pop, smiling at finding her already succumbing to at least one of the drugs by her half-lidded and dazed expression, and said to his brother, “Lube up your dick; you’re taking her ass today.”

Anders’ brows raised in surprise. “I… Um, isn’t that more your preference?”

Vidar responded to that idiotic question by handing him the tube of lubricant. On hearing no further argument, he moved to sit up against the headboard and pulled Simone’s weak, shaking body to straddle his lap, admiring how her head lolled listlessly from disorientation. As he gripped his cock and smeared her opening with the slick constantly dribbling from his tip, he cupped her cheek adoringly and looked into her blurry eyes. Not even the glimmer of fear could be seen in those smokey depths. Perhaps it was all a bit too much for her, but the utter obliteration of her awareness and control was adorable.

“Do you feel better, sweetheart?” he smirked, pressing into her hot little cunt from below.
She made a small, broken sound that was not quite a moan when her snug walls hugged past the ridge of his tip and he felt the pinpricks of her short nails dig into his chest. It was distracting to have her hands unbound, but there was no struggle or resistance in them, only the raw reaction to the pain of making her stretch around him again so soon.

“No, Simone! Bad girl!” Anders scolded her, yanking her arms behind her, and she fell forward onto Vidar’s chest with a grunt.

The shift of her weight impaled her on his cock, making her whole body stiffen and jerk in both surprise and pain. Anders tied her wrists behind her back with one of the short ropes from the nightstand, his quick and simple technique finishing in a big looping bow that Vidar might have laughed at if he could focus on anything but the slick, sweet pleasure of their slave’s cunt sucking at his cock.

“Fuck…” he groaned, astonished by how quickly her body could recover from being so thoroughly fucked. She was truly made to serve.

Anders wasted no time once she was bound; his stare fixed on her asshole as he spread her with one hand and gripped the base of his shaft to line himself up to it with the other. The focus and concern etched into his intense stare did breach Vidar’s high enough to draw laughter this time.

“What are you waiting for?” he chuckled. “Afraid it won’t fit? Haha! Trust me, it will.”

Anders blushed sheepishly and muttered something that only made Vidar giggle helplessly. The GHB might have been starting to hit. As his little brother began to shove his way into her tiny pucker, that laughter trailed off into a moan. The way her muscles flexed and throbbed deep inside sent waves of pure pleasure through him, the drugs intensifying the sensation and making him roll his hips to chase each tingling wave. She gasped and her back arched and tensed as Anders shoved inside her faster to avoid slipping out at the abrupt motions, beginning their fuck with no further preparation. With his little brother leaning over her from behind, she was nearly crushed between them, only able to move enough to flinch and shake. The small, strangled sounds they began to knock out of her when they fell into rhythm punctuated each thrust with a thrilling reminder of how painful this was to her even through the filter of the drugs. The added sensation of the other cock sliding into her made Vidar shut his eyes and fall into this pure pleasure; they had everything they could ever need here, including each other. The satisfaction this knowledge provided filled him with a euphoria greater than the sum of the sex and the drugs. This was right. This was perfect.

Simone coughed and hiccuped with restrained sobs, the pathetic sounds plucking something unpleasant at him like an untuned instrument. It was definitely the drugs prompting this aversion to her crying, but he still found it distracting. Anders caressed the sides of her thighs, shushing her to soothe her distress, but those little hitched sobs only grew into open weeping. A wicked grin split Vidar’s mouth as an idea occurred to him.

“Hand me a rope,” he said.

Anders looked at him quizzically, but obeyed, pausing to reach into the nightstand and pull out the last short length of silk rope. Vidar wrapped it around her neck and, with a wink to his confused brother, began to strangle her with it. Immediately, her tightness closed them in her in a vice grip, choking out a startled grunt from Anders and silencing her crying. Vidar wheezed out a gleeful laugh at how stiffly she squeezed his cock, rasping out a curse and releasing her to let her choke on air as he resumed fucking into her. By the time her gasping calmed enough to turn into that desperate, pathetic sobbing again, he tightened the rope and bit his lip at the almost excruciating tightness. Pushing into her, he could feel her walls dragging harshly along his shaft, no doubt hurting her as he forced his way past her resistance. The way her mouth fell open in a futile gape for air as she
grimaced in pain was a lovely sight, encouraging him to repeat this game again when her sobbing broke through quicker the second time.

“Stop that…”

Vidar looked up from her darling mouth silently begging for breath at the mutter from his brother, quirking a smirk at him. “What did you say?”

“Stop,” Anders repeated, not much more clearly than the first time he’d said it. The younger man couldn’t seem to bring himself to look at him, a reluctant frown crossing his features. “You’re hurting her.”

“You weren’t against hurting her just a moment ago,” Vidar countered, still not loosening the rope. She bucked in a convulsive flinch, his signal to let her breathe before this became risky, but now he had a point to prove. “What happened to teaching her a lesson? She’s not going to respond to discipline properly if you’re so inconsistent.”

Anders’ frown deepened, but he said no more. Vidar eased slack into the rope, letting Simone gasp again to catch her breath. This time, however, she started to cry out for help, her raspy voice breathless and weak but there was no mistaking what she was trying to scream. Another idea formed amid the surprise this reaction from her prompted.

“Anders,” he said, smiling when the younger man’s stare flicked up to him. Vidar held the ends of the rope wrapped around their slave’s narrow neck to him, delighting in how horror widened his little brother’s eyes as he commanded, “You do it this time.”
The rope was slick and soft in Anders’ hands, the woven silk still holding the warmth from being wrapped around his brother’s long fingers, which were now finding their way into Simone’s wet hair to yank her into a violent kiss. He shouldn’t like the way Vidar’s teeth sank into the plush pout of her lower lip before licking over the hurt with an animal affection, but he shouldn’t like most of the things that caused his cock to throb with want. He’d stopped recognizing himself long ago, anyway. The rope, however, was too much. He didn’t want to want that. He didn’t want to want her neck baring the raw violet bruises like a collar tattooed into her skin, a collar showing just what her masters could take from their girl. But this was not about what he wanted.

“Punish her,” Vidar smiled, that smooth voice as cold and cruel as the ice in his stare when it turned to him with that command.

Anders obeyed. Simone’s body jerked as he pulled at the ends of the rope, squeezing that ring of red it already burned into her skin, and the tight ring of her asshole squeezed back. Objectively, that tightness was uncomfortable and delayed his thrusts, but that he could dictate how her body reacted with such brutal methods pleased something deeper than the simple pursuit of his orgasm. Control, vengeance, dominance; these sentiments heightened the pleasure with a stronger edge. His head swirled with it, the room already spinning from the GHB as it began to take hold over the waning cocaine, and it was enough to distract him from the itch it created in him. He had many itches to scratch now, and he raked his nails over the sweet swell of her hip once he let go of the rope.

That urge to tear into her, both figuratively and literally, imparted a zest to this gesture that left the thick red lines in her skin to immediately bead with blood. She would learn this time. With his anger and betrayal refreshed at the evidence of his ire raked in four bleeding marks swooping her hip, he took hold of the rope once more and grinned at Vidar’s strained grunt when she tightened in turn. She deserved the pain and fear this time. The rope bit into his hands as he pulled; he could only imagine the agony it caused her. His cock throbbed and wept, buried deep in her twitching ass, as he thought on it. When he slackened the rope again, she did not weep or cry out as she had before, only dragging in broken, creaking wheezes as she struggled to refill her lungs.

“Bad girl,” he growled alongside her neck, lips grazing the bleeding cuts he’d carved over Leif’s bite mark. “Bad little bitch.”

A chuckle from his brother drew his attention to see the older man watching him, his stare half-lidded and darkened as lust dripped from each word, “You’re doing magnificently, Anders. I knew you had it in you. We all have it.”

Anders directed his discomfort at the unwanted compliment into sucking at Simone’s wound, the bitter tang of iron made sweeter by her whimpering groans as he thrust into her more harshly. Her soft flesh rippled with each slap and he moaned at the heady pleasure her slick, firm hole provided. He still preferred the welcoming hold of her little cunt, but reaming her ass held its own appeal. She was so thoroughly theirs as they fucked into her between them, it was hard not to spill in her sooner just to see her holes leaking and sore with their claim. This was the proper order of things, their love coming to form so naturally in this framework; she would see they were right soon enough. She would learn to love them as she should.

“Please,” she whispered, raw and rasping. He took hold of the rope again, ready to silence her pleas for mercy, never expecting her to say, “Kill me. Just kill me, kill me!”

Rage crept red into the corners of his vision and he pulled that rope taut with a hard yank, stopping
her wheezing gasps with a sharp immediacy.

“No!” he hissed next to her ear, bloodstained teeth bared in a snarl. “This is for your own good. We’ll train this sickness out of your mind!”

Her mouth gaped for air like a newborn chick begs for food from its mother’s beak, her stiff body trembling with the involuntary effort, but he held the rope longer this time. She had to learn. Slowly, that stiffness eeked out of her muscles and she began to relax around him, enough for him to move. Vidar gripped her hips, his fingers smeared with the blood from the scratch marks as he resumed his punishing rhythm. Her body jerked in a spasm, echoing a fluttering pulse in her holes that forced a surprised moan from Anders and a pleased huff of a laugh from Vidar.

“Fuck, she’s coming!” the older man grinned, his head thrown back against the headboard as he pushed up into her enthusiastically. “Keep choking her! Oh, fuck, that’s good!”

Anders’ astonishment was knocked out of him with a gasp at the pulsing sensation pulling him deeper inside her snug hole, her orgasm massaging his cock thrillingly. Any questions of how she could be coming by such brutality were shoved aside by the cresting wave of his own completion, mounting a height elevated by the drugs spinning their magic and the terrible thrill of cruel revelry. Part of him wanted her to come out of this punishment still defiant, still needing their discipline to be fucked harshly into her, again and again. Another part, a shrinking part made nearly mute by the sound and fury of his wrath, wanted her to escape this Hell before it ruined her as it had ruined them. He pressed his sweat-soaked forehead into the bloody crux of her shoulder, moaning out his ascending pleasure as his body tensed before snapping into the throbbing pulses of ejaculation. The deep, sucking pull of her orgasm milked his cock for every drop as he spilled in her with each shuddering throb. As he came down from that dizzying high, his wrath melted away under the burning intensity of his love and he let go of the rope, letting her breathe in the mercy that love flooded in him.

“Um…” Vidar murmured.

Anders kissed the hot bruises the rope had dug into her neck. She didn’t even whine from the pain. His sweet, dear angel would learn, but he would be patient now.

“Anders,” his older brother said, low and sharp with a creeping alarm. “I don’t think…”

Her body was relaxed, her submission was to be rewarded. He caressed where he had hurt her, soothing an apology into her skin, but he had to hurt her. She had to know that she’d left them with no other choice.

“She’s not breathing.”

Simone’s body was still crushed between her father’s brothers, their sex jutting into it as they panted with exertion and delight, but she wasn’t in there with them. She could not bear the pain of being a living body, so she sank away from it to be somewhere else, somewhere they couldn’t reach. Each time the rope was tightened around her neck, she sank deeper and surfaced slower until she didn’t come back at all. There was no second heartbeat to moor her to life this time, so she sank freely into that nothingness. Time stretched and unraveled, memory crumbled and scattered, thought dimmed and silenced. Lower and lower, darker and darker, everything and anything faded into nothing. In that place, without a body to feel or see, she could only sense this nonexistence taking her apart. She
had no lungs to breathe the sigh of relief that her dying mind thought to make, but that well of gratitude filled her before spilling away along with the rest into that void. There was only peace until that too was gone.

Then there was the sour stench of chemicals and damp rot. Red bloomed beyond her shut eyes, confusion blossoming along with it. A faucet was dripping nearby. This was not nothing.

“What-?” she tried to whisper, the word scraping a dry hiss from her throat.

“Patience, child.”

That soft-spoken voice was deeply steeped in the Norwegian accent her uncles spoke with, but while familiar, the mild timbre did not belong to any of them. She blinked away the blurriness clouding her vision to see him standing with his back to her. Warmth and trust pulled from somewhere within her toward him, dredging up such strange sentiments of attachment although she was sure she’d never met him before. He was a thin man, his pale skin and fair hair reflecting pure red in the dim light that filled this small room as he focused on peering through a tall microscope. No, an enlarger. This was a darkroom. This was the darkroom, the one in Vermont, but that was impossible.

“Where am I?” she asked in a rasping whisper. Her voice was so weak, her tongue like a stranger in her own mouth.

“Patience is a practice, not a virtue,” he said, gently chiding, a singsong inflection to cull the edge of command.

His calm soothed her uncertainty with a reassurance that caressed her brain in ways only her father’s voice could touch it. That’s what this familiarity was: family. Untainted, untwisted family with no trace of the lust or terror that had come to infect it. All that had been done to her concept of family fell away like a bad dream and she leaned into this heart-achingly beautiful comfort.

“A person is not a singular entity; his internality is not an impenetrable fortress within which his self resides as untouchable in its uniqueness,” he said, each syllable resonating an echo of warmth and safety in her, and she let her shields fall away to open herself to his voice. “A person is also not an object; he is not at the mercy of what externality he is invariably joined. Our actions affect ourselves, our environments, our present and future, but we are no more than a grain of sand in the vast desert of time. We live in this ambiguity of existence; alone and conjoined, inept and powerful, temporary and everlasting. Many have tried to mask this as duality, but there is no divide—only entanglement. Everything and everyone is entangled. What determines an ethical decision if he is not without the bias merely existing implies? Where, in this entanglement, does his responsibility begin?”

Simone, with her mind open and unguarded, heard these words and sensed the sweetness of them as a delicate perfume cutting through the sour stench in the air. She received the meaning like a thick honey poured over her strange tongue: open, wanting, grateful. She wanted more; her aching loneliness welling a deep hunger for his words and the connection they weaved.

He took the photographic paper from the enlarger and submerged it in the development bath as he continued, “His responsibility is essential within that entanglement. He is responsible for the self that is subjected to externalities and he is responsible for the externalities to which he is joined. He cannot reside wholly within himself just as he cannot claim to be powerless to outside influence, so he is responsible for both. He is responsible for his self, for his environment, for his fellow man. He can only be free when all people are free. If he is oppressed, he must seek liberation. If he is liberated, he must liberate all others.”

Using a short pair of tongs, he transferred the paper, now splotched with an image she could not see
at this distance, to the stop bath. Curiosity for both this familiar stranger and the photograph he was developing drove her to step forward on legs that felt a mile long in this distant body she inhabited. Her own body was still in that other place; she had let it go, and that was enough thought toward it for now, perhaps for as long as thought existed.

“Oppression must be eliminated,” he said, still focused on the development process as she stepped closer to see his face. “As free men, it is our responsibility and our joy to free all others from what oppresses them. That is the basis of our ethics and morality.”

Shock wrapped over Simone’s comfort like a layer of ice, immobilizing her in a moment of pure astonishment. Bjørn Valstad, not the monstrous apparition that haunted her or the desiccated corpse still lying in a metal drawer, but the living man stood there with his bushy beard and his light eyes that glittered ruby red in the light. He glanced to her with a smile crinkling the edges of his eyes, those long crow’s feet digging years into his weathered skin. When he touched her arm, she could feel not only the warmth of family bleeding through the gesture, she could feel him. Skin thickened by years of hard work, ridged and gnarled by scars and callouses, she felt him with the vivid awareness no vision or hallucination could impart. He moved past her, stirring the air and leaving his scent in his wake as he placed the photo in the sink and ran the faucet over it. Her stunned stare latched onto that trickle, unwilling to accept that she had felt him and now smelled him. She knew his touch, his scent. She had always known.

As he pulled the finished print out of the bin in the sink, he turned it to her and asked, “What do you think? One for the books?”

Further bewilderment creased her brow and her widened eyes flicked down to the photograph. There, in black and white, the white filled in with red from the darkroom light, she saw her bloodied body laid out on the floor, Vidar’s long hands pressed over its sternum in what she immediately knew was an attempt to resuscitate her. His cruelty and greed reached for her even here.

“No…” she whimpered, dread welling up where shock had emptied her. “No. No! I won’t go back!”

But the photo had developed. The moment was set. A burst of blinding white light like a camera flash brought her coughing and heaving through pain that went deeper than the buzzing of adrenaline could mask. She writhed, weak and shaking, as both her uncles pulled her up and embraced her, but she was not struggling against them; she struggled to escape the prison of this body. Her senses were shocked into a muted blur, yet Bjørn’s soft and warm voice still rang clearly through the muddled noise, that sweet comfort clinging to her with all its terrible promise. They were part of her, all of them, and there would never be any escape.

“Sssh… You’re okay, sweetheart, you’re okay...” Vidar’s smooth whispers wracked ice down her spine, the sound so distant though he held her pressed to his chest. She could feel Anders sobbing more than hear him, his abdomen quivering in fright and jerking in sobs against her other side, tucked as closely between them now as she was when she’d left them. Vidar’s hot breath huffed against her ear as he told her, “I won’t let you leave us.”

Her mouth gaped, choking on air and the rageful cry she could not give voice to scream.

Vidar tested the rope that wove Simone’s wrists together at her front, wriggling a finger through the loops that made up the columns wrapping around each wrist to ensure that her circulation was not being sacrificed in the security of the binding. The clothes he had dressed her in, the sumptuous
Dr. Aguiyi had gifted him now soiled in her blood and their sex, were folded next to her on the metal table in the little room at the back of the kitchen. By the drains in the smooth concrete floor and the sharp stench of industrial cleaner hanging in the cold air, he could guess the brutal purposes this space had held, but for now it was an infirmary. His slave had not struggled or resisted as he’d carried her to the medics, she did not snap or kick while they stitched and swabbed and probed, she did not weep when they had left her drenched in antiseptic with a needle feeding her vein fresh blood pulled from the caged things. He did not know how much blood she had lost until he took a glance at the sheets to see what may as well have been a murder scene.

It didn’t occur to him until this quiet moment that it was nothing less than exactly that. The chill that ran up his spine at this revelation shivered a giddy laugh to bubble from his rattled mind, the queer sound quickly cut off by the horror that dampened it. His heart had not stopped its aching march since that first stuttering gasp he had coaxed from her with his palms rhythmically crushing over her sternum and his mouth breathing the life back into her.

He slid his hands from checking the rope, eschewing the pathetic excuse to touch her when she was his to touch as he pleased, and cradled her jawline to lift her gaze to his. She looked at him, but the blank sheen glazed over her stare told him nothing. His eyes narrowed, bitterness churning from the depths of his aimless need. He had dragged her back from the dead, taken control of her when she did not know how to manage it on her own, given her sad little life purpose, and yet she remained ungrateful for his mercy and generosity.

“Did you think you could escape your penance?” he sneered. She blinked, but that blank sheen did not abate. His lip curled in the aggravation heating his temper at this defiance. “Your life belongs to me, little bitch. Not even Death can claim you from me, not until you’ve paid your dues, and you are far from finished.”

Her eyelids drifted shut in response, but it was more feedback than the medics had been able to get from her with their myriad of questions to gauge what damage may have occurred to her brain from her brief death. The thought that she would be so reduced dredged a cold dread in his gut, filling him with a more powerful need to assure that her mind was only as broken as it had ever been. This was not the docility he had wanted to tame into her; this was an unjust theft from what belonged to him. His fingers curling tighter around her jaw, his need pulled her up into a kiss, his breath huffing hot with desperation from his nose as he tasted the blood in her mouth.

The signs of violence now grated his bones with weariness in the wake of raw fear and the very presence of that fear for his slave was not something he was in any condition to face. If he could have tenderness this once, just a taste of the sweetness that was impossible between them, this chill might leave his aching chest, but his lips only found her unresponsive no matter how gentle he was. That need in him grew more desperate, his thin patience breaking to the weight of it, and he growled as he crawled atop her. The metal table was unforgiving to his knees as he straddled her, boxing her in beneath him while he sought some sort of response from her lax mouth. His fingers sought out the deep gash stitched up alongside her ribs, jabbing the fresh gauze layered and taped over it until she at last gave him a grunt that moved her lips. The response was only to pain, but it was enough to assuage the cold dread knotted in his chest.

“Good afternoon, Valstads.”

A reactive anger flashed in Vidar at being interrupted, an anger that was quickly levelled by recognition of that dry, whispery voice. He leaned off his slave, wiping her blood from his mouth as he sat up and responded, “Good afternoon, Doctor. I’m sorry that I haven’t come to thank you for bringing Simone to us.”
Dr. Aguiyi gave a brief nod, his hands clasped behind him in a deceptive display of polite harmlessness Vidar had seem him assume before ordering the slaughter of dozens, and said, “I understand. I also understand that you’ve been having quite the busy day. How is she?”

Vidar resisted glancing down at her, never wanting to take his eyes away from the old man whenever in the same room, and carefully answered, “I think she’s just shook up. Gave us a bit of a scare, but… she’s alive. Now.”

The doctor hummed, the sound closer to a rumbling than a hum, and gave a contemplative nod. “So I’ve heard. Takes after her father that way. The boys are already preparing a feast in honor of her resurrection.”

This time, Vidar did risk a glance down at her, hiding his relief and surprise at seeing her face turned toward Aguiyi behind, “I am not so sure she would be willing to attend, Doctor.”

“She owes the demon in her blood the honor it is due,” the old man said dismissively, as though what he said was so common and obvious it could not be helped. As he slowly stepped toward them, his fine patent leather shoes gleaming in the overhead fluorescent lights and his hands still harmlessly clasped behind his back, Vidar sat up straighter and tried to ignore that he still straddled his slave’s bare thighs. When Aguiyi stopped and gazed down at her with all the affection of a doting grandparent, his voice took on a warmth that reflected that sentiment as he smiled, “Hello again, Little Scratch. What was it that waited for you on the other side?”

She blinked slowly, the same level of response she’d given to any questions asked of her by the medics, but when her tiny, cracked voice spoke, Vidar’s heart thawed halfway from the terrible fear that had gripped it. “Noth-th-ing.”

The Doctor hummed again, then turned his clouded stare to him. “You may go tend to your charge, my son. I have much to discuss with the young miss before the evening’s festivities commence.”

Vidar kept his wariness off his face, but only just barely. Leaving his slave, especially in her fragile state, to the strange whims of this powerful man settled a bitterness the longer he stayed his tongue from lashing out in refusal. He detected no hint toward what the old man had planned with her, nothing to either protest or forewarn even if he was in a place to make such demands, but he slid off the table as was suggested of him. The Doctor’s suggestions, no matter how passive and polite, were never less than orders, after all.

With his half-frozen heart sinking at this circumstance, he leaned close to her once more and hissed warningly against her mouth, “Be good.”

Anders’ grief choked him when his brother returned to the room alone. His pale hand clapped over his mouth, but it was not enough to staunch the low keen of horror wrung from his sorrow-thickened throat.

Vidar’s head whipped to him at the sound, face drawn in urgency as he almost ran to him, and Anders relented to the reassurance of his urgent whispers as those long arms enfolded him, “No, no, no, no! She’s fine! Don’t cry, Anders, she’s alive! Just in observation, that’s all… that’s all.”

“I killed her,” he croaked, the awful truth blunted against his shaking hand still clutching his mouth. His sins were too great and too many to confess, but this one was too much to keep coiled inside.
The words had leapt and dribbled out of him with every panicked pant as he paced this cavernous room and waited, waited, waited for her to come back as healthy and whole as the day he’d watched her walk through his father’s yard with a tray of fruit in her arms and a shy smile curving her lips. What little composure he had managed to gather crumbled at that memory compared to the image burned in his mind; her cut and bloodied, brown skin paling a sallow gray, so still and quiet on the floor as his brother breathed into her again and again while he screamed. “I killed her, didn’t I? I killed my… my…”

“Sssh… It’s alright now,” Vidar hushed him, always the patient one, always the one in control. Anders buried his head in his shoulder, grief and gratitude weighing him down and shaking a sob from him as his brother stroked his back in this comforting embrace.

“I’m sorry— I’m so sorry! I didn’t… didn’t know, I-”

The older man stopped his blubbering with another long, soothing hush and softly said, “It was an accident, littlest brother. It’s okay. We just have to be more careful with her next time, that’s all.”

“Next time?” Anders breathed, shocked at the idea. “There’s not going to be a next time. Vid, she died! There’s no way she’s going to want to… to do anything like that with us again.”

The low chuckle that shook Vidar’s chest shocked him, though not as much as his amused, “She’ll never learn her place with that attitude. What happened to ‘making sure she remembers who she belongs to’?”

Anders winced at the sickness his own words roiled in his clenching gut. “Vid, I’m serious!”

“So am I.” That bubbling amusement left his brother, leaving only the hard edge of cruel truth as he spoke and held him in an embrace that was more constrictive than comforting, his long fingers tangling in the roots of his hair. “Sheltering her when your conscience flares has not benefited her, just as my shelter has not benefited you. It’s time for you to accept what we are, brother. Understand that what I have done was only ever for your benefit, but I am not incapable of error, and protecting you from this was my error. Tonight, you’ll join the flock as I have, and together we’ll serve our purpose to creating a free world. Now, take a couple Xanax and come join me in the bath. We have a long night ahead of us.”

Anders’ mind was a tangle of alarm and bewilderment as Vidar kissed his forehead before releasing him to walk toward the bathroom, leaving him alone again in the maelstrom of his distress.

Black cardamom and sandalwood burned in the small firepit at the center of the floor, the fragrances clinging to the women that wiped the blood and god-knows-what from Simone’s skin with sweet-smelling oils. Each swipe of the dripping fabric over her sensitive skin made her shiver and clench her teeth to keep from writhing, not from pain, but from the unbearable joy of a gentle touch. Their faces were hidden behind veils that jangled with gold, but she could feel their emotions through their careful fingers and steadying hands. Their pity did not burn and their caution did not deceive the way those sentiments had from others. There was something almost holy in the way they guided her limbs to wash away the sin and the pain, and when they poured jasmine-scented water over her, she felt renewed, baptized by their mercy. Her wounds painted in a salve that stung and burned only a little, her body hidden under the soft fabrics of a beautifully patterned kaftan, her tangled hair tamed into braids and twisted into a bun, she almost felt alive again. When Aguiyi returned and addressed each
of his wives with a friendly touch to their hands as they filed out of the room, she almost didn’t hate him.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Did that ever matter?” Simone shot back, the bite of the quip lost to the ache that softened her pitch to a near whisper.

His beard split in a grin, that rumble of a laugh or a hum rolling around in his chest. “You recover quickly! That quality will take you far here. Come, I’ll escort you to the feast.”

He extended his arm to her and she did not have much choice but to take it, that limb deceptively thick with muscle beneath the faded suit jacket as she leaned into his elbow to steady her shaky pace. Though the sun was not anywhere near setting, the courtyard was decorated in flame, every pit and torch lit and expelling smoke that irritated her sore throat. It was hard to believe that just earlier that morning she was lounging here with Bisi, still so blissfully unaware of her uncles’ proximity and in denial of what this place was. The reminder of her weakness made her stand up straighter, steel her gaze harder against the massive crowds of men running about in giddy preparation.

“You needn’t worry so much,” Aguiyi said, his normally quiet voice taking on a gruffness to be heard over the din as they made their way to the table atop a stone platform. “None here would dare touch you.”

She held back her sneer, looking up at the platform with an unease she hid beneath fatigue until, as though those words had jinxed her, she spotted Vidar seated at the center of that table. He was speaking amicably with a handful of war-torn and grizzled men that gave his predatory features a polish of civility in comparison. As the group laughed at some joke that came out of his smiling mouth, he caught her gaze and her feet immediately glued to the ground. The slow shift of his smile into a sharp-toothed smirk as he held her gaze from yards away made her lungs ache in a way they hadn’t since drinking the tea the women had brewed her.

“You needn’t worry,” Aguiyi repeated, giving her hand an encouraging squeeze as he pressed on.

She stumbled into his slow pace, feet heavy as the lead that now filled her belly, but she had to do this. There was a reason Bjørn met her in that place between life and death and that knowledge alone allowed her to put one foot in front of the other, carrying her up the steps and closer to her uncle until he pulled out the chair next to her for her to sit. She turned her stare to the crowd, facing stage fright more easily than the terror that gripped her at the sight of him. That didn’t stop him from demanding her attention in other ways, however, and she flinched when his hand squeezed her thigh under the cover of the tablecloth.

“You don’t look so gloomy, sweetheart,” Vidar smiled, his long fingers kneading her flesh with a threatening gentleness. “You’re the guest of honor.”

Aguiyi sat down on her other side with a groan and a slowness to the motion that betrayed his aching joints, and immediately the crowds dispersed to seat themselves at the long tables lining the courtyard. A microphone was handed up to him and he winked at her with a grin before bellowing into it with a roar that made her wince, “Today we celebrate the homecoming of our sister, Simone Valstad!”

Simone slunk low in her seat, that stage fright abruptly giving way to stage terror as the crowd applauded. She focused on just breathing and maintaining her bubble of relative calm, willing her eyes to not shut against the sight of the faces blending together with the words the doctor shouted with all the fervor of a Baptist reverend. The echoing from the speakers across the yard made her
nauseous with just how possible all this impossibility was, and she shut herself to it to retain any sort of composure.

When at last the speech beside her drew to a close with a flourishing applause, Aguiyi turned to her and asked, “Do you have anything you would like to say before we begin?”

Her throat forgot how to swallow in the spike of nervousness this shot through her. She wasn’t ready. She stood up stiffly, drawing hundreds of eyes to her from below, and this platform became her pulpit. It had never mattered that she wasn’t ready; this had to happen on its own pace. She could feel their union, their community, their devotion to a cause she was just beginning to realize was there by the slightest inkling, and she opened herself to the mass of their anticipation.

Her hand shook as she held the microphone, but her voice was steady by the measured quiet her aching throat demanded as she began, “A person is not a singular entity…”
The entire estate seemed to have emptied into the courtyard, terrorizing the resident peacocks into hiding among the trees and dissolving the stalwart duty of the guard dogs into weaving playfully under the long rows of tables lined up on the grassy expanse and nudging against outstretched hands. Word spread fast, the announcement for celebration faster, and each post was abandoned to prepare and partake in the second coming of Leif’s sole progeny. Vidar watched even the most hardened warriors thaw in the revelry of the religion Dr. Aguiyi preached, their soldier-soldered hostility shifting into something just as dangerous but more inwardly focused. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t heard before, the crowd likely a thousand times more, but even he had to admit that the old man’s passion was infectious. Whatever demon had blessed them made no promises of everlasting peace or salvation; they had to make those for themselves, and they were spreading their peace and salvation one destabilized country at a time. Each blessing and victory had to be celebrated in recognition of their own divinity.

He still had just enough of his mind left to know he would find it all terrifying and fascinating if he still had the focus to listen, but when the Doctor went on and on about the sovereign rights inherent in all men and the indelible duty to uphold freedom, his gaze drifted down to Simone. A smile slowly pulled at the corners of his mouth and he brought his cup up to cover it with a long drink of that bitter tea they all favored so highly. Leaning his chin on his hand propped up on their table, Vidar did his best not to let the stimulants still buzzing in his bones cause him to fidget as he watched her stiffen in rising nervousness. For someone whose heart had gone still for almost two minutes just hours ago, she looked good. Of course, he’d thought she’d looked good with blood, spit, sweat, and tears running down her face, too. Seeing her so cleaned up and wearing actual clothing just didn’t seem right anymore, but this was a special occasion. Their path had been divinely affirmed by this miracle blessed to them from over the edge of death, according to the Doctor’s impassioned insistence. He was about to reach out to tug at the gauze wrapped around her slender neck when she turned away from him and he followed her horror-stricken stare to the microphone held within range of her grasp.

It seemed that they were both taken by surprise when Dr. Aguiyi gently offered, “Do you have anything you would like to say before we begin?”

Simone’s mouth opened and shut in a stammer that reminded Vidar pleasantly of the torture he planned to continue after these festivities, but then she rose from her seat with a swift abruptness as though the wooden chair burned her. When it became apparent that the shy little creature intended to take the offer as she accepted the microphone into her trembling hands and turned her wide eyes to the crowds, Vidar leaned back in his chair, ready to be amused at whatever nonsense might come stuttering from her quivering lips.

“A person is not a singular entity…” she said, her voice too quiet and soft to be heard above the murmuring crowd. Rather than try to speak louder, however, she continued that near whisper into the microphone. “His internality is not an impenetrable fortress within which his self resides as untouchable in its uniqueness…”

As she spoke, the noise and excitement of simply having that many people gathered together drew back. The shuffling of fidgeting, the sniffling coughs, the murmured comments, the scrapes of chair legs against the ground; all noise ceased and allowed her whispers the space to carry through in pin-drop silence. Vidar looked out over the crowd, astounded and bewildered that they had found something in this insane girl’s insane speech to pay such close attention to. What might have been three hundred faces, few of them without the scars that bore the violence in which they thrived, turned up towards his slave with a solemn and open silence. He glanced to Dr. Aguiyi, finding a
harder edge to the focus of his stare, a stillness to him as though he were carved from stone as he watched Simone with his whole body turned toward her. They were actually listening to what the mad little creature had to say. Surely, then, these were not her own words.

“A person is also not an object; she is not at the mercy of what externality she is invariably joined,” she continued, and he had to stop himself from showing any reaction to how she glanced at him as she said this. Rage curled in him like a plume of smoke at the suspicion that this was some form of rebellion against her master, but the clandestine quickness of her glance told him something different. There was something she wanted to let him know in that line, something different than what these words might mean to her audience, and he filed them away to examine and punish her for later. Her storm gray eyes fixed unseeingly back to the audience once more. “Our actions affect ourselves, our environments, our present and future, but we are no more than a grain of sand in the vast desert of time. We live in this ambiguity of existence; alone and conjoined, inept and powerful, temporary and everlasting.”

A new worry wriggled up from the grounds of his astonishment at the quiet power her words held over this mass of murderers. The parallels between her and Leif were not mere mimicry. This was no church house play of the resurrection of their Christ. To them, this was the repetition of history necessary to fill the role Leif had left open. This was divine fate: her fate, and theirs. Her words continued to trickle into the microphone, gently speaking of entanglement and responsibility, words he had never heard from the few she had dared speak in his presence, but he could not hear them over his own thoughts. In the magic silence her unwavering speech cast, she was fitting into her place in their new world order; a world in which Vidar did not yet know his own place even as he found himself trapped in it.

Seeing how clear Simone’s purpose in this place was seeming to be injected a sudden urgency in him. Whatever Dr. Aguiyi had been grooming him to become had afforded him many luxuries, but his purpose was no clearer now than it had been the morning after his initiation. Heat pooled at the base of his neck at the danger this notion carried; the mild summer sun quickly becoming uncomfortable even in the shadow of the mansion walls surrounding the courtyard. He had to figure out his place here before it was figured out for him, if it wasn’t already.

“Oppression…” Simone paused, pulling him out of his rising anxiety to see the steel that glinted in her gaze as she looked out over the audience that had become her flock. His breath paused in the chill that froze his core; her eyes had never looked so much like Leif’s. “… must be eliminated. As free men, it is our responsibility and our joy to free all others from what oppresses them. That… is the basis of our ethics and morality.”

Her pale-knuckled grip on the microphone loosened as it slowly lowered from her mouth, leaving only that striking silence suspended in the air. Then, all at once, applause erupted amid the roaring din of over three hundred voices. He looked to Dr. Aguiyi for some clue as to what exactly had transpired here, but the astonishment in his wide grin told him only that he was impressed. In the shaky sigh she expelled as she settled unsteadily back into her seat amidst the clamor, Vidar caught the sense of relief, of victory in his slave. When the crowd’s attention was diverted by the commencement of the feast and the courtyard was filled with the clamor of conversations competing to be heard, he reached under her and tugged her chair flush to the side of his.

The motion and the little yip of surprise this elicited from the girl caught the Doctor’s attention and, while those pale eyes were turned to them, Vidar wrapped his arm around her and asked with a jovial loudness, “Tell me, Doctor, do you officiate weddings as well as you preach?”

Dr. Aguiyi laughed as Simone stiffened, his head thrown back and his gnarled hand splayed over his chest in a hearty guffaw that stole the sound from his throat until he was wheezing at the end of each
heaving laugh.

“I- ahahHAA! Please, forgive my manners, Valstad, but,” Dr. Aguiyi tried to say, pausing to collect his composure only to crack again at the end of a calming sigh. To Vidar’s surprise, he leaned forward and spoke in slow but clear Norwegian, “Breeders don’t typically need their bitch and stud to marry.”

Vidar’s genial façade fell away as he fought to keep his indignity from his expression. “So that’s really what I’m here to be? Breeding stock?”

Dr. Aguiyi was still smiling with mirth when he shook his head and answered in English, “No, no. If that was all there was to accomplish by bringing you into the fold, we’d only need what we could take from you in a vial.”

This did nothing to ease the distaste at realizing his desires had ended up aligning with the Doctor’s, no matter how conveniently that served them both. Taking advantage of the old man’s good mood and attention, he dared to press, “And just what else do you have to accomplish by bringing me here?”

Aguiyi gestured to the arm Vidar had slung around Simone’s shoulders and said, “Well, for one, she’s far less likely to bite you than me.”

Feeling how she tensed up under him, he quickly changed the subject before that wild streak in her did something stupid. “That was a very… moving speech. How did you get her to memorize the whole thing before the feast?”

“I had nothing to do with it. That was all the doing of the divine will that guides Ouroboros flowing through our newly hallowed saint,” Dr. Aguiyi answered so plainly it took a moment for the ridiculousness of that statement to sink in.

Whether it was the religious zeal or the impossible idea that it was all her own doing, it was too ridiculous to believe either way, but for all his smoke and mirrors, the Doctor had not been one to outright lie to him yet. However, it did not match up with the kind of crazy he knew his slave to be.

“I did not know you spoke so well,” he said instead, steering the conversation back to calmer waters. “I do not, but Bjørn was a patient teacher.” Aguiyi leaned back and pulled out a half-smoked cigar from inside his coat. As he lit it, he said between puffs, “While it was fate that led her to you today, I’m reluctant to risk a repeat on a miracle. Before the night’s festivities begin, I’d like to discuss something with you all in my office. Bring your brother, as well. After what happened today, I feel there must be a discussion made on what will be proper conduct going forward. Wouldn’t you agree, Simone?”

“Wouldn’t you agree that asking me doesn’t mean shit?” she sneered.

Vidar yanked her against him and hissed out a frantic hush near her ear in the impulse to protect her before his mind even caught up to the full horror of just what danger she’d put herself in. Bloody images of skinless faces screaming in guttural tongues and limbs lying severed next to writhing stumps of bodies flashed in the blank that filled his mind, all tied to the knowledge of the man who could order such carnage with a mere snap of his fingers. The mention of his own actions that day as a cause for a private discussion was enough to enflame the constant current of fear that buzzed through him. Even with the gleeful response of another laughing fit from the old man, Vidar held her tightly, his long arms nearly pulling her into his lap with the terror that stiffened his muscles. No matter how he tried to discipline that unmanageable madness from her, he had somehow still failed to
tame that fiery core of hostility and rebellion. The swooping line of stitches below her navel and the raspy laughter of the devil next to them both screamed this failure above the pounding of his heart.

“There’s that famous Valstad resilience! Freshly resurrected and already snapping back,” Dr. Aguiyi grinned, his speech slightly muddled by the cigar tucked tight between his teeth.

Vidar pulled her fully onto his lap and covered her mouth before she could make another disastrous quip, pressing waringly against her bandaged chest wound to reduce the words she growled against his palm into a pained groan. Only when she melted against him in submission did he relieve the pressure, but he kept her pressed to him with his arm hooked around her waist throughout the rest of the feast regardless of the odd stares this garnered from those in the crowd bold enough to look. They didn’t matter. No one else mattered except what belonged to him. Whatever the outcome of this discussion they were to have, he would find a way to tame that beast in her and keep them all safe in the process. He had to.

The perimeter of the estate was thoroughly monitored, even the sewers and catacombs had been worked over with motion sensors and infrared cameras. Leif knew this because he’d been one of the supervising directors of that project, and in a rare lack of foresight, he’d left only one unmonitored route through which he’d escaped, the one they’d since blocked. Still, he found himself coming back to the view of the high walls emerging tall above the surrounding trees and buildings, staring out across the river as he anchored and disposed of Torrez’s body until he’d smoked through the half pack of cigarettes that were in her bag. His thoughts were disorganized and hazy; a dreary battlefield amounting nothing but indiscriminate loss on both sides of his indecision. He needed to get his daughter back, but his body and brain needed sleep before he negotiated the terms of her release.

With one last look at his latest failure come to fruition, he tossed the emptied pack to where Torrez’s body was laid to rest under the flow of the river and walked back toward the rental car. There was nothing on her that had given him any clues to what he suspected they might be doing to his girl, not that he had expected Aguiyi to allow his offsite people to take their work home with them. Still, no miraculous insight or resource had sprung up, not even this close to the compound. Desperation had led him into recklessness. His dragging steps along the concrete stopped.

“Reckless…” he muttered, turning the word over slowly along his tongue as it stirred something in his mind.

They knew him. They would be expecting the risk-mitigating strategist and calculating negotiator they’d known him to be in his service to their cause. They’d stacked the deck, sweetened the pot with his girl to welcome him back into the fold, expecting him to come rushing back in the ensuing bet for his loyalty. They knew he would be a desperate man, but they didn’t know him well enough to guess what desperation might drive a father to do. They wouldn’t be betting on recklessness.

He kept walking, shaking his head at his own delirium if he thought he would live through any sort of recklessness. He was no longer a cocksure young man with no thought beyond obtaining the first victory in front of him. No, he was 42 with knees that creaked at the end of the day and enough experience to know when the hand dealt to him was a losing one.

Or maybe he had forgotten how to handle the free fall of risking such dangerous unknowns.

He ran a hand through his graying hair, carrying away a film of oil between his fingers from the days gone without stopping to bathe, and turned back to face the direction of the river. The only things
separating them were some bulletproof walls and roughly three to four hundred war-hardened killers. He’d been looking at this all wrong, trying to play the board set before him when he should have been focusing on changing the game. There were still hours to go before nightfall, hours to gather the necessary supplies and assemble them into the devices he would need to increase his chances of surviving this. The madness of the plan germinating from the foundation of this recklessness generated a manic energy that pulled him through his exhaustion and he had to hold back from running towards the car, needing to conserve what he can despite the thrill of the hunt begging him to chase.

The muscles in Simone’s neck began to ache as the painkillers waned, making the mere act of holding her head up a strenuous task, but her mind began to finally clear. Sitting across from Aguiyi, a wide coffee table stacked with thick files on top of pen-marked maps between them, she didn’t try to hide her baleful glare as he sipped his tea and waited for Vidar to return with Anders. Her wristwatch ticked in time with the ornate grandfather clock’s tock, both counting the seconds that dripped by in a silence broken only by the clink of the teacup being placed in its saucer until he spoke.

“I warned you not to run.”

Ticktock. Ticktock.

It’s bait. She took it anyway, seething out in a spiteful whisper, “Can’t help myself against the will of ‘divine fate’.”

“You weren’t supposed to be the one to lead us through the fire. Who told you about the basis of our ethics and morality?”

She shrugged, her trapezius muscles protesting the movement. “Just know how to read a room. Seemed to fit the theme of things.”

“I’m aware of your sensitivity to people’s emotions. That was not empathetic intuition. Who spoke those words to you?”

She leaned slowly back in the tufted dark leather sofa, forcing her features into a thin smirk as she countered, “Who am I to even try to comprehend what gave my voice those words to speak?”

“Did someone here speak of the path in your presence?”

“Not enough English in these halls for me to know it if they did.”

“Speaking of the path in the presence of the uninitiated is strictly forbidden. It would behoove you to identify who it was.”

“Why would I tell you anything?”

“I have ways of finding out, but those ways are quite unpleasant. It would be efficient to begin interrogating those who spent the most time in your presence.”

Her head swam with how quickly she sat up, her lip curled in a snarl as she hissed, “Leave Bisi the fuck alone! Nobody started spouting this culty bullshit until you used my pain as propaganda, just like you used my father!”
He did not rise to her anger, driving hers up as he retained that infuriating calm. “You’re so protective of others, yet you never seem to protect yourself. I don’t approve of what they did to you, not today and not any of the times before, but you do nothing to protect yourself from them. You let them do this to you. You let them murder you, child. You can’t keep running away from yourself.”

“Shut up!” she growled through her teeth, fingernails digging into leather.

“You’re not a monster, Simone Liliuokalani Valstad. There’s nothing in you for you to be so afraid of.”

The ticking of the clocks pounded in her brain, the pain at each throb thickening her blood and making her mouth water in the rising urge to vomit from how hot her hatred burned. Still, his quiet voice reached past the noise and wriggled infuriatingly in her squirming mind.

“I can help you, if you would only let me. I can help your family overcome the pain that’s steered everything so wrong. Don’t you want things to be as they should instead of as they are? Haven’t they hurt each other enough? Haven’t you been hurt enough?”

The tightness in her chest crushed inward, constricting itself until she thought her lung might have collapsed again, but she was able to snap, “Stop it!”

Hot, rough-skinned hands grabbed her by her upper arms and she was hauled up before she could struggle through the pain to resist. There was something wrong with her. The pain was too much, blinding her, leaving her shaking and weak. She couldn’t even speak to yell as he forced her to walk, half carrying her as she stumbled in his hold. The sour stench of the darkroom waited just on the other side of the nothingness that crept into the corners of her flickering consciousness.

“You love them. You’re always going to love them no matter what vile things they do to you, but they have shut their hearts to each other. They’re only going to destroy each other, and one of them has already proven that second chances aren’t afforded to every Valstad. Henrik was slain by his own brother in this pointless war between them.”

No.

That was impossible. This was a lie to weaken her resolve, trick her into believing this web of lies he tried to spin around them.

The floor beneath her feet changed from hardwood to sterile gray linoleum, the air turned cold enough to make her bones ache and her breath huffed out in blooms of steam, and she tried to shake this delusion away before she got sucked into whatever hallucination this was as Aguiyi steadied her to stand on her own. She wavered, almost collapsing under the demand of the throbbing in her head as he banged around, sliding metal on metal.

His hands were gentle, but his touch burned as he held her by her shoulders and said, “See what will become of your family if this is allowed to continue.”

Focused on the singular goal of ending this torture, her neck muscles barely functioned through the strain of lifting her heavy head as she blinked the stars from her vision. A body was laid out in a long metal drawer before her, a cleaner and newer version of the one Bjørn had been laid in to rest. The skin was an unnatural white, bloodless to the point that the musculature beneath where that alabaster skin was peeled back seemed pale, and she followed the long line of the incision from the pubic bone to the fork of the Y at the sternum. She stopped when she saw the end of a blond beard.

“N-No… Not…” she stammered, teeth chattering in both the freezing cold and the chill of horror.
“Look at him and see the coming end of your family. This madness can be stopped. You don’t have to lose anyone else,” Aguiyi spoke close enough to her ear that she could feel his smokey breath brush down her neck, but he sounded far away. “The violence within your uncles took Henrik from you and the violence that follows your father took your child from you, but here, we can save what we have left and create new life. You can welcome your future children into a world that accepts them and a family that will raise them in love and harmony. There’s nothing left for you out there, nowhere in the world you can escape from being hunted for who you are, not for any of you now. Stay true to the path, and we will walk together towards a brighter future. Will you walk with me, child? … Simone? Simone?”

Darkness swept over her mind and submerged her back into that nothingness before she could scream.
Chapter 85

Chapter Notes

This is a short update to prove I'm not dead or shying away from this project. I apologize for the delay; I had a run of family troubles, but I'm getting back into the swing of things and am more or less ready to write again. As a reminder, you can check for status and extra nonsense on https://dissonancedance.tumblr.com/

The halls were empty. The whirring and pounding of machinery and the shrill echo of screams were as absent as the gnarled men that had always watched them with an unpleasant gleam in their glassy stares, but Anders stuck close to his brother regardless. Even when empty and quiet, a heavy foreboding seeped from the building itself, pressing against his skin with a wordless malice that gave his gut-churning fear a much-unneeded edge. The cozy confines of Dr. Aguiyi’s office offered no refuge from the sense of exposure and vulnerability stitched into his skin, either. The ornate rugs and heavy wooden furniture reminded him too much of his father’s house and his mind chewed on the grime that particular horror brought with it.

Vidar’s long fingers intertwining with his own tugged him away from the past and eased a long breath out of him he didn’t know he’d been holding. Anders could no longer trust his own mind, but if he had learned anything through all this, it was to trust his brother. The price collected from them was the same, but the older man still had something left over that he didn’t, some piece he twisted to fit this Hell they found themselves in. Fighting him, fighting this place, fighting himself was just too much; Anders had no choice but to trust his brother.

The conversation between Vidar and Dr. Aguiyi was slow with the gravity of the subject, slow enough for Anders to follow, and he nodded along until it was easier to just fix his stare ahead and wait. Words weaved through the spice of tobacco smoke and aromatics he could not name, masking the stale reek of blood and rot that permeated these walls and these men. There was nothing for him to discuss or negotiate; his brother would navigate the admonishment with the ease of tact that had always come naturally to him and whatever came of this was simply what would be.

“… clear to all of us that, though you may have been guided by fate, you are yet in need of guidance,” Dr. Aguiyi’s raspy voice rumbled through the fog coating his awareness. Anders’ eyes flicked to where those big, knobby hands were folded between his knees, his gaze snagging on the calluses thick as crocodile scales. “Now, I am not one to judge how you love your beloved, Brother Vidar. Your passion is a gift, it was what brought you to us and it can carry you to further greatness, but passion has destroyed men who have allowed it to rule them. You wield a double-edged sword, be very aware of where it cuts.”

Delicate powder sat feather light in the crease folded in the parchment held in the hand of one of the old man’s wives. Anders had almost forgotten her presence until she stepped closer, leaning down over the low coffee table between them and her husband. Each white grain sifted into the pot slowly, puffing out a small cloud before the heat of the candle beneath the iron stirred up a cloying sweetness. His mouth watered at the same rate a trickle of fluid mixed into the pan to bubble and brown the powder into a thick amber liquid.

“I am aware,” Vidar nodded, all tightly coiled calm and well-oiled respect. “I was… overzealous in
my desire to help her shed her false ideals and lay her bare to accept our path. It will not happen again, I assure you.”

Aguiyi leaned back into the creak of antique leather, fingertips pulled in to steeple over the slight curve of his belly. “Assurance needs insurance, son. Those who have followed the path in faith have been allowed into this sanctuary, but faith alone does not clear the path for them. The circumstances of the incident are being made known to them and their faith in you and your brother is shaken by their postulations. They need more than a promise that the female Valstad is safe in your company.”

Vidar’s fingers twitched in his hold, but his voice remained steady. “Then I will atone for our transgression.”

The needle sipped up the cooked liquid, slowly filling the chamber, the glass cylinder long and thin to cool the contents quickly.

“Of course you will. All three of you owe your brethren the assurance atonement will bring them.”

“Anders and Simone are uninitiated. They are my wards; I will take full responsibility for their participation.”

Anders unbuttoned his shirt cuff eagerly as the young woman stepped toward him, but she stopped him with a tattooed hand gently pulling his collar aside. He looked up at her, her dark eyes steadily avoiding his as she brought the syringe to his neck, and he tilted in offering. The scrape of the needle wavering over his jugular brought the shadow of a memory to pass over his mind. The taste of blood and mint in his mouth, the green pool of a rug at the center of stark white tiles, Leif’s low voice rumbling something about trust. The sting and bloom of warmth chased it all away.

“By claiming them as uninitiated, you would only be subjecting them to the rules of their current rank, which in this circumstance would be death. I intend to use their pending status as a loophole to apply a more lenient consequence, but their initiation will have to be expedited for that option to remain open.”

“Anders will undergo the ceremony tonight, as soon as possible.”

“Well enough for him, but you’ve left Simone in no condition to earn her rank in combat.”

Anders perked up at hearing his niece’s name on that whispery tongue, his heart rate ticking up a bit before settling back into the sluggish pace that the drug had slowed it to. He eased further down into the comfortable couch, the leather squeaking under the slide of his body relaxing into it. If Vidar noticed his manners failing, he paid no mind to him, continuing the conversation as though he wasn’t there at all.

“It would be murder to put her into the ring against any of those men even if she were well. Surely, not all your people were forced to prove themselves by such means.”

Aguiyi nodded, conceding with a wave of his hand, “You underestimate the gifts imbued in your bloodline, but Ouroboros welcomes all who follow the path with proven faith. There are many ways to give strength to the cause and the strength she has given us today clearly marked her place among us in a way I had not predicted. Still, there is hesitance within her. I have arranged a trial to cleanse her soul for us to receive her as one of our faithful and tonight, your beloved ones will be welcomed into our new Eden.”

A metallic taste invaded Anders’ mouth and he grunted as he tried to swallow it down, an odd franticness churning at each increasingly loud pump of his heart. A tingling wave of nauseous
euphoria doused him in sweat from head to toe and brought the terrible knowledge that it wasn’t heroin rolling through his veins. He’s not able to get a word out of the panic gripping his throat before Vidar is speaking over him.

“Thank you, Doctor. To finally have my family... I don’t know how to thank you enough.”

“Your service to the path is thanks enough, son,” Dr. Aguiyi responded, the light of his warmth shining through the placid smile tucked under his beard. Anders groaned in confusion at how his fear melted and warped, the air around him pulsing until it broke with an ecstatic glee that bordered on revelry. He gripped the sides of his face and trembled in happiness when Aguiyi’s ancient stare turned to him as though noticing him there for the first time. There was a thrilling comfort in being noticed by him where there should have been terror. “Ah. It seems your ward is taking well to the serum. I’ll go ahead and prepare the flock for the ceremony, then.”

“So soon, Doctor?” Vidar asked, rising as the old man pushed himself up to stand with a grunt.

“Have faith,” was all Aguiyi said as he shuffled off with his wife, shutting the heavy door with an echoing thump and leaving them alone.

Anders’ tongue finally loosened enough for him to blurt out in a quavering stammer, “I-I don’t want to be stuck here, Vid. I don’t want to be p-part of this!”

Vidar turned from where he stood watching the door as though the doctor might return, but instead of the stormy irritation that usually pinched his features and sharpened his tone whenever Anders voiced his feelings on this cult, he nearly dove to wrap his arms around him and whisper, “Sh, shh, littlest brother, I know it’s scary, but you’ll see that this is where we belong. Nowhere else will we find the acceptance that they offer in their community. All they ask is your faith and your strength and they will welcome you with full acceptance. Do you think there is any acceptance left for us anywhere else in the world? With what we’ve done... and what we are? No. This is salvation, Anders! We have found community here! We are free to be what we really are!”

Poison sweet and thick as honey dripped from every word, dissolving his confusion as the warmth of his hold thawed the fear he clung to. He knew he should not want this, but there was no use fighting it. It was futile, yet he knew the truth.

“I can’t kill, Vid,” Anders said, meaning for it to come out as a solid stance but it dribbled from his lips like a shameful confession. He clung onto his older brother tighter, frustration fighting the drug pulling his concentration from what he knew was right.

“You were born and bred to hunt and kill, not cower and compromise. You will kill, and then you’ll know... you’ll know what we are.”

Anders hated how his blood heated and tingled with each syllable puffing against his neck, hated the twin temptation to surrender to this truth Vidar was selling him and to chase that mysterious desire curling at the edge of every shiver. “No, no, don’t say that! We’re not murderers, don’t let them tell you that! You only did what you had to do to survive!”

Cold, rough hands gently cradled his head and he had no choice but to meet his older brother’s calm stare and feel the wet warmth of his breath brush against his face as Vidar quietly whispered, “I have killed for more than that. I’ve killed to protect what we have, no matter who it was that threatened it. Anders, I... killed... Henrik.”

The dam built of the shattered debris of his clarity broke and Anders choked on a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob, the jumble of emotion too large to know. There was no scramble for
denial to shelter him from this truth; it was too loud to run from, too large to get around. The roughened pads of Vidar’s fingertips were wiping the wet off his cheeks before he realized he was weeping and he was making more of those soothing hushing sounds, but there was a ringing in his ears drowning everything out. When those fingers dragged his tears into his hair and anchored him into stillness at the roots, he didn’t fight. Vidar was all around him, his long limbs caging him and his lean torso bowed against him, but he was trapped by the savage euphoria that crushed a heavy need into him. His brother pressed their foreheads together, nuzzled their noses in a gesture that was obscenely intimate, breath hot in his slack mouth as he spoke in tones almost too low for him to hear above the receding ringing.

“You’ve survived everything that’s happened to you, you’ll survive this. You were not made for the world out there, for all the weakness they trick us into with the false comforts and false gods. You’re stronger than any of that. You’re mine.”

Anders shuddered at the growl that tore from Vidar’s throat, a growl that he felt against his mouth as it closed over his and licked the taste of zinc over his tongue. The drug twisted despair into searing pleasure, making Anders accept this, all of this hateful knowledge and affection his brother laid on him. All teeth and tongue and raw possessiveness, Vidar did not kiss, he devoured. Anders grabbed onto the collar of the older man’s shirt, but he didn’t push him away or pull him closer. His fists trembled in confusion and they remain twisted in the starched material, hopelessness eating away his will until he simply accepted this, too. Vidar didn’t need him to respond or reciprocate, happy enough to take, take, take, and Anders didn’t want to give but he wasn’t stopping him either. He was his to take, after all.

That sharp mouth moved, licking at the salt of his tears with a sigh before latching onto his neck and sucking a bruise that would mark him for all to see. Sounds shivered out of Anders, squeezed and twisted out of him in the turbulence of grief and intoxication, wrung from him by his brother’s fingers tugging at his hair. He wanted to rip his skin off, both Vidar’s and his own, when he felt his body betray him in the fattening of his cock. He’d never wanted this. He didn’t want to want this. How long ago was it that Simone had sobbed in his arms, saying the same thing? How many times had he fucked her just to prove she should want it?

The noise he made as Vidar’s hands tugged out of his hair and clawed down his torso was strangled in misery, but his hips lifted off the couch as soon as he heard the jangle of his belt coming loose. He let his head tilt back, unable to risk seeing what was happening as he panted through the torment of needing this, needing anything he could get. Killer’s hands unwrapped him like a precious gift, this murderer’s patience building a burning within him until it was relief that shook him more than disgust when his cock finally emerged from his stifling clothing. The slide of another man’s palm over the drooling head hollowed out something in him, only for that numbed space to fill with the pleasure the drug provided. He moaned, and another part of him died, surrendered to Vidar.

“I’ve done everything I could to protect you, give you the family you wanted.”

Anders groaned against the breathy cadence of Vidar’s voice and the disgusting pleasure of his hand wrapping around his shaft, the pad of his thumb pressed against the sensitive underside of the head, nail just barely grazing it. It had only been half a day since he’d last fucked, but he was pressing into the leather beneath him, trying not to wriethe against that grip.

“I had to kill him for you, for Simone. He turned on us, his own family. We couldn’t trust him! I can trust you, though. You’re so good, Anders. You’ve made some mistakes, but you’ve made the right choices. I can trust you, can’t I?”

The hand wasn’t moving. That tight grip, so perfectly positioned, stayed wrapped around his cock,
the pressure sparking enough pleasure through him to make him throb and pant, but it wasn’t moving. Shame grunted out of him at the sheer demand of his need.

“Yes,” Anders hissed, nails digging into leather, teeth bared as the word slipped between them. Anything to get this over with.

“Look at me.”

Anything but that. He shook his head like a petulant child, helpless and ashamed, cheeks burning, everything burning, and sparks danced in his vision when that hand tightened to rend a low keen from his throat. Before he could swallow what remained of his pride, his head was lifting from the back of the couch and he watched as Vidar smirked and dragged his grip up his shaft. The slide of his palm pulling at his foreskin was rough, but it was stimulation, and he grabbed the leather tighter to keep from wrapping his hands around that grip and guiding him to go faster. That long, pale hand curled over the sensitive head, gathered the spring of precum dribbling in excess, and slicked his cock with it in a slide of motion that made Anders’ toes curl.

“No more hiding from the truth, littlest brother,” Vidar smirked, dragging his grip back up too slowly, the pad of his thumb rubbing a dangerous pattern at that sensitive spot under his head. “You’ll breed our kin to purify our bloodline and thrive on the blood you’ll spill, just like our fathers before us. Our family will be strong again. We will cull the world of the weak and wicked and show those who survive the righteousness of the path.”

Anders bit the inside of his cheek to keep still against the agonizing slowness of each stroke, made it three seconds before his hips twitched up and his lungs deflated in a ragged sob at how good it felt. He couldn’t stop, not his crying or his thrusting, as he fucked the fist that twisted into each motion with a practiced ease while he crumbled into a million pieces. He hated him, himself, everything that they’d done together to bring them to this moment.

“There we go. Come on, Anders, show me what you need.”

Ugly, broken noises hissed between his teeth, but it was better than hearing that voice or the slick sounds of that hand sliding around his cock. He couldn’t risk looking away from the grotesque sight, not when he was this close to the edge, his knees shaking with each push and his muscles losing what control they had in the fever of the drugged arousal. He didn’t focus on anything except the shiny red flesh of his cock, didn’t feel anything except the pressure building from his need, but Vidar’s sharp teeth glinted in the background as he laughed. His back bowed in a tense curve off the couch, desperate to do whatever it took to end this, and his eyes squeezed shut as the first fluttering pulses of his orgasm finally came.

The sound of a pop and Vidar’s cruelly cheerful “That’s a good boy” were muffled under the strangled cry that broke out of him as a primal, rudimentary climax tore through his body. His nerves buzzed with pleasure and his mind screamed with agony as his brother milked him for more than he could give, that rough hand yanking him until it hurt. When at last the need that possessed him was sated and that hand retracted its strangling grip from his spent cock, a sense of danger shot his eyes open to see Vidar screwing a lid onto a small jar.

The older man grinned at him and, with an apologetic shrug that stung worse than Anders could have thought possible amid the suffering already within him, said, “You will survive the initiation, but just in case… This will help rebuild our family again, no matter what happens to your body. Rest briefly, littlest brother. We have much to prepare you for shortly.”
Chapter 86

Streetlights flashed yellow through the dark from the narrow window in the back of the commercial van, muddy red clouds blocking out the few stars that could be seen in the night sky as Leif watched for any familiarity in the canopy of trees and buildings overhead. He didn’t recognize anything, of course, but trained habit had him memorizing landmarks to navigate by regardless of unlikelihood he would ever find himself near this route again. Crouched low between rows of tall steel cylinders sloshing with the liquid nitrogen Francis had shipped in weekly, he readjusted his backpack over his stiff shoulders as he ran through a mental checklist and reexamined the pistol from the decade-old hideaway he had stashed years prior. The pack was heavy with the materials he needed to wreck his intended havoc, but it would be lightened soon enough.

“Shit, it’s hot in here…” one of the men, a stout tawny fellow with a full black beard, complained in German that was gruff and thick with rural roots.

“Pop open one of the cans and freeze your balls off if it bothers you so much,” came the casual reply from his partner, the Slavic tilt in his accent giving his nationality away.

“Not like I’m using them anyway,” the hick grumbled, taking a sharp turn that had a few of the lighter cylinders clinking. “I though French girls were supposed to be sluts.”

“They are. You’re just ugly.”

The hick nodded in assent and the men fell back into that companionable silence that fit easily between longtime partners. They’d gotten too comfortable, too assured in the routine of this weekly supply run to have paid enough mind to notice Leif slipping past them as they had loaded the van. It was only too easy to hitch a ride right into the inner sanctum as they passed through the checkpoints, bringing a twinge of a frown to his features as he considered this safety malfunction after working to make access to the estate airtight. Although, anyone who infiltrated these grounds were not likely to have had the same luck in surviving them, himself notwithstanding.

He slouched lower as they stopped at the first checkpoint, nearly holding his breath through the order confirmation until the driver got the all-clear to proceed into the compound. The van rocked and bounced over the ancient cobblestones, kicking up a chorus of clanking metal all around him and drowning out the inane chatter of his chauffeurs. The cabin went dark as the heavy gates of the outer compound closed them off from the streetlights. He stroked his thumb along the smooth metal of the silencer attached to his pistol, the matte black finish now warm in his palm as he slowly disengaged the safety to stifle any telltale sounds that might filter through the clamor. As ordinary as these men could seem in their crassness, they were still field operatives, the disciplined and dedicated soldiers of Francis Aguiyi’s Ouroboros Army. Rank aside, they were all just tools, subjected to the same doctrine to give their lives to serve a greater machine, except Leif had at least a decade on them and a much more desperate purpose to risk his life for now.

He rolled the stiffness out of his shoulders when the view of the night sky was blocked out by concrete as the van descended into the underground loading dock. It had taken the engineers a full month to reinforce the neglected driveway and get the service elevator functional again, the necessity to conceal exactly what they were loading into the building having been less of a priority to the Marceaus than to the ambitions of Ouroboros, but its use had been nonstop since. There were always two to six men dedicated to working the dock and with fifteen rounds in his pistol, this provided a comfortable margin of error for the shots he had to make before getting to his first objective. Fortunately, the route from the loading dock was closer to the generator room than to the main building but doubling back was still going to be a challenge even if he managed to cut the power.
Nothing worth having ever came easy.

The breaks whined as the van eased into a stop under the wan fluorescent lighting, the rumbling engine echoing off the walls until the vehicle pulled into its place in the row of six other vans just like it. Papier Paradis scrawled in block script on the sides, the green lettering sanded to give the impression of time-worn fading, mundane and unremarkable. With the sound of the idling engine to mask his movements, he rose from his crouch.

“I would never allow that shit anywhere near my mouth,” the Slav emphatically declared.

Leif lifted the end of the silencer into the space between the headrest and the seat.

“I am just saying, if it is cooked right, there is nothing to worry about!” the hick insisted.

The bullet shot out with a dull crack through the silencer rather than a ringing bang, the sound of the gunshot still especially loud in this small space, though it did make the recoil as soft as a kitten. The Slav fell forward never knowing what had killed him, but the hick’s trained reaction to find the threat beat out the shock of seeing his partner’s face project a spray of gore into the windshield. The man met his executioner’s eye before taking a bullet through his, splattering Leif’s chest with the blood that sneezed out of the hole it punched through.

“Two,” Leif muttered under his breath as he grabbed his pack.

He pushed the hick’s body out before following after, hopping over the heap and using the line of vans as cover as he made for the service elevator. Through the windows of the vehicles, he saw two men making their way over, nothing in their unhurried steps and relaxed gaits giving the impression that they’d thought anything of the suppressed gunfire. Loud and sudden noises were part of the job down there anyway, more likely to have been the cargo unsettled during the drive or the aggravated slamming of the van doors. Leif took a quick sweep of the room once they passed and, not seeing any obvious observers, stepped out from his cover. On wide, silent steps, he rushed in behind them and took aim. One in the chest sent them each to the floor in a hurry before they could notice the body crumpled next to the idling van. As he drew in closer, he recognized the one still moving through the agony that twisted his features and wrenched wet-choked screams from his gaping mouth. Leif quieted him with a second bullet through his cranium before the noise drew attention.

“Five,” Leif muttered, pivoting on his heel and jogging back toward the elevator.

The bodies were fine in the open; the next shift wasn’t due to switch for another three hours and the video feed would hopefully be cut before the surveillance room would think to check for anything amiss down there. Of course, that could have just been his impatience justifying this sloppiness, but he was on the elevator before he allowed the luxury of a second thought to slip in. Too late to amend now. Luck had gotten him this far, but ten bullets loaded and thirty more in the magazines in his pockets weren’t much for whatever awaited him between here and the generator room. He slung his backpack off his shoulder and traded out the pistol for the modified P90, preparing to shift his tactics from stealth to assault with a flick of the dial to its fully automatic setting.

As the hydraulics hissed to a stop, he flattened himself along the side wall and waited, listening as the doors opened to the unusual presence of silence on the first floor. The service hall was empty, the cacophony of noise that typically echoed throughout the structure completely absent. Caution had him glance around corners, rifle aligned with his line of sight in readiness to shred down whoever came into it, and impatience had him move too quickly from point to point. The lack of any other motion in these halls was not in his favor, making it more likely that whoever was monitoring the cameras would be drawn to him.
The generator room door was open, the heavy metal door propped open with a bucket of sand, and Leif moved cautiously into the crowded space. A clattering sound rang sharply above the humming machines, drawing his attention to the figure hunched over a dense arrangement of cables spilling out of the backup generator. A thin string of steam drifted up from where this person was soldering alloy onto a printed circuit board, their focus so entirely consumed in their task that they did not even cry out when he pulled their head back and dragged his knife through their throat. Once his victim’s bucking and kicking calmed as their severed arteries gave a final sputtering trickle, he left them hunched over their work as he’d found them and appropriated their toolbox for his next task.

While this had so far been closer to his field of expertise, it was not the infiltration he had prepared for. It was going too smoothly. There were few occasions that could leave the mansion staffed by a skeleton crew this sparse, and as he wrenched open a steel panel on the main generator, the probability that this was a trap seemed almost obvious. If it was, he was caught, but this did not deter him. His daughter was the guiding star at the center of his universe, the one point to which all his paths led, and he could not move forward without her. They were tethered to each other by the chains of their DNA and the bonds of family; more inescapable than any prison, more permanent than the constant flow of time could erode.

He pulled the night vision monocular from his pack and fitted it before powering down the main generator, enclosing himself in a darkness that was complete but for what the lens painted in silver through his left eye.

The scents of pine needles, woodsmoke, cooked meat, and the myriad of fungi, moss, and soil that made up the ground of a coniferous forest gently pulled Simone out of unconsciousness. Light filtered in, the bright point in her field of vision gaining color and clarity until she found herself staring into a campfire. The crackling of the flame eating away at the charred kindling reminded her of something important, something just outside of her memory, but as she stared into the dancing flow of light, she could not recall. She could not recall anything at all.

“I will be returning to Africa in a few days.”

The warm, gentle voice drew her gaze to the side to find Bjørn sitting next to her, his sun-damaged skin and flaxen beard almost seeming to glow with the black of night behind him. He glanced at her, the silver of his irises meeting her own briefly before he looked away and huffed out a breath of a chuckle.

“Do not give me such a look. I will not be gone forever this time,” he said, the wan smile deepening the creases at his eyes fading as he softly added, “But someday soon, I will not be able to return to you.”

An uncomfortable mix of dread and sorrow tied a thick knot in her chest at this, though she wasn’t sure why. Thought escaped her, her own mind unable to hold anything for more than a fleeting moment with his words ringing so loud and clear above all else. All she could do was watch the subtle play of emotions shift over his features, her focus drawn to every detail as though imprinting his image on her memory forever. He would not look at her, his stare fixing forward to a place she could not see.

After a long pause filled with the chorus of crickets and the crackling fire, Bjørn drew in a breath and held it before saying, “Personal identity lies rooted in your idea of yourself, an idea constructed of memories, obligations, values, culture… but it is only an idea. Memories are often inconsistent with
reality, obligations shift according to a hierarchy of necessity, values are always adjusting, and culture changes over time and events. If this idea that you may have of who you are is based on a constant state of flux, then your identity cannot be a constant entity. Who we are in one moment ceases to exist in the next. When my next moment fails to come, do not mourn me. All that matters of me will continue after my death in you.”

The dirt and pine needles scraped under the rough-hewn fabric of his hunting gear as he shifted to turn to her. His hand was cold when he grasped her wrist, the contact and mad gleam in his eyes so strangely reassuring.

“You must never forget what you are,” he said, jaw tight with solemnity. “Always keep that knowledge with you, always pass that onto the next. What once was must cease to be to make room for what must come, but do not allow this link in the chain of change to break. No matter who you will become, no matter who will carry on after you cease, it will never change what we are.”

A thought came through the fog encasing her mind and it leaked out of her mouth in a voice that was not hers, “It will continue with or without my influence. What we are will always guide who we are.”

“Do not allow your children to go through life blindly guided by what they do not understand!” Bjørn scolded sharply, his grip tightening on her wrist. Shame washed over what confusion trickled through her arrested thoughts and she bowed her head under the weight of it. He sighed, releasing her, and continued with his previous calm, “Do not do as your father has done to your brothers. You will see how our gifts can spoil into curses if left untamed. Promise me that you will do right by our legacy, Leif.”

A loud splashing sound startled her into a gasp and she blinked to find the fire gone, replaced by darkness peering between the rusted mesh of chicken wire just inches from her face. Her heart pounding in alarm and confusion, she felt water drag at her limbs when she tried to move and looked down to find herself on her back, halfway submerged. She kicked, the fearful impulse unexpectedly unimpeded as her heels fell deeper to find that the wire mesh under her back dipped down beneath her thighs, and she jerked her legs up to press against the wires above her. The forest, Bjørn, and the fog crowding her mind were all torn away from her, and as she gasped raggedly through her bewilderment, she remembered the long Y incision up a cold pale torso and the end of a dark blond beard.

“Henrik…” she rasped, her throat closing in a hitch of a sob that curled her body as far as it could bend in this cramped space.

Tears fell hot down her chilled face as she pressed her forehead against the metal, the shivering sob that grief twisted out of her ending with a chatter of her teeth. Her fingers slipped through the small spaces of the mesh, pushing against it with no sign of give, not even a rattle. Panic crested over her bewilderment, crashing down over her when she realized this was a cage.

“No. No!” she whispered, her breathing too short and too rapid, punched out of her with each powerful thud of her heart thrashing against her ribcage. “Let me out!”

She thrashed with it, beating against the walls of the cage, her screams reduced to choked grunts. Pain seized her movement, a sharp burn shooting through her head and crackling down her spine as the world tilted and swam around her. She had to calm down, think, get control before panic swallowed her whole. Whatever had happened and whatever soon awaited her had to not matter in the presence of the present. If she succumbed to unreality now, stuck in a cage in six inches of frigid water showing early signs of hypothermia, she might not have a reality to go back to. Gripping the
wires above her, she focused on breathing as calmly as she could through the shivering and shut her eyes to the world for a moment to find an island of peace to cling to inside her mind.

The reflection of the fire dancing in Bjørn’s eyes, the reassurance that everything was as it should be so long as he was near, the overwhelming comfort of his protection. These were not her feelings; these memories did not belong to her. They belonged to Leif. She’d only ever felt them through him as a vague sense of fondness; one of the few genuine emotional responses she’d felt from her father for as far back as she could recall. This Bjørn of her dreams was as unreal as the ghost of Bjørn that had followed her, only a figment of an overactive and diseased imagination that constructed a person and a memory from what clues she’d gleaned from Leif, but she felt him inside her with a lucidity that was impossible. The real Bjørn was at least partially responsible for creating the suffering that now sought to capture their family and he was locked away in a drawer decades ago for it. This dream of him, his innocence and warmth, was not real, but she could feel what her father felt for the man and that was enough to slow her breathing and calm her heart.

When she opened her eyes, it was to the glazed death that clouded his ghost’s gaze staring back at her through the gaps in the metal. The stench of the darkroom, the sour milk sallowness of early decomposition, the sunken skeletal remains stood over her watching, waiting. Somewhere, the watch was ticking.

“You’re not a part of this world anymore,” she said, ragged and hoarse from trying to scream. Anger flickered some heat alive in her, just a candle in the cold, but she sought it and let it give her strength. “What once was must cease to be to make room for what must come. There’s no place for you here. Go.”

Soft as a sigh, Bjørn’s ghost vanished, and she saw the glimmer of dim light catch on a key suspended on a chain where he had stood. That flicker of anger expanded in her. This was one of the games Aguiyi had hinted at, one of the trials she was expected to overcome. It made her sick with the want to bury him in the ashes of this cursed place.

“Shit-eating scum fuck…” she muttered, ignoring the churning ache in her muscles as she gripped the roof of the cage and tested the depth beneath her legs.

As she had thought and had feared, her feet descended deep into what felt like a tunnel big enough for her to slip down into. There was no other way out of the cage but down into the water, if that was even a way out at all. Before she could let fear well up in her again, she took as deep a breath as her healing lung could hold and slid down to test how far it went. She pushed down along the cage, forcing her descent into the blind depths as she searched for any wide gaps by touch. She made it down a few feet when she heard a loud scrape directly above her. A heavy dread slammed into her when she reached up and felt something blocking her way back. There wasn’t time to think, the urgency for survival moving her to claw at the walls desperately, pushing her down through the only path left. Lower and lower, with the pressure of the water pressing pain into her head, her chest began to burn for breath. It was too soon for that; she wasn’t going to last much longer.

The wires cut into her fingers as she grabbed and pulled frantically, climbing down quicker as her feet searched for the end to this drop. That hot center of that aching need to breathe the crushed inward as the burn spread outward to infect her muscles with a heaviness that warned death. The tips of her toes brushed metal below her and she didn’t hesitate to think before crawling into the even narrower space it led. There was no choice but to keep going. Touch was all she had to guide her as she pushed through, her sense of direction thrown off in the panic and near weightlessness in the water, but she had to believe her climbing was taking her out of this. Darkness of a different quality began to creep at the edges of her vision and her muscles clenched on the verge of convulsing. The temptation to open her mouth and let the water fill the need in her lungs trickled madness into her
desperation. She could still feel the rope around her neck even now. Death would not spare her twice in one day.

Water broke to air and she gulped it in greedily, heaving and shaking to get her fill until she could care about the sharp stab that met each blessed breath. She pushed and dragged her heavy body out of the water, a jagged edge from the wire tearing her sopping gown and scratching a line down her torso, but she didn’t care. A queer, despairing sound that wasn’t quite a sob or a laugh coughed out of her as she lay on her back on the concrete. She was alive and, for the first time in a long time, acutely glad for it.

Once the shaking wore off enough to allow her some control of her body, she pushed herself up to stagger toward the key. The chain pulled on something from above when she yanked it and she jerked out of its way, stifling a shudder when a knife clattered to the ground where she had just stood. The blade was long, seven inches of metal coated in a non-reflective black, with a cruel curve at the tip and a groove down the side. There was no separating the weapon from the key; she needed to bring both with her to go on. She held the knife tight and low at her side as she followed the pathway into a deeper darkness, the chain wrapped securely around her wrist like a shackle.

The underground cavern was empty, the line of corded lamps hanging from hooks drilled into the stone above them casting a harsh light over the circle where Vidar had sacrificed that boy to earn his place. Anders sat in the center, hugging his knees and muttering beneath his breath as they waited for the men to arrive and the ceremony to commence. Somewhere in the shadows that the light did not reach, the skittering of animals echoed through the silence, setting Vidar even more on edge as he waited for his brother to stop sulking.

His fingers threaded through the sweat-dampened roots of Anders’ hair, the heel of his palm pressing into his little brother’s clammy forehead to hold his head up as he ground out, “Get up.”

Anders’ reddened eyes darted anywhere but his face, not latching onto anything long enough to see, his mouth twitching as erratically as the rest of him until he stammered out, “C-c-can’t. Can’t do this. Won’t.”

“You either do this and live,” Vidar said, yanking his hand away to let Anders’ head fall forward onto his knees in the tight crouch he sat in, “or you don’t and die.”

“Don’t want to live,” the younger man mumbled. His arms wrapped around his head as though the ceiling might fall on him at any moment and stayed curled in that defensive ball, muffling his voice to near incoherency. “I can’t live like this… like a thing for anyone to keep… even if it’s what I deserve, what I tried to do to… It’s the only way to stop it all. We have to end… to make it all stop.”

Disgust curled Vidar’s lip into a sneer. He’d seen Anders laid low and broken many times before, seen all the ugly ways grief could turn in on itself in a spiral of raging self-destruction, and though it disgusted him, he had been there to pick up his little brother’s pieces each time he fell apart. Seeing him curled up and cowering on the floor, Vidar began to regret his sympathy. Anders was weak because he had allowed him that weakness, and now those irresponsible whims of kindness might kill the man he had tried so hard to protect.

“Get up,” he frowned. Anders didn’t move, just kept curled on the floor, his clothes smeared with fine white ash and dust. Vidar grabbed him by his shirt and hauled him up, shaking his limp and listless body as he growled, “Do you think it was easy? Do you think I wanted this? I had no choice!
Neither of us do! You don’t get to opt out whenever life gets hard!”

Anders jerked away from him, drawing his hands up to cover his fear-stricken face as he muttered, “There’s a choice. I made so many wrong choices. I should have to live with them, but I… can’t. I can’t. I’m not even human enough to regret any of it, I’ll just keep... It all needs to be stopped.”

Hatred coiled Vidar’s hands into fists, but before he could step up to knock some sense into his brother, the echoing of several voices and footsteps heralded the entry of the flock. The urge to escape the approaching crowd as they began to surround the ring nearly overwhelmed his resolve. He could not run. He could not fear. Anders didn’t even seem to see the expanding wall of men forming around the outside of the circle carved into the worn stone floor, his haunted stare aimed at nothing a thousand yards away and his ears deaf to the clamor of their excited chatter. As the men kept pouring in to fill this arena, there was something different in the air, a sobriety that was absent in the raucous celebration that these events had held for the few Vidar had been called to attend. It did not bode well with him.

He grabbed his brother by his shoulders and forced him to meet his eye before demanding, “Don’t leave me alone, Anders. Promise you won’t leave me here. Swear it!”

Anders’ mouth twitched in an attempt to smile and, failing that, he responded, “I promise.”

A saxophone, of all instruments, bleated out a brief melody that cut through the crowd and resounded buoyantly through the gaping cavern. The crowd silenced and parted for their leader as he stepped through the offered path into the ring, a knife gleaming in each of his outstretched hands and a wide grin gleaming beneath his beard.

“We are gathered here tonight for one of two souls to join our path and for all who wish to engage in the pleasure and purity of sport!” he announced, the ragged roar of his baritone echoing proudly to usher a roaring cheer from his followers. The tension that had been knotting Vidar’s muscles eased at this, loosing a sigh from deep in his chest. The sooner this began, the sooner this could all be over. They just had to make it through this and they would be together again, together in the way they should be. “As I am sure we are all eager, let us not waste another moment to welcome our new brother in victory! Bring forth the hopeful!”

A stirring rippled through the crowd, bodies shifting until a freckled young man was shoved into the ring. He shuffled to stand, favoring one foot, and Vidar was glad to see that he was wounded in more ways than that. It would be no contest at all between this boy and the athletic strength still present in his brother. He looked to Anders with a reassuring smile, which the younger man passively avoided as he watched his opponent limp closer. Dr. Aguiyi handed them each a short knife, regarding them both with the same benevolent grin before clapping a hand on Vidar’s shoulder and guiding him from the ring. His feet were heavy, dragging across the stone as he left Anders standing alone to face fate.

Joining the dense bodies to which he had paid and earned allegiance through the same deadly game, Vidar wondered if he should pray, and then to what he should pray. There was no God or Jesus in this place, no scriptures, no hymns, but the presence of faith was abundant and raw among them. It was life itself they revered and death they paid penance to. Existence was their ethos, and the mysticism beyond that was still frighteningly mysterious to him, so he did not pray, only waited for what would come. He wasn’t sure when he had stopped seeing their elusive sense of faith from the outside, or if he had truly felt it within himself now, but there was no denying how present it was around him. There was something here that was not out there, something soaked into the ground and floating in the air, and he was now part of it even if it was not yet part of him. Yet. All else that the doctor had preached to him had come to be, bringing an inevitability to his words that Vidar had
come to believe. That, he supposed, was also a form of faith.

Dr. Aguiyi announced the commencement with a signal to the musician at his side, the saxophonist chirping and crooning out a heated melody as the unnamed opponent rushed at Anders in a limping stagger. At last, the crowd exploded with that savage energy more suited to this arena, the calls for blood shouted out in wordless tongues as Vidar stood frozen in horror. Time seemed to slow, the demanding shouts and erratic music blending and warping as the realization that Anders was not going to respond to the boy rushing at him with a knife became a certainty. The bright, brassy crescendo of song arched with the swinging thrust of the blade cutting through his younger brother’s face. Red flashed in Vidar’s vision before everything went black.

The lights had cut out. The cheering turned to a confused clutter of noise. Time shocked itself back to normal.

“Technical difficulties!” Aguiyi shouted, quieting the din. “The generators are undergoing maintenance, everything is fine! Belmonte, Veracruz, go check on the engineers!”

Everything is fine. The men around him began to disperse from their tight formation and Vidar couldn’t hear the approach of footsteps amid so many shuffling of feet, didn’t react quickly enough to being grabbed amid so much movement around him, didn’t know what was happening amid the darkness until he felt the blade slide between his ribs.
Whatever local anesthetic they’d administered to Simone had begun to wear off as her adrenalin receded, a fact she noticed with increasing dread of pain to come as she traced the row of stitches holding the cut below her navel shut. Before her self-surgery had been interrupted, the brief delving of her fingers touching the smooth musculature beneath the skin had told her she had failed to penetrate her abdominal wall with that first incision, but the burning pressure from within now had her second guessing that supposition. The skin around the incision was hot, tender, and inflamed compared to the stitched wounds on the front of her chest from the gunshot and at the side of her ribcage where they’d inserted the chest tube. Not good. A strong likelihood of infection, especially after laying in that pool of stagnant water for however long. That was, if she survived long enough for infection to really take hold.

She pulled her fingers out of the long rip shredded down her gown and trudged onward through the labyrinth, her left hand braced on the stone wall to keep from walking in aimless circles. Only the sound of water far behind her revealed that she’d accomplished any distance in this web of twisting tunnels. Otherwise, she wasn’t sure how long she’d been walking or if there was even the possibility of an end other than the one hypothermia might claim of her if the chill that clung to her wet clothes worsened. Her teeth clacked together in a rattle with each breath and every minor muscle in her body shook while the larger ones dragged in exhaustion. These were good things. If the shivering stopped, that would spell a lot more trouble than the annoyance of occasionally making her bite down on the cavity she’d been trying to ignore for a year.

A delirious chuckle huffed out of her at the thought of such a minor problem drifting back into the forefront of her mind. Not too long ago, that sore tooth had been the worst of her physical problems. She’d never so much as broken a bone before, but now each step carried the worry of her intestines herniating her abdominal wall, hypothermia pulling her into its lethal lull, or re-collapsing the lung that had been grazed by a bullet just a week ago. Even through all this, her tooth had the audacity to ache.

More annoying than that, it reminded her that there was the matter of living past simply surviving. She wondered, as she often did when the thought had crept past her guard, if there was even anything left of her to live with. Everyone else seemed to have a future for her in mind, but that was a choice that had been taken from her long before any of this had happened. She was the next Valstad before she was even born, the next to carry on the traditions that nurtured the curse in their biology.

“Bullshit…” she muttered, the cuss clipped by her shivering teeth.

Biology didn’t have her wandering through a maze like a half-drowned lab rat. Everything had, as her mother might put it, gone to shit. She was back to just trying to survive, a state the world had seemed intent on keeping her in, and she wasn’t sure if that was a bad thing anymore at this point.

But she wasn’t alone in this state.

Simone heard the shuffling steps of a limping stride before she saw the glow of a light move shadows along the jagged walls. The handle of the knife was steady in her grip, the chain attached to it wrapped around her wrist like a serpent’s tail to keep it from jangling as she moved in. Those uneven steps were coming toward her; she wouldn’t be able to sneak up on him, but his pace didn’t indicate that he knew she was there. Not yet. She was injured, but he was too. If she could get the jump on him, disarm him before he could retaliate, she might have a chance. Ducking low behind a corner, the flame of a lighter came into her view, the intense point of brightness blinding after the
unending dark and sending her leaping before fear could paralyze her. The lighter fell and darkness 
dropped over them as a shriek rang out with the collision of their bodies, the cry’s origin lost in the 
panic as she drove forward. She pushed until his bulk slammed into a wall, her knife held flush to the 
curve of his neck as she noted the dimensions and positioning of his body. He wasn’t much bigger 
than her, at least not as big as she’d grown accustomed to expecting with the men around her, and he 
was lightweight enough for her to keep pressed up against the wall when he began to struggle.

“Don’t move,” she growled out, thankful her voice didn’t waver and her teeth didn’t chatter. She 
pressed the knife closer and was rewarded with a broken whimper from him, a sound that 
emboldened her to keep her voice steady. “How long have you been down here? Are you armed? 
Are there others?”

The injured man choked out a startled stammer, “J-J-Jeg vet ik-k-”

“No! Engelsk! Anglais! Inglés!” Simone interrupted quickly, then swallowed the desperate edge of 
rage before asking, “English? Do you speak English?”

“Ja- ah, yes! Yes, English, yes!” he cried out. “Please, don’t hurt me! They threw me in here hours 
ago, w-with no weapons, nothing! You’re the only person I’ve seen!”

She knew that voice. Froggy and thick with fear as it was, she recognized it. The weight she held 
against the wall filled in with an image as she read his thin body like braille.

“Trygve?” she asked, disbelief hushing her to a whisper.

His panting halted, then, “Simone?”

There was no relief at this recognition for either of them, only a chilling wariness.

“I’m going to search for that lighter,” she said, slow and clear, “and if you move, I will come at you 
with this knife. I won’t be able to see where I stab you. If you move after I find the lighter, I will be 
able to see where I will stab you, and I will make it count. Do you understand?”

“Uh-huh,” he muttered. “I won’t move.”

With a deliberate slowness, she released him and backed up to where she had heard metal clatter on 
the ground. His heat and his dry clothes muddled her mind with temptation; the ugly, filthy feeling of 
his warmth clung to her skin in an aggravating appeal to seek refuge from the chill that continued to 
sap her energy. As she crouched and felt around, the sound of his breathing grated her nerves but 
confirmed that he had not snuck away from where she’d left him. It was strange to have her words 
bring any consequence that was not a punishment to her, strange that her words had the power to be 
obeyed where they had come to mean nothing but a nuisance of noise. Perhaps it wasn’t her words at 
all, but the knife that had amplified their meaning and intent. Words themselves were hollow and 
wretched, but a knife was a promise that was kept by its very purpose.

“How… How did you get here?” he asked, and when she ignored him as her free hand scraped the 
ground, he offered shakily, “They came to me when I was still in the A&E, after the break-in. Came 
as detectives, said they needed me for questioning, and they… they put a sack over my head and…”

“How… How did you get here?” she interrupted. She crawled on her knees, cold fingers fumbling 
numbly in the dark. That damn lighter must have been kicked somewhere nearby.

“No. No, I’ve been walking in circles for hours. I keep finding the start, but I can’t open the door.”

Her palm brushed over the warm metal of the lighter at last. “A door? Why can’t you open it?”
“Because they locked it after they shoved me in here,” he answered tersely.

“Can you take me there?”

“What does it matter? I can’t unlock it.”

She bit her lip in frustration, her patience eroded by exhaustion and her mind too numbed by hypothermia to navigate around tipping him off that she had a key. She tucked it snug between her palm and the knife handle, the jagged teeth biting reassuringly into her skin. “Then don’t, but at least tell me where I can find it.”

“I’m not letting you steal my lighter.”

“I don’t want to steal anything from you. Show me where that door is, and I’ll give you the lighter back.”

“It’s a waste of- Hey! Where are you going?!”

Simone didn’t bother trying to silence her steps as she started off in the direction he came from, her grip on the knife tightening as he limped after her.

“Keep your distance, asshole,” she warned.

“How can I? I can’t even see where you are!”

She reached out, grabbing the thick sleeve of his sweater, baffled and annoyed that he couldn’t place her position by the sound of her voice and her steps. He jerked out of her hold hard enough to fall backward and her annoyance boiled over at his ineptitude at functioning in darkness.

“If you’re going to be such a baby about it, then go ahead and waste the fuel,” she scowled, thrusting the lighter down at him and, realizing he possessed no ability to discern his surroundings without sight, dropped it in front of him and continued walking.

The shuffle of movement behind her gave away what stealth he’d attempted in lunging at her and she sidestepped his path to let him careen into the curve of the wall. Her free hand found his arm and twisted it behind him to slam him into the wall again before he recovered, but he was reckless and dumb on rage enough to buck her off.

“Trygve! Stop this!” she tried to yell, the sounds scraping roughly from her injured throat and coming out in barking and broken tones. She sprung away from his attempted grapple, not quite feeling the sting of his fingernails grazing her arm. This wasn’t good. She was too slow, too tired to keep this up and already doing badly. “You fucking asshole! We don’t have to do this!”

“It’s what they want!” he shrieked. “I’m going to succeed the trial! I’m going to finish the initiation!”

Her back hit the jagged stone and she rolled, feet scraping noisily on the ground, but Trygve still couldn’t track her as she moved behind him. The knife was pointed down and away from him in case he tried another tackle. He was an idiot, but he didn’t deserve to die for it and she didn’t deserve his blood on her hands for the sake of this game.

“Bullshit, Trygve! If they wanted us to fight, they would have given you a knife too, right?” she argued, backing away as he shuffled toward the general direction of her voice, which, in this narrow space, did not provide a wide enough margin of error for her comfort. “Would they have put us in this piece of shit maze if all they wanted was for us to kill each other?”
“Jeg vil vinne!” he yelled as he charged her.

Her elbow connected solidly to his face as she moved to the side of his path, hitting him hard enough to reverse his forward momentum and knock him on his back. The stench of fresh blood wafted up with the choked wheeze in his gasp as he lay on the ground and tried to catch the wind she’d knocked out of him.

“The purpose of a trial is to prove something,” she said, crouching next to him, knife pressed hard into his battered cheek. “What is there to prove by senseless murder? Yeah, you could kill me, but so could any creep on my block back home. Killing is… killing is easy. It is, even if living with that choice isn’t. If you want to prove something, prove you’re more than the means to someone else’s end. Prove you have what it takes to live.”

“Why…” he croaked, a breathless and miserable sound. “Why don’t you just do it… just kill me? That’s… That’s why they gave you a knife. They wanted you to win.”

Simone shifted on her knees, discomfort making itself once more apparent in her injuries protesting all the recent sudden movement, and she let out a weary sigh before saying, “If they set all this up to guarantee I would win, then there would be no value in that victory. Besides, I don’t need a knife to kill you.”

He gasped as she sat on his chest to pin him as she gripped his chin and slid the blade in a curve along his cheek, slicing a crude and simple spiral of a sheep horn while she continued, “And I don’t need to kill you to win. You lost, Trygve, but you do not have to be lost. You are my sheep and I am your shepherd. Your life belongs to me so long as I choose not to end it, I will guide you through this valley of darkness by my rod and my staff. If you want me to keep you alive, then you will have to keep yourself in my favor. Do you understand the situation you now find yourself in, lamb chop?”

He let out a quavering gasp as she raised her weight off his chest, but she did not remove the knife from his face until he blurted out a rushed, “Yes! I understand! I-I’ll do whatever you say!”

“That’s good. Very good. Now get the fuck up and take me to that door.”

The man’s scalp was slick with some sort of gel, making Leif have to grip onto a good chunk of hair to keep him from slipping out of his grasp as he struggled and bucked in the dishwater. Although, with a broken femur and his arms zip tied behind his back, he wouldn’t get far from Leif if he did manage to buck him off. Water splashed over the edge of the sink and soaked his clothes, the water dripping off him tinged red with the gore from the four other men that had been working by lantern light to get through the tall stacks of dishes. They must have had a feast, by the looks of it. A good one, too.

Leif waited for the man’s wriggling to become sluggish and his body to sag before hauling him out of the water and asking again, “Have you remembered where my daughter is yet?”

The man gasped and coughed loudly, greedy for oxygen, but had learned not to delay his response too long before answering between heaving breaths, “I… don’t…”

“No, no, no. Don’t tell me you don’t know,” Leif chided him warningly. “Tell me what you do know instead. I already know she’s here, so let’s go from there. Has my little girl been taken good care of?”
“I don’t kn-”
“Ah-ah! Don’t say it!”
“Sorry! Sorry! We were told not to approach her! Uh, uh, I don’t know much, but something happened and- Ah!”

A noise outside the kitchen had Leif force the man’s head back under the water and push the tip of a chef’s knife through the base of his neck to stop his jerking struggles. The wide blade wedged between the vertebrae just a few inches before bone stopped its progress, though it was enough to still him. In the rare quiet permeating the estate, he heard the faint sound of footsteps. Leif gave the blade a hard jerk to ensure paralysis had taken hold before leaving the man floating in the blood-clouded water. He left the chef’s knife embedded in the back of the paralyzed drowning man’s neck and pulled the monocular back into place as he headed into the hall, peering down toward where the clattering of shoes slapping down the marble echoed. They were coming his way in a hurry, but there was only one of them, indicating a mere run to the generator room to assess the source of this blackout, then. There was no reason for them to panic yet, but time was running short before this mundane inconvenience gathered suspicion. He headed in the direction of those footsteps to buy himself a little more time.

“Scratch.”

Leif froze mid-stride, the electric shock of failure hitting him right to the bone and squeezing caution for him to slowly turn to that voice. He had to shut the eye looking through the night vision monocular to prevent from being blinded by the flashlight that hit him, but even with that brightness obscuring the man behind it, he knew who had caught him.

“Veracruz,” he said by way of greeting, the corner of his lip tilting into an embarrassed smirk. “I wish I could say it is nice to see you again.”

Of all the men to be sent out on this simple task, it would be one of Francis’ guerrilla warfare experts. The man had probably smelled foul play the second the lights went off. Veracruz held his beloved Smith & Wesson .500 beaded on him in a steady one-handed grip; the hand cannon could blow a man’s chest open, which the gentleman had gladly demonstrated as often as he could.

“We been missing you, Old Scratch,” Veracruz said, low and quiet. The footsteps were still approaching from further down the hall. “Me, Frank, everybody. Specially your girl. She a sweet thing, got her daddy’s eyes. Real smart too. You see her speech earlier?”

“No. I just got in,” Leif said. His handgun was still strapped to his hip, mere inches from his hand, but he’d be forfeiting his life if he reached for it. He needed to stall for a distraction. “She’s not usually the speech type. I’m sorry I missed it.”

“Then you missed what happened, yeah?”

Leif loosened his posture, projecting a relaxed composure to mask how he shifted his weight in preparation to lunge for the gun if the opportunity came, and said, “Well, we don’t throw a feast for every small occasion, despite the frequency of them. What was it that prompted today’s celebration?”

“Young girl pulled a Leif Valstad when your brothers pulled a Ted Bundy on her.”

Leif’s mask slipped when his confusion gave way to a suspicion that held a rage and horror he could not touch without his mind catching on fire with it. The sound of footsteps coming up behind him fell on deaf ears.
His voice was barely a scrape across hard gravel as he muttered, “What… are you…”

The gunshot went off in a flash of lightning and clapped with the force of thunder barely five feet away from him, the echoing roar leaving a sharp ringing in his ears and rattling every bone in his body. There was no gaping hole anywhere in him when he looked down. Confusion more than relief rushed up past his shock when he followed the beam of the flashlight to the bloodied body behind him.

“… clear. Just a misfire, boss,” he heard Veracruz say when that ringing retreated. The crackle of a hand radio patched through something unintelligible and he responded with a casually beleaguered, “Yeah, we gonna need fifteen, twenty minutes to get the power back. Think you can keep the party going down there?”

Garbled static came through the line and Leif faced Veracruz with no pretense or deception in his wary glare. The scarred tactician met his eye with a determination that was unprecedented from his typical caution around him.

“Frank will have you hanging by your ankles for this,” Leif warned.

Veracruz shrugged. “Eighteen years I been with him, Doc Francis ain’t never let his men take no females as spoils of war. Said we do not sanction rape of noncombatants. It ain’t been easy keeping my boys off free pussy, ain’t what a lot of em learned in the shit, but we have ethics in Ouroboros. Always have. What I seen happen to your girl, it ain’t ethics.”

“Dr. Aguiyi is your commanding officer,” Leif argued. “Eighteen years of carrying out complex asymmetric warfare tactics, of sending scores of good men to their deaths for reasons not even fully revealed to you, and you betray your commanding officer now over a conflict of morals?”

“It ain’t the first time me and Frank had it out. You better get going down to el laberinto before your girl makes it out. Besides,” Veracruz said, tossing the gun up and catching it by the barrel before handing it to him. Leif reached for it, the grip molding comfortably to his hand, but the tactician didn’t release it as he leaned forward and continued with a wry smile, “I ain’t betraying nobody. You gonna knock me out and steal my gun.”

In the dark, Anders could almost pretend that this wasn’t happening. It was all just some terrible nightmare that had played out far too long, twisted into the worst that unreality could offer. He could close his eyes, drift into the dark, and open them anywhere else but here. The warm wet coating his fist was not blood, the wriggling weight against him was not his brother, the screaming ache in his soul was not this murder. He could not keep running from the truth, though; that’s how all of this had started, and he could not finish this by running again. He turned his face into the crook of that neck he had become so terribly familiar with and pushed the knife, feeling the resistance of flesh split around the steel and the pressure of the cries caught behind his silencing hand. Guttural anguish lodged in his brother’s throat, choking him, loud enough to alert the men around them but stifled enough not to alert them to the cause. Not yet, at least, but they would know, and they would stop this too late but, in this moment, their last moment, only the two of them existed.

“I’m sorry,” Anders spoke against his neck.

Vidar twisted and jerked, his lean strength not enough to loosen the grip locking him still. Anders pushed the blade deeper, shaking from the pain of having to do this, but his brother had left him no
choice. The world had left them no choice.

He could taste the sour edge of fear in Vidar’s sweat as he whispered into the skin below his ear, “You were right. There’s no place for us in the world. But… we don’t belong here, either. What we are, what we’ve become… shouldn’t exist.”

Vidar’s taut muscles jerked and stiffened as the blade tugged out, his convulsion ending in a violent shiver that wrung agony in Anders’ heart. Blood ran in hot rivulets between them, dripping down in a thick splatter to brand their skin by this final sin, but Vidar still struggled and fought for the life that was rapidly leaving him. This was so sudden and so long overdue, happening too fast and stretching far too long all at once.

“Let go, Vid. I’ll see you soon. I promised I wouldn’t leave you alone, right? I’ve been so cruel, letting so much, so much happen because I didn’t want to think about it. It’s all caught up to me now, though. Close your eyes, and just let it happen. Easy, easy…”

His brother’s legs gave out and his weight sagged in his hold, tugging Anders’ heart down with him with a wrenching tear. Several hands dragged them apart, reaching between them as the darkness itself seemed to shout and pull him into a sea of bodies, but it was done. There was no relief or solace in the finality of what he had done, no forgiveness or release, only an end, nothing more. Grief welled an ocean within him, drowning him in all the undeniable evil they had come to be and to commit, and in a way, it was not his brother he had killed. Vidar had been eaten away from the inside by this madness, consumed bit by bit until there was only the shell of him left, and the only way to preserve that little bit was to destroy it along with the infection. It was simply too late for either of them.

Anders let the arms of this darkness drag him, putting up no resistance to the punishment that awaited in their hold, and felt a wave of heat bloom above his sweat-dampened hair. He opened his eyes to see the reflection of fire behind him burning in Vidar’s eyes and illuminating his wet face in the yellow glow. This was no ghost standing before the burning maw of Hell. Anders’ bewilderment burst under the terrible knowledge of his failure to bring his brother the mercy of an end, that knowledge confirmed in the burning pain striking through his neck. The knife he had left buried in Vidar’s back was in the man’s hand and he sawed it through the flesh under Anders’ chin, the undulating motion of the handle just within Anders’ field of vision as those many hands held his head still. The scream that pain pushed out of him was reduced to a wet gurgle, the feeling of his own breath redirected through the slit carved through his throat so strange, but he didn’t struggle. He’d failed to do the one truly good, truly merciful act left to either of them, and it once again fell on his older brother to lead him through. As a heavy shadow began to weigh over him, he wished he could have been helpful just once to anyone.
The door out of the labyrinth was rough and decayed with rust, the lock needing an aggravating amount of convincing to take the key, but Simone ignored Trygve’s nervous fidgeting and wriggled the knob until it turned with a reluctant scrape. Relief lasted only the span her sigh before the weight of the door pressed a fearful anticipation of what could be waiting behind it. There was nothing she could do but move forward no matter where that took her, and as the door squealed on its rusted hinges, forward took her into further darkness.

“Lamb chop, bring the light in there,” she whispered, watching for anything to drift out of the shadows from the doorway. Her voice, hoarse and quiet as the pain in her throat dictated, didn’t echo the same as it had in the vast rocky tunnels of the maze.

“You go in first.”

Simone suppressed the urge to grab Trygve by his narrow shoulders and throw him into the room, only finding the will to resist through the doubt that she had the energy to accomplish it. She compromised by grabbing his sleeve and nearly dragging him alongside her over the threshold. The meager glow from the lighter molded shadows into shapes, the bright reflection of the flame dancing off the stainless steel instruments laid out neatly on a rolling stand next to the mobile operating table. She sucked in a gasp at the grisly array of medical tools and equipment, memories of Maier’s torture cabin flooding her mind with vivid terror and vibrant pain at the sight of the syringes all lined up in a neat row next to the forceps and surgical blades. A sick, hot hatred boiled up out of that fear with the phantom pains and humiliation of being bound and invaded, of being strung up and whipped, of being probed and pierced until the jagged edges of her humanity cut the monster in her loose.

Somewhere in the distance, an annoying voice hissed, “Someone’s coming! Get down!”

The shadows closed over them at the snap of the lighter cap and she was forced to her knees, her weakened legs folding under her easily. The palm of her hand pressed over the sharp ache at her forehead and she spat out a startled cuss as it peaked abruptly, the agony drowning out her other senses until she couldn’t see or hear beyond that pain. The cabin’s concrete floor was cold under her knees as Vidar’s heel pressed into her back, the phantoms of the past as solid as the knife she clung to for any grip on reality, but she’d escaped.

“Didn’t I?” she muttered, needing to hear something other than the sound of her blood roaring in her head.

A blow to her side sent her rolling onto her back, knocking the wind out of her and lighting up her injuries in a blaring chorus that dissolved the phantoms inside her mind. She’d escaped so many times, but she was still trapped within a larger prison. Her hand had been clutching the knife for so long, it had become part of her, soldered to her grip more often than a paintbrush or pencil had been for months, and she swung out in a wide arch before she could suck in the breath she’d lost. The drag of the knife meeting and cleaving through flesh prompted a shriek from the shadows and a splatter of blood falling on stone.

Trygve’s startled cry leaked past her pain and panic, pushing her to rush towards the fearful sound. A pair of strong arms grabbed her around her middle as the first man bled and bellowed on the floor next to her, the stench of antiseptic and hospital summoning Henrik’s phantom before he vanished at the memory of his body lying cold and pale on the autopsy table. Sorrow, thick and heavy as tar, crushed her along with the clumsy bear hold squeezing pain from her lungs. She stabbed at the man’s arm and he released her with a scream that she chased with rapid swipes. The blade grazed him as he
stumbled backward, and she lunged at the sound of his shuffling steps, striking out at the pitch black until she crashed into the rolling tray and fell with it in the loud clatter of surgical tools. She braced the fall on her right arm and a yelp tore out of her damaged throat at the burst of pain radiating from her chest at the impact, the mangled musculature from the gunshot wound nowhere near healed enough to take the weight.

Hands grabbing her by the back of her gown tore the material until she was dangling from the snare of ragged fabric. The sound of ripping cloth injected the same rabid panic that had gotten her caught and pressed between Vidar’s body and the steps of the ladder, conjuring the phantom of his long fingers hooking around the waistband of her shorts when he tore them down her spread and bound legs. The past blended hellishly into this present nightmare, painting demons out of darkness that clawed at her stitches and wriggled through her pounding pulse. Her arms were twisted and locked behind her before she could maneuver out of the tangle of damp fabric, the stretch pulling at the gunshot wound with an agony that forced a howl from her.

Moist, hot breath brushed down her neck as a gruff voice barked out above her, “Drop it!”

She didn’t know how many there were, only that there were too many and she was going to die in the dark with these phantoms chasing her. Her wrist twitched to give up the knife, but she couldn’t surrender, not after fighting for so long. Rage clawed up out of her fear and she jerked hard, pushing through the strain on her stitches to headbutt her attacker. The back of her skull knocked hard into his mouth and nose, stunning him enough for her to twist onto her side and free her arm. The knife plunged deep under his sternum to spill a hot cascade of blood on her as she kicked out from under him. When she pushed herself up to stumble away, his wet groan trailed off into a gurgling rattle and the only sounds that were left were her own panting and Trygve’s snuffling sobs.

There was no regret or relief at having killed again, no black pit of sickness raging hell within her damned soul or wringing a scornful satisfaction at having survived the impossible odds, just a grim acknowledgment that it was done. Only the thought that it had become too easy to kill brought the shame she needed, but it wasn’t enough to fool her into humanity. No amount of shame or horror at what she’d become could change her back, and she found that she no longer wanted to. The human was weak, but the monster survived.

“The light,” she croaked, nearly choking on the words. She coughed out the tension in her throat, moving to stretch her sore neck muscles before remembering the world of hurt that brought.

“H-Hva?” Trygve stuttered from a far corner.

Aggravation sizzled at the ragged ends of her nerves and bled into her tone. “We need to keep going. Walk with me or be left behind, it’s your choice.”

Seconds ticked by with only more of that frantic sniveling from him as she stood trying to will her heart rate back down without crumpling under the exhaustion that waited for her at the end of this fight or flight response. The shuffle of movement, then the scrape of the flint in the lighter illuminated the far corner where that terrified white boy stood holding the dancing flame against the darkness enveloping them. As she approached him, stepping over the body of the man she had freshly murdered, she watched as his features paled to a grayer shade and stopped to search for the source of his alarm. When turned back to ask him what was wrong after finding no obvious sign of danger, the question withered and died at the realization that his fear was directed at her. Her kaftan had been ripped to shreds to hang off her shoulders like an open robe, her body was bared to him with all the blood, bruises, bites, and stitches on display.

The notion of even trying to hide her grisly wounds came only to leave bitterness in her mouth. It was all too appropriate that her appearance matched the thing that was inside: a mutilated and blood-
soaked monster, torn by the violence of her world. Her neck and wrists were marked by the chains that had held her as much as her mind bore the chains of the humanity she had shed, but she still was not free of it, not from any of it. She’d never been free, and she never would be so long as she was bound to the sins of her fathers before her.

She turned with an indignant snort, hoping her simmering irritation gave her the grace not to limp as she trudged towards the next door and sneered, “Get going, lamb chop.”

His startled swiftness to move in close beside her, but not too close, tipped her off that it wasn’t the ghastly sight of her wounds or the blood that had him so skittish. He was behaving as though the threat was still with them because it was walking right next to him. She flexed the fingers gripped tight around the knife, the blood and sweat slick between them, and tested the weight of that thought. For so long, she’d been powerless, forced to fit in the spaces made by the men who wanted to reshape her, but this monster was hers. All the work of putting the pieces Leif had made of her mind back together into something jagged and sharp, all the strength she’d trained into her body throughout the loneliness and monotony of Henrik’s prison, all the discipline she’d learned from enduring what Vidar took from her, all the truth that Anders’ betrayals and lies had shown her; the monster rose from the ashes of the destruction they’d wracked. She would find a way to thank them someday.

“Who’s there?”

Leif crouched behind a corner, hiding from the beam of the flashlight that bounced with each step the Ouroboros member took toward where he had tapped his knife on the wall to lure him. Francis was being conservative with sending out men to patrol the estate while Veracruz oversaw the repair of the generators, but Leif knew it wouldn’t be long before that twenty minutes Veracruz had bought him would run out. Of course, that was only if Frank didn’t get antsy and try to radio the unconscious Veracruz ahead of schedule. The toe of a boot came into view and Leif rounded the corner, catching the guard’s rifle and pinning him against the wall with the blade blocking off the man’s startled shout before his breath made it past his vocal chords. The flashlight was smashed between them, illuminating the guard’s shocked face from below as Leif sawed across his neck with jerking movements.

Leif knew him by his surname, Kozachic, and remembered personally assigning him as part of the emergency guard team. He was an experienced veteran, not one to hesitate pulling the trigger, but he had recognized Leif and his loyalty had bought him a knife through his arteries. Regret, a rare and annoying notion, itched at the back of Leif’s mind. All that effort, the excruciating screening for potential recruits and the curated conditioning process to mold each of them into perfect tools for Ouroboros, was wasted in thirteen seconds in an expanding puddle at his feet. Leif waited for the stillness of death to glaze over Kozachic’s wide eyes before easing the body quietly to the floor and turning off the flashlight.

The stairwell that led to the labyrinth was not far, but even without the surveillance system to consider, a direct route would be an ostentatious risk. In the rare quiet that filled this sprawling mansion with a gaping absence, Leif heard the echo of a horn wailing up the pipes, the brassy baritone honking out the edges of a melody too faint to name. The party, it seemed, had taken assembly down below in the catacombs, most likely awaiting his daughter’s emergence from the labyrinth to commence the second wave of the day’s revelry. The timing tipped off his suspicion again, all of it too deliberate to be coincidence. Faith and fate were fatuous concepts, but he could not
deny the faith that fate had instilled in him after carrying him through impossible odds by impractical means to his daughter before. The thread of fate had stitched them together too surely for the mere risk of death to sever, and for all the great Dr. Francis Aguiyi’s militant bluster, he knew the man wouldn’t kill off a Valstad for either the sake of a trial or the punishment for desertion. Frank had wanted to bring out the demon in their blood and he’d succeeded, now he would reap the consequences of that dark summoning.

Leif found the electronic lock on Aguiyi’s lab still operating on the backup battery built inside it, working exactly as intended in the event of a blackout, but the old man had neglected to change the entry code. He ducked through the door just as the beam of another flashlight blinked further down the hall…

“Welcome back, Mr. Valstad.”

… and found himself in the company of a room staffed with four white coats hunched over their work. The hum of the liquid nitrogen circulating through the equipment competed with the gentle rumble of a small generator, providing power to the digital microscopes and refrigerators housing a variety of unstable chemicals and experiments he could only guess at. Leif waved at the scientist who greeted him and walked through the room to his destination: the chute of the defunct dumbwaiter system from when this room was once the mansion’s kitchen sometime before the turn of the century. There was no point in breaking their apparent impression that he’d returned to Ouroboros; by the time any of them found out otherwise, he would be gone again. As he wriggled a pry bar into the rusted door of the dumbwaiter, the same scientist approached him with a chafing air of curiosity.

“Can I be of any assistance, sir?” he asked. The teeth of the pry bar finally wedged past the edge of the door and gave with a loud screech, providing Leif with the satisfaction of seeing the lab rat cringe. “Perhaps a lubricant would be of use?”

The door opened further with another hard pull and a hellish squeal, attracting the bothered stares of the other scientists.

“Don’t mind me, I’m just checking for opportunities to improve security. Please, continue with your work,” Leif smiled as he anchored the hook to the edge of the chute and tested the cable at the harness strapped around his haunches. The chute was a lot smaller than he remembered from the last time he’d attempted this roughly 25 years ago and the safety harness was uncomfortable as tactical gear often was, but using the stairs was out of the question. As he swung his legs into the opening and sat on the edge, he looked back at their bewildered stares and asked, “What exactly is so urgent that it has gathered you all here at this time of evening? I can’t have Frank burning out our brightest minds over his pet projects.”

This time, a young woman who bore a striking resemblance to the unfortunate Dr. Torrez spoke up, “Pardon me, sir, we weren’t given clearance to divulge that information to anyone outside the project.”

Leif’s polite mask ticked into an intrigued smirk. “That’s the second time I’ve been told that today. It’s awfully hard to maintain command when I’m not aware of all there is to command in my own regime. Unless I am not in a position to command here?”

The young scientist fell into a stiff silence, leaving the first man to tensely respond, “You are, sir.”

Leif clapped his hands together with a boisterous enthusiasm that made the quartet flinch. “Well, then by all means, entertain my authority! Let’s have a status report, if you would be so kind. Anyone?”

A short, older woman spoke from the far corner of the room with a quick Indian cadence, “We have
twelve blastocysts that have hatched out of zona pellucida, two of which have so far passed screening without chromosomal abnormalities and are clear for implantation, sir.”

“Well, well, Frank didn’t tell me we were running a fertility clinic,” he said, drumming his fingers on the sides of the dumbwaiter. There really wasn’t time for this, but fate had led Dr. Torrez to her watery grave just to bring him the seeds of suspicion and fate had led him to this room to find out what might sprout. “What might the donors’ names be?”

“Geeta,” the first scientist warned her in a low hiss, pulling Leif’s focused attention, but fortunately for him, Geeta answered without skipping a beat.

“Sperm was collected from Anders, Henrik and Vidar Valstad, ova from Simone Valstad. The sperm from Vidar was used to create this initial batch we are currently screening. The sperm from Henrik was unviable and the Anders batch is being preserved until future oocyte retrieval produces more ova… sir.”

This was not how he had expected Francis to fulfill Bjørn’s dying wish that he look after his family, although he supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised considering how fascinated the man was with the original breeding program that had honed the Valstad line. In vitro fertilization with embryo screening was something Leif had considered a possible necessity to avoid the complications that could arise from his family history of consanguinity, only to abandon the idea when Simone had proved to be a suitable and healthy heir. Having what he had once considered to be a potential key toward reproductive success now used to trespass so offensively onto his own daughter’s reproductive rights was a bitter irony he found no amusement in. He drummed his fingers on the rusted metal he was perched on, rolling this thought through the wrath the revelation stewed in him.

“I appreciate your forthcoming report, Geeta,” Leif said, allowing the tension in the room to rise toward the edge of panic as he slowly unholstered Veracruz’s Smith and Wesson .500 to check the ammo as he spoke. “I would appreciate it more if you didn’t genetically engineer my grandchildren, but I understand the pressure you may be under. I’m under quite a bit of pressure myself.”

The scientists shrieked at the thundering boom of the bullet piercing the power generator and enclosing them in a darkness that kept them screaming with a useless panic. Leif would have preferred to wreck the lab and destroy their family planning more assuredly but being short on time or an incendiary device meant he had to cut his losses and shove off down the chute. The swift descent was controlled by the cable running through the braking device at his belt; a clever little toy a client had gifted him for some architecture work he’d done in Monaco. He’d never thought he would be using it to infiltrate the Marceau estate. He’d never thought he would defect either, but life and love could not be so easily predicted or controlled.

“Get off me! Get away!” Vidar snapped, yanking away from the men that grabbed at his arms and tried to corral him onto the stretcher. “I told you, I’m fine!”

The torchlight cast a dirty orange glow that gleamed brightly off the sweat-slicked skin of his little brother. The crowd gave them a wide berth, all those eyes watching, but he didn’t care what spectacle he made of his grief as he dropped to his knees and pulled Anders’ heavy body into a protective embrace. The muscles under his left shoulder screamed in protest, forcing him to cradle his body one-armed, but he couldn’t let these vultures take Anders away. He smoothed his brother’s damp hair away from his face and kissed his forehead, just as their mother once did for them all when she’d put them to bed.
“Köhler, Braun, how fine would you say he is?” Dr. Aguiyi asked, addressing the pair of German medics who watched Vidar with patient attention.

“Bleeding is stable, elevated heart rate but other vitals are within normal range. Puncture seems to be just lateral of the scapula in the posterior axilla, estimated seven centimeters in depth,” Köhler answered.

“No subcutaneous air upon palpation surrounding the wound and no complaints of pleuritic pain,” Braun added seamlessly. “Low probability of partial pneumothorax and internal bleeding. Would require radiography for a clearer assessment with the current absence of symptoms.”

Aguiyi shrugged, relenting, “Alright, so you’re fine.”

His brother was still so warm, his unfocused eyes still just as blue and wet with tears as his. Blood drooled lazily from the corner of Anders’ slack mouth and the wide rip in his neck when Vidar adjusted him to lie across his lap and he muttered, “We need her. We need to have our girl with us.”

“Scratch is going to be just fine, don’t worry. We have a med team waiting for her when she emerges from the labyrinth and—” Aguiyi paused, caught by surprise as something occurred to him, “… Oh, um, Chacal? Could you run a couple lanterns down to the team at the labyrinth entrance? Post haste, my friend, thank you. It won’t do them much good to patch her up in the dark, haha!”

“Heart rate is tight, overfilled with rage, sorrow, and sheer loss. Why did you betray me? We could have had everything, but you… I couldn’t make you see it. I protected you, provided for you… I gave you a family, Anders! That’s what you wanted, but you threw it all away. For what? I… I don’t understand why… Why did this happen? Why?”

He startled at the hand gently grabbing his shoulder, the fragrances of black cardamom and sandalwood mingling with tobacco smoke overpowering the stench of sweat and blood to warn him against flinching from that touch.

“We need to prepare him, Vidar,” Dr. Aguiyi’s gravelly, dry voice quietly said from behind him, his proximity sending fearful shivers down Vidar’s spine as he held his breath to keep from screaming. That heavy, deeply calloused hand squeezed his shoulder in what might have been a friendly gesture. “You may stay by his side, but it must be done. You will be sent for when your sweetheart has emerged from her trial.”

The lighter had given up its last sputtering dregs of fuel shortly after the killing, and no amount of shaking or cursing from the boy could revive the little bit of flame once it had puttered out at last. Simone was too numb with exhaustion to scold him for fidgeting, but at least she no longer had to deal with the unpleasant chore of taking the light away from him. In the pitch black of these underground halls, it had been their only method of maintaining any visibility, but it had also been a beacon for whatever else wandered down there with them. Trygve had held onto that light like a security blanket, never realizing there was safety in the darkness and comfort in being unknown among the unknown. She reached behind her to where she could feel and hear his hand moving the air and wrenched the worthless device from his fingers.

“Drett! How do you do that? How do you know right where everything is?” he snapped.
“How d’you not?” she grumbled back, slurring a little more than she’d liked. She couldn’t hear him scowling, of course, but she had a clear picture of his sour expression in her mind as she took hold of his sleeve once more to guide him in the absence of his precious light. “Stairs ‘r not far.”

“You know where we are?” he asked.

The hope and wonder in his voice were a dire contrast to the dread his question churned in her. She did. Somewhere off to the left in this winding network of twisting halls and locked doors was a drawer that held the mummified corpse of a man who would not stay dead and gone from this world. He whispered in the back of her mind, his voice suspended on madness and dreams, the words always too soft to understand through the barrier between their worlds. Ghosts weren’t real, but Bjørn was a memory that didn’t belong to her, metastasizing into something just as impossible. There, in this place where he had walked a thousand times before she was born, she could hear his footsteps echo off the stones.

Her bare feet skid backwards before her mottled mind caught up with the realization that they had company, her free hand twisting Trygve’s sleeve warningly as she pulled him down to crouch with her behind the bending corner. Rubber soles beat out a swift and steady tattoo, quick with a dutiful urgency, no panic, no reason to believe they’d been spotted. Trygve shifted nervously, trying to maneuver away from her, and she allowed him to retreat down the hall. Cowardice and caution weren’t options for her, though. Light splashed along the walls as those steps drew nearer, brighter and brighter as they brought it towards her. Simone’s thighs burned with the effort of remaining crouched, the cut along her lower belly on fire with the stirrings of infection while the rest of her still shivered with cold and fatigue, but survival instincts graced her with the will not to mind any of it as her knife waited for them to come. The light was almost blinding when they came up just on the other side of the sharp bend and stopped. The person was less than a meter away, close enough that she heard every squeak of their leather boots as they shifted to turn and look around, and she held her shivering breath in the rapidly dwindling hope that they had not detected her. After the last burst of adrenaline-fueled exertion, the element of surprise was all she had left to defend herself with.

“Qui est là?”

Simone flinched hard at the teeth-rattling boom answered the man’s question. Red splatter hit the wall and floor, the wet sound lost in the ringing of her ears but the thump of his body colliding with the floor vibrated under the soles of her bare feet. He fell right in front of her, and she wasn’t sure whether the shiver that ran through her was due to the site of his head missing above his jaw or to the realization that he had been much closer than she’d anticipated. Now that she knew someone with a gun and an eagerness to use it was waiting around the corner, she didn’t have the mental real estate to care about another dead cultist. Her grip on the knife twisted as she swallowed repeatedly to test her hearing and listen for movement, only catching a muffled click in her throat through the persistent ringing. The light he’d been carrying was snuffed out with a click of a switch a moment afterward; his killer was close. In the false distance that acute tinnitus placed every noise beyond that whining ring, she heard the scrape of a shoe, the jingle of metal, and then nothing. Nothing for so long, seconds oozing past in small eternities as she prayed for her hearing to show her the world that this blind darkness denied. A bizarre giggle threatened to cough up from her aching chest. She was a sitting duck who brought a knife to a gunfight, and she would shortly be a very dead duck.

A rattle of something metal set off her last frayed nerve and she leapt out from her crouch, determined to at least go down on the offensive if this was to be her last act. Almost as immediately as she sprung from the wall with her blade leading the charge, she was thrown back onto it, the knife clattering to the floor as her wrist was twisted in an iron grip. With her body quivering with weakness and pain, her will to even struggle faded into failure. She wasn’t able to save her family. She wasn’t even able to save herself. Those strong hands loosened and slid away from where they
had pinned her to the wall, smoothing her wild hair away from her face and cupping her cheeks. The tenderness seeping through the touch confused her as she waited for the boom of the bullet only to be shocked by a different sound that pierced her just the same.

“What have they done to you, Simone?” her father’s whisper echoed through the dark.
Chapter 89

All the technology crammed into the stout tube nestled against Leif’s eye socket gathered his daughter’s image in ghostly grays, digitally combining the thermal and night vision feeds to reveal her features in striking detail. The last time he’d seen her, she was injured, covered in blood, weak and shaking from the physical trauma dealt to her body, and it seemed that she had stayed frozen in that dire state from the moment he’d left her then to the moment he found her now. The sight of her, though fraught with grief and terror, brought a flood of relief that drowned out his senses as he pushed her to the wall. Her panic was brief as her weakness folded over her will to fight with a sorrowful surrender to her struggle, becoming so docile under his hands. He cupped her cheeks, felt her skin clammy and hot with fever, her jaw quivering with each shallow breath, and saw how more deeply than flesh these wounds had harmed her. The temptation of surrender yielded the expectation of certain death, yet she waited for her end with an acceptance that twisted a painful revulsion in him. His daughter was waiting to die.

His thumbs swept a caress up the curve of her cheekbones, the instinctive call to soothe and protect his child twisting that knot tighter within his chest and wringing out a whispered, “What have they done to you, Simone?”

Her veil of waiting fell to leave only its memory seared in his mind as she came back from that ledge with unseeing eyes searching the darkness for what stood right in front of her.

“Papa, you… How…” she rasped, voice catching in her throat before she swallowed it down with a wince.

He took the night vision device off and joined her in the blind dark as he hushed her with a kiss. Her mouth was hot, startled open by the sudden press of his lips as he stifled her gasp into a muffled groan. A reactive need to reassure himself that she was alive fed urgency to his kiss and had him pulling her into an embrace before he could recall her recently collapsed lung. His need fell to grip her hips instead, thumbs resting on the ridges of her pelvic bones and fingers squeezing the feminine softness as he guided her closer. She burned like coal under his tongue and he tasted blood, but she was here, she was alive, and she leaned into him so sweetly. He folded her into a careful embrace, holding her body together while she trembled against him like she might shatter at any moment. Her fingers carded through his beard and rested at his cheeks to feel what she could not see and she whimpered a cracked and mournful lamentation, her relief and grief calling to his as he swallowed her sob. The urge to simply hold her until his heart stopped aching was tempting, but not here and not yet.

Slow in his reluctance, he broke the kiss and pressed their foreheads together in apologetic affection as he said, “We don’t have much time, darling, if we’ve time at all. Can you walk?”

“Not well,” she answered, her voice quiet and hoarse, dredging up lighthearted memories of the bronchitis she’d contracted during her first New York winter and how losing her voice had made her so adorably sullen. Hearing the strain it took for her to speak now was not so adorable.

He pushed down the dark stirrings of wrath that began to cloud his focus and said, “Then I will help you, but I need full use of my arm, so I’m going to have to put you in a fireman’s carry.”

“But…” she started to argue before he knelt and folded her at her hips to drape her torso over his shoulders.

Years of gymnastics practice had her body immediately cooperative with being manipulated into
position and with her weight distributed evenly on him as she held on, he rose and moved with no impedance to his motion. He readjusted the strap of the monocular as he continued in a swift pace down the corridor towards the labyrinth, listening to her hitching breaths and feeling her body tense on him with each step.

“If this puts too much strain on your injuries—” he started to say, stopping when he heard movement echo ahead. Veracruz’s revolver was raised to kill before he even thought to draw it, every nerve on edge with his daughter’s life resting both literally and figuratively upon his shoulders, but only a rat scurried along the edge of the wall before vanishing under a loose stone.

As he pressed on, she asked, “Where?”

“‘Where’ what, Simone?”

“We going?”

“At the end of the labyrinth, there is a cistern containing a duct that leads to a well outside. We’ll be able to escape once we’re beyond these walls,” he answered, keeping a low tone as he listened and watched for anyone other than them and Chacal’s corpse occupying these halls.

“What?”

“A cistern is a receptacle for storing water. The mansion’s cistern hasn’t been used since the introduction of a municipal water system, but it was never demolished.” He shrugged to resettle her weight when she pressed his backpack into the brand the bounty hunters had seared into his skin during their interrogation, regretting the maneuver when she flinched in pain. “My apologies. Where are you hurt?”

She sucked in a hissing breath, holding it before rasping, “No, I- I know what a cistern is, I just… We can’t leave.”

“Don’t lose hope. I know this place seems impenetrable, but there are centuries’ worth of forgotten construction we may be able to take advantage of.”

“No!”

Her choked cry bounced loudly off the stone walls and nearly made him stop as he gripped the pistol tighter and scolded in hushed and tight tones, “Simone Lili‘uokalani! Do you want to alert the entire estate to our exact location? Please, darling, we can speak once we’ve made it to safety.”

“But-”

“Darling,” he warned.

She fell quiet with a sigh, but her frustration did not leave her as she clung to him and twisted his shirt in her fists. He regretted having to silence her, needing the sound of her voice no matter how ragged and weak to ground his constant worry for her, and turned his head to kiss her thigh in apology. He would have to make do with the comfort of having her so near. The twisting halls of the catacombs, a maze in itself, eventually yielded the foyer to the labyrinth. He opened the door, stepping out of view from the doorway to listen for anyone inside to react, and when that was met with silence and the heavy reek of blood from the room, he peered inside. No one was standing around waiting to ambush them, but as he moved through the room now crowded with equipment that seemed to designate this space as a makeshift infirmary, the puddle he stepped into drew his single-seeing gaze down. Three bodies, their heat signatures still warm, laid strewn in wide pools of blood. Someone had come through here beforehand to clear the path for his daughter. It wasn’t like
Frank to cheat a trial, even for someone as high value and high risk as Simone, which left only the possibility that a third party had seen fit to ensure her survival. Unless she wasn’t the only initiate undergoing the labyrinth.

“Darling, did you encounter anyone down here?” he asked as he stepped over the corpses, holding the pistol ready as he nudged them with his foot.

At first, she didn’t seem to have heard him, and as he was about to inform her that she could speak, her weak voice drifted through the quiet dark, “You’re just going to abandon everything.”

This time, her voice did stop him. “What was that, darling?”

“You made all this,” she said, trying to speak above a whisper, managing to accomplish that with half the syllables. “These people… gave their lives for you. For what you’ve made with Bjørn’s legacy. And your brothers… You showed them their gifts, but you weren’t around to guide them through what they didn’t understand… you let it spoil into a curse. I couldn’t do it by myself, couldn’t make them see themselves and now… And now Henrik is dead...”

Leif stroked the back of her thigh to calm her as her trembling worsened, her breath huffing rapid and shallow down his shoulder as he collected his bewilderment at this strangeness and said, “I cannot abandon what is not mine. I owe no fealty and have sworn no oath to anyone or anything but you, darling girl. If you’re afraid that I will leave-”

“You don’t always get to choose what belongs to you,” she interrupted stiffly. “Whether you choose it or it just happens to you, it’s yours, and you have to do right by what’s yours.”

This was new. Somewhere along the torment his brothers had subjected her to and the violence his world had instilled in her, his little girl had sprouted her own ideology. He readjusted her weight more securely across his back and continued through the room, saying, “As intriguing as this rationale may be, my dear, we don’t have time for a debate on the extent of personal responsibility in the context of a chaotic world.”

The rotted wooden door to the labyrinth was swollen from decades of exposure to the moisture that drifted out from the cistern and needed a stiff pull to finally creak open, the sharp noise echoing through the yawning tunnels.

Vidar’s breath puffed out in twin streams of white steam from his nostrils, the walk-in freezer at the back of the infirmary still holding cold in the power outage. He stood waiting, expecting even in knowing not to expect breath to puff out from his little brother’s slackened mouth as he lay so strangely still on the steel table. The skin around Anders’ closed eyes was dark and sunken, his pallor was stark pale, and his bones seemed to jut more than even in the worst of his depression-induced dehydration and starvation binges. Vidar had nursed him time and time again back to a state of health closer to what it had been before their lives had been changed, but Anders had never been that robust ball of irritating optimism since the morning Leif had drugged him into raping their niece. The horrors that had happened in their father’s house had taken something from them all and given them madness in return. Vidar had seen the change, knew the inevitability of it and embraced it in ways his brothers could not, and now he was the only one left to live with it. Survival was the only true morality allowed to him in this Hell.

“I tried,” he said, combing Anders’ hair with his fingers to more resemble how he’d usually worn it.
“I did everything I could to save you, but you didn’t want it.”

He bent, careful not to stretch or strain the wound under his shoulder blade as he kissed his brother’s cold forehead in farewell. He shut the insulated door behind him with a firm push of his hip to spare his shoulder as Köhler rose from a stool and gestured for him to sit.

“We must address that puncture appropriately, Mr. Valstad,” Köhler said in a clearer German than the strange murmuring way he spoke with Braun.

Vidar had never seen the medic apart from his constant companion and seeing him alone now made him realize that he’d rarely seen any member that was not accompanied by at least another, their ongoing narrative of collaboration bordering on the edge of a collective mind in how they all worked together as pieces of a whole. To them, Ouroboros was a machine that ran according to the world Bjørn had envisioned over two decades ago, a vision that still lived so long after his death in Francis Aguiyi, and they were part of this machine before they were anything else. As he disrobed for this medic’s inspection, he wondered when he had started losing himself in the machine.

Halfway through getting the wound packed, blood and saline solution running freely down his back to splatter to the floor as he gripped his thighs in pain, the radio at Köhler’s belt chirped and the medic tugged off his gloves before answering it. Braun’s voice came through the line, his German incomprehensible even without the detriment of static, but Vidar understood enough of what was said to settle a cold dread in his gut. Leif was there, and he was in the labyrinth with Simone.

As Vidar stood and wrestled on his pants, he ignored the medic’s harsh demands that he calm himself and said, “I need a gun.”

The past was once something Simone had thought of as safe in how immutable it was. The past was inert in that it was gone and certain, something conquered, dead, and left behind in pursuit of the future. When her once bright and boundless future had shrunk as her mind had slipped away from her control, the past began to bear new agency in her life. Regrets had calcified into the milestones that marked her dilapidating memory and each day locked inside her parents’ loss of trust had blurred present and future into monotony until time was no longer something linear and passive. The past was not vanquished or unchangeable, the past was vengeful and hungry, growing and expanding every slippery moment into an overwhelming force. As her father took her back to the water she had started, his wide gait eating through the winding labyrinth with a strength of certainty she had never possessed, a bitter defeat welled in her. As swift and sure as his step was, they could not escape their past by outrunning it within a loop; they had to contend with what followed eventually or be overtaken by it.

She counted the ticks on Bjørn’s watch, seeing the gears twitch in her mind where the little timepiece had made a home more permanent that her wrist, as she shined Leif’s flashlight on the water and waited for him. 118 seconds had passed by the time he resurfaced, breaching the water with a gasp that echoed off the ancient lime plaster waterproofing this room.

“It’s a bit of a swim, but there’s a ledge above the water level along the way where we can let you rest,” he grinned.

The wooziness that had become a constant visitor in her body was at least partially due to a low oxygen level in her blood, whether that had been from widespread bruising in her lung or some other neglected disease. She wasn’t sure if there was a minute’s worth of diving in her, and the fear that
kicked up her racing heart rate as she considered going under that clouded, frigid, stale water again wasn’t helping.

“Papa…” she started, her uncertainty closing her already sore throat around the word as he pulled himself out of the water.

“Just a little further,” he assured her. His arms were freezing as they wrapped around her shoulders to pull her into a hug and his soaked beard tickled her neck when he nuzzled his mouth into the less injured side of her neck. “I’m sorry I kept you waiting, Simone. I won’t… I can’t be apart from you again.”

Her argument died under the weight of his love, his need for her calling to her constant loneliness for him, thick and heavy enough to crush whatever doubts reality could conjure. She shut her eyes to the cloying truth and wrapped her good arm around him as tight as she could. Whatever might happen, they would be together for it.

His face lifted abruptly from her neck and she felt a stiff tension ripple through his powerful body as he whispered, “Someone’s here. Three, no, more men than that. Come, we must leave now.”

There was no time to protest as he pulled them into the water, the cold swallowing her with a swiftness she could only prepare for with a shallow gulp of air before he had pulled her under. Whatever little kicks she could expel were a futile effort as he dragged her with wide, sweeping strokes of his long limbs to the bottom of the cistern. The terror she had expected with each tick of the absent wristwatch was held off by her father’s arm looped securely around her middle, even as part of her reacted to the water with all the fatal threat it had proven itself capable. She should have been panicking, but the things she should do did not often apply in the same ways when Leif was involved.

However, the possibility of recollapsing her lung was just as real and present in this pressure as it would be without him, that likelihood making itself known in the burn pressing high and deep in her rib cage before the need for oxygen ignited its own pain in her chest. Simone jerked against her father’s hold as something in her torso spasmed, tugging a painful snap at that burning. Instinct had her go as still as she could manage with him pulling her through the water, her muscles going limp in the caution they heeded to the wound this pressure may have dealt as her mind went through a flowchart of possible injuries. The cramping, crushing sensation could have been anything from strain to cardiac arrest, but the message this pain brought was the same either way: the weight of the water was going to kill her. Her nails raked at the arm dragging her, Leif’s tolerance made frustratingly apparent in how he did not so much as tense in reaction, his movement through the cistern uninterrupted by her squirming and clawing.

Red and white flashed behind her eyes as that pain warned her again, yanking harder at the viscera that held her organs in place, images of animals being cut open and field dressed by a hunter’s ruthless hands flashing along with it. She did not know about hunting, though, didn’t know the resistance of flesh cleaved by the gut hook dragged up the abdomen, didn’t know the slick warmth nearly up to her elbows as she cut away the diaphragm and trachea to loosen the chest organs, but she did. The water swirled around her, all sense of up or down lost as her father dragged her through this pain until they broke the surface and reflex sucked in a breath that was stopped short with a stab. Her fatigued muscles unable to press against the weight of exhaustion, he pulled her from the water into his lap, the solid stillness of his hold as he whispered to her more comforting than it had any right to be against the dread her body ached with.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you, you’re alright,” he whispered, his breath hot as it brushed over her forehead, the kisses he peppered on her face searing her like a brand.
“We out?” she wheezed.

“No, no, we’ve quite a way to go. We’re above the waterline, though, so less swimming.”

She squashed down the useless urge to weep, blinking away the tears rapidly before asking, “Is it… Can we rest just a bit?”

The pregnant pause before his reply birthed an anxiety that went deeper than worry. “You can rest for a moment while I scout our path ahead. Here…” The sound of the zipper on his pack was loud, the space they’d crawled into must have been small. The light that burst color and dimension onto her surroundings with a click confirmed it as he wrapped her numb hands around the flashlight and smiled down at her a little too reassuringly to be convincing. “Two minutes, Simone.”

That dread twisted into something more familiar: the fear of being alone.

She reached up and grabbed the dappled dark gray of his shirt, trying not to let the pain of speaking show as she whispered, “Wait, I… I missed you, Papa. So much has happened, I didn’t think… I would see you again. Please, just…”

The steel behind his eyes softened and he put his hand over hers, intertwining their fingers as he leaned down and nuzzled her cheek. The scrape and tickle of his beard eased a surprising comfort through her.

“You’re seeing me now, though,” he murmured, low and soft, that deep, rich voice carrying fonder memories of such simpler times. He pulled back, that reassuring smile morphed into something more genuine and less forced as he gently traced his fingers over the thick bands of bruises circled around her neck. “What do you see, Simone?”

She looked at him, seeing the tactical gear and holsters strapped over the dark camo he wore, something more fitting to a soldier than a man who had spent his days hunched over a drafting table until recently. Except that neither of those were what he was. She blinked, shifting her perception from seeing to observing, finding that the blurry half-focus that had always shielded her father from her intuition was clearer now than it had been. She looked at him in the thin white light that bounced off the stones from the flashlight, seeing how dark the circles under his eyes were, how deeply furrowed the lines in his brow had become, and how strained his muscles were beneath the shrink wrap of his wet shirt. Her father was as exhausted by all of this as she was.

She forced a smile and said, “You look like Tom Cruise in the last Mission Impossible.”

He smirked, following her lighthearted lead. “Like a spy?”

“No. Old and tired.”

He huffed out a laugh that she tried to join, managing a grin before pursing her lips against the stinging urge to weep.

“Please don’t go,” she meant to plead, the words dribbling out in a pathetic murmur as he leaned down and stopped her begging with a kiss.

“I love you, Simone,” he whispered against her lips before kissing her again, deeper, sweeter, and she knew there was no stopping him.

The pain in her body, the bittersweet taste of this kiss, the rushed passion in it was all too similar to the moment that she’d lied bleeding in the grass as he left her. She’d lost him and their baby too that day; she couldn’t lose him again so soon. He laid her gently on the algae-slick stone of this polyp of
a sanctuary and slid back into the water, leaving her with the flashlight and the sound of his sloshing steps vanishing down the short and narrow tunnel. If she had ever learned to pray, she would pray for their future, but no gods could seem to hear her no matter how desperately she’d begged before. There, alone and wounded with her recently restarted heart still remembering how to beat, she clutched the flashlight and listened for her father’s return as she counted the phantom ticks of a dead man’s missing watch. At 963 seconds, she heard him coming back, his waist dragging slower through the water. She knew something was wrong before she saw the weight of defeat in his solemn expression.

“What?” she asked, too tired to wait for his tact to dictate the delivery of whatever bad news he carried.

Most people she knew would mutter a little, maybe find themselves unable to look at those they believed to have failed as they spoke of their defeat, but her father did not hesitate or demure as he answered, “We must go back. The way to the well has caved in some time ago.”

He didn’t need to remind her of what waited for them back there at the reservoir of the cistern. She felt no need to tell him that escape was impossible no matter how far they made it from this place. The past was never patient, never waiting; it was and would always be with them, inescapable.
“Let me in,” Vidar repeated, a snarl curling his lip back to reveal the full length of a sharp incisor. His last ragged thread of patience strained under the stimulants boiling his brain and the day’s never-ending parade of tragedy and rage, making him heavily consider the 9mm tucked under his waistband at his back.

“Can’t be doin’ that, Brother Scratch,” the man said with a shake of his head. He readjusted the tranquilizer gun in his hold, never turning or even looking away from the heavy wooden door Vidar needed to pass to even get to the labyrinth. “I got orders, ‘n orders said ain’t nobody else goin’ in ‘til Ol’ Scratch come out.”

Vidar’s jaw clenched. Arguing with this human wall was going nowhere and every second Leif roamed in this place drew the walls around Vidar closer, threatening to crush him in the threat that madman posed to his life and everything he’d sacrificed to salvage it. Dr. Aguiyi could not protect him from that madman or the mad devotion of his congregation; he had to end Leif’s reign before it took hold again.

“You have friends in there, hunting him down in that darkness?” Vidar asked, switching tactics as soon as this was confirmed by the nervous shift in the guard’s posture. “If your friends are cowards, they will stay out of his way and maybe even live, but your friends are not cowards, are they? No, they have their orders. ‘Welcome him home’, right? From what I hear, Leif seems to have only one response to that welcome, but I can talk to him. He’s my brother; he will hear me and you might not have to lose any more friends tonight.”

The guard shifted again, his muscled weight slowly moving from boot to boot as he nodded, agreeing with whatever thoughts went through his scarred and shaved head before saying in the clear tone of careful recitation, “We live by the mission, we die by the mission, for we are the mission.”

Vidar’s last thread of patience snapped at the words Dr. Aguiyi had preached being mindlessly and wholeheartedly shoved in his way. He gripped the cold, solid handle at his back and raised the gun to the base of the guard’s skull as he calmly responded, “Then die.”

Pink and red chunks splattered the rotted wood of the door with a bang. He registered the feeling of wet spraying up his arm and the side of his face as the guard crumpled to the floor, knees crashing to the stones before the heavy body followed. Beyond the nuisance of the task, there was nothing, no emotional or psychological reaction to having murdered this man who he had spoken to and seen before amid the population of the estate. Vidar stepped over the corpse, careful not to get his shoes filthy in the chunks of brain matter and bone as he pushed open the door and walked into a lantern-lit room furnished with medical equipment and three bodies piled in the corner.

A very surprised Braun, dressed in crisp white scrubs, popped up from behind the examination table with a rapid, “Don’t shoot! My orders are only to attend her wounds, so no need to kill me!”

“He had a choice,” Vidar sneered, weaving past the surgical lights, vital sign monitors and display screens, all quiet and dark without a power source.

The next door needed a hard shove, the loud squeal of the rusted hinges echoing through the network of tunnels on the other side. Just when he set one foot into the labyrinth, the radio at Braun’s belt crackled to life and Dr. Aguiyi’s guttural whisper seeped through the speaker.

“Is that how you’re going to win, Vid?”
The nickname only his brothers could get away with burned his mind with a brand of fear from that mass murderer’s tongue. He had no brothers left to call him that name now, though. The lantern light behind him cast his shadow on the curved wall of the labyrinth snaking out before him, his hollow shape watching him from the carved stone, waiting while the radio hissed and crackled on dead air. The low rumble of a hundred murmuring voices echoed up from the depths of this maze, blending and reverberating into an incoherent mass. No. He could not beat Leif at his own game, no matter how his heart howled for a bloody and immediate vengeance. He stepped backward into the light, shutting the door on that watchful shadow, and placed the handgun on a tray amid a gleaming line of surgical blades and forceps as he walked back towards the catacombs. He could not waste his wrath on a folly of pride. He would welcome Leif home as the Doctor had ordered.

“Papa, we should…”
“Ssh… Rest now, darling.”

Rest. Just a little rest before the water crushes her chest and movement makes the rip along her belly burn and stretch, before they return to the prison the past had made for them. The fever was boiling her brain and the cold had bitten through to her bones, but her father’s warmth was steady and safe as he cradled her close in his lap, holding her up to ease the ache that rattled at the edge of every breath. Their fingers, still stained with the blood of the deaths they both had wrought to find each other, stayed intertwined in her lap as the relief of sleep began to finally enfold her. The acrid stench of the darkroom mingled over the staleness of the cistern water, jolting her awake. She could not rest yet. She swallowed, her parched and bruised throat resisting each syllable she pushed past the reluctance to pierce their bubble of peace as she gave voice to what should have been said long ago.

“None of this has happened by accident.”

Leif’s face was close enough for her to see his utter lack of concern through the blurriness that fogged her vision, his dismissal of her admission confirmed by his softly spoken, “Don’t listen to those whispers, Simone. It was by no one’s will that the well had collapsed.”

“No,” she croaked. Frustration scraped through her abused throat, the words coming too hot to justify how quietly they passed through her bitten lips. “You don’t understand. Maier, back in Vermont, he told me… The network, Marceau, the FBI… It was all to bring us together here.”

“Ssh, ssh, darling girl, I know Mr. Marceau had exposed me to bind me to this sanctuary,” he whispered. “It was all a bid to use our family’s influence in a coup for control, but the Marceaus are no more. They did not win.”

Her fingers crushed against his, trembling with the urge to scream, but she could only rasp, “No! No, that’s not… Marceau wasn’t the one who-!”

Her pounding heart and quickened breath yanked hard at that ache, pulling a harsh cough to wheeze through her clenched teeth. Leif shushed and murmured sweet reassurances to her as the coughing fit choked her, those soothing sounds she’d always craved in her suffering fading along with the rest of the world as unconsciousness crept in black spots across her vision and a low roar in her head.

No! No! Not now, not-

White light flashed bright, blinding her with a pop followed by the mechanical whirring of a film
camera, then nothing.

Leif did not feel the ache of his muscles straining to push them through the water or the shock of finding himself faced with a wall of applause and blinded by a spotlight when he breached the surface on the other side of the flooded tunnel to find the cistern, he was only aware of how limp his daughter was in his arms and how shallow her breath was as they rattled slowly in and out of her wounded chest. Realization crept past that panic, rage thrumming up hot and electric through his alarm at being received by a cheering crowd packed tight in the room, their raucous applause and the saxophone bleating out an avant-garde interpretation of “When the Saints Go Marching In” reverberated madly off the stones as he hauled himself and his daughter up the sloped floor from the cistern pool. They’d been waiting for him to emerge from the water like some strange parody of a baptism, their jubilee clear in each grinning face and fist raised in celebration for the return of their leader and the victory of their freshly initiated sister.

Dr. Aguiyi stood before the crowd with arms outstretched wide as he bellowed above the clamor, “Welcome home, Valstads!”

Leif swallowed the spike of wrath that greeting shot through him, willing himself to remain in control of the violent need for vengeance for now despite the source of half his current troubles standing not even ten meters before him. He glanced down at the limp girl cradled in his arms, and as he examined her condition by the lantern light shining on them, the world around them seemed to fade from his perception. Violence would not help his daughter survive this time; she needed the help he lacked the proper skills to provide. The sunken pallor of sustained stress and illness cast a dull gray over her honeyed brown complexion, giving her a distressingly deathlike visage in unconsciousness. He knew how strong she was, how both strong and weak he had made her, but knowing that she could quickly recover from these multiple injuries did little to alleviate the insistent pull to care for his ailing child. There was nothing holding him back from indulging in these urges and instincts now, no pretense of authoritative fatherhood or methodical crafting of her psyche to restrain his love for her. After two decades of denial and distance, the chrysalis had finally cracked, but what had emerged was beyond his ability to have ever predicted. Their time together in this love had been too brief; he had to do what he could to preserve it, and if that preservation demanded the price of his vengeance, his pride, and even his life, he did not so much mind the sting of that sacrifice now.

He turned his gaze up at Francis, his frown set in the solemn determination of the truly desperate as he said too quietly to be heard but clearly enough for the words to be read on his lips, “I need your help.”

The old man’s leonine grin softened in response and he approached. The faded black wool of his suit pants darkened with water as he sloshed through the slope until he came up to them, waist-deep in the cistern, and held out his arms. Leif felt the anticipation of those hundred eyes watching, none of them knowing the true nature of this exchange as Francis’ benevolent smile carved salvation into every weathered wrinkle on his ancient face. Francis himself might not have even known what he was asking of him, but Leif could not allow himself the leisure of hesitation. He held out his daughter’s unconscious body and Dr. Aguiyi took her into his arms as gently as he would receive a newborn, that gentleness as deceptive as the warmth in his cataracted eyes as he gazed down at her face and turned towards the crowd. To the victorious commotion of song and applause, Leif followed him as he walked through the path the crowd had cleared for them, the noise echoing through the winding tunnels of the labyrinth.
As the racket began to fade in the distance they'd slowly gained, Dr. Aguiyi spoke first, his gravelly voice rattling, “We’d expected you days ago, Scratch. What took you so long?”

“I would have arrived sooner had I known you were raiding my daughter’s womb,” Leif answered evenly.

“Yes, this was not how I’d wished to broach that subject with you. Not to worry. Your disruption in the IVF lab resulted in only the loss of the one embryo they were screening at that moment. Nothing that can’t be easily replaced,” the old man chatted amicably, his swift pace tireless and certain through the twists and turns.

The revolver was nestled against Leif’s hip, the heavy pistol dragging at his belt like a suggestion, but not one he could take. Not yet. In their line of life, the distinction between friend and foe was a boundary blurred by the rules of necessity. It was often just as necessary to kill a friend as it was a foe, necessary to ally yourself to your enemies, necessary to make yourself known in the pursuit of knowing another. Dr. Francis Aguiyi aligned himself well within this constantly shifting ambiguity, all at once Leif’s benefactor as well as his jailor, but this ambiguity had never imparted confusion of those roles. Theirs was a friendship upheld in a classic war tactic of deterrence; he trusted Francis to carry his daughter to a medic and Francis trusted him not to kill him while he was so presently available to kill. It was easy to slip into the well-formed grooves of friendship between them even with their mutual betrayals so fresh.

Leif huffed out the ghost of a bitter laugh. “When exactly were you going to broach that subject with me, Frank? When the men started to complain about the 3 AM bottle feedings of your little inbred army?”

“Don’t be so cross with me, son. With Valstads dropping like flies, this was the only sure way to fend off your extinction.”

“I didn’t come here to argue ethical boundaries with you, Frank. It was made clear that you have an issue with boundaries when you kept me separated from my daughter for months.”

“I did not know where Simone was being held until she’d escaped from your brother Henrik. He paid dearly for that.”

For all the dishonesty Leif was now becoming aware of from this man, he did not sense deception lying in that. Still, to have his brother’s death so offhandedly mentioned added to the growing pyre of his wrath. “Must I reiterate my previous statement on boundaries in relation to you having my brother killed?”

“You must not, for that was an act carried out within the family. If you take issue with it, complain to Vidar. I’m afraid you’ve just missed Anders’ departure by that same means, as well.”

Leif bit his tongue from lashing out, taking a moment to compose himself before calmly asking, “Vidar killed Anders?”

“Just an hour ago.”

His disappointment was an aggravatingly palpable presence in his mind, regret seeping through his ire at not having taken the time to end them both at the cabin. Ideally, he’d wanted to guide Simone through culminating that particular vengeance against his two most troublesome brothers, to encourage and coach her through extending them a long and painful death, but that fantasy was now denied to him. He took solace in that he still had half of the duo still available for the sake of his daughter’s catharsis.
“And where is my one remaining brother now?” Leif asked.

“You’ll see him soon enough, don’t worry,” Francis answered airily. “I’ve been eager to tell you, I’m very impressed with your work on the little miss here. I know your genetic memory experiments did not bear the results you’d desired, but one could swear she is the reincarnation of Bjørn himself at moments. In my opinion, the long-term damage was worth the attempt. Tell me, did she recognize Dr. Wallis when you went to him?”

“Of course not,” Leif frowned. “And I’d rather we focus on getting my daughter the medical help she requires, if you’d be so accommodating as to please shut up, Frank.”

“Goodness, you’re snippy! You don’t bounce back from being in the hot zone like you used to, Scratch. Getting old and grumpy on us. I appreciate that you haven’t tried to kill me yet, but it’s clearly not out of any politeness or manners on your end, is it?”

“I don’t need to be lectured on manners by the man who kidnapped my family and immediately started breeding them like prize ponies.”

“So negative. Fine. We’ll straighten out your pessimistic perspectives after your R and R.”

To Leif’s surprise, the proffered R and R was delivered immediately after Braun had irrigated and redressed Simone’s wounds. The threat of ceremony and ritual pageantry was deferred in favor of her recuperation and, by the grace of Francis determining that her father’s presence would aid in that recovery, Leif had found himself granted a respite of at least a few days before the full reintegration into his previous role. Standing under the spray of the shower in his quarters, the water running cold in the absence of power to the heaters, he allowed himself the momentary gratitude for all he had managed to salvage of this situation. While their escape was unsuccessful, they had both survived for another attempt at some point in their future here, whatever that future would bring. Recklessness had failed him; it was time to return to discipline and patience.

As he toweled off in the dark, shadows danced under the crack in the door from where a couple of Frank’s wives were still bathing a deliriously semi-conscious Simone by candlelight. They had shooed him out of the room as they carried in buckets of water, heated by methods he could only guess at, and he allowed them to handle his girl more out of curiosity than implicit trust in their caregiving skills. Watching from the darkened doorway at how gently and methodically they worked to bathe her, he was pleased that his curiosity had awarded him comfort this time.

“Bisi…? Bisi, is… it you?” Simone mumbled, her hand weakly clutching the veil of the woman who worked a thick conditioner into her mess of curls and waves.

The woman shushed her, muttering reassurances in soft and placating tones that were too quiet for Leif to pick up but settled Simone into nearly nodding off again as she massaged her scalp. He smirked, knowing very well what a weakness his girl had for a good rub, and leaned against the doorway to watch and wait as they worked to comb out her snarls and rinse her clean. There was something untouchably innocent and intimate in the care they applied, a sacred femininity between the three as Simone gave herself to them so wholly. Jealousy tickled at the back of his enjoyment of witnessing this process, a bitter longing to partake in something so unattainable to him, and he nearly snorted at his ridiculous greed to be all things to his daughter. Try as he might, he could not be a fellow woman to her, although seeing a woman’s hands tenderly caress Simone’s bare skin prompted a desire to perhaps share her with one someday.

In surprisingly little time, they had his daughter clean of blood and grime and gleaming with a thin
sheen of body oil, the sight of her slick and glistening in the candlelight too brief before they wrapped her in a loose and lightweight robe. The one Simone had called Bisi helped her back into bed, lingering behind her sisters to lift the bottom of her veil and kiss his daughter’s cheeks in a gesture obviously not meant for anyone else to witness.

“All done?” Leif asked, startling the woman into jerking back from his daughter with a glare that spelled murder in her dark eyes.

She did not speak to him, as all Aguiyi’s wives had seldom spoken in his presence, as she quickly backed out of the room without her baleful glare leaving him. The door shut with the click of an external deadbolt sliding into place, trapping him and his daughter in this suite with the heavy solemnity of their circumstance unfolding in their shared solitude. He sat on the edge of their bed, smiling at the sight of her already so rejuvenated, the deathly pallor gone from her complexion and her face relaxed in the mercy of the opiates taming her pain. In the golden glow of the candles lit on nearly every available surface in their bedroom, her eyes sparkled as she blinked awake blearily when he cupped her cheek.

“Papa…?” she whispered, endearingly weak and bewildered. “What are you doing here?”

She was just too cute when she was drugged like this. He allowed himself the indulgence of leaning down and kissing her mouth, softly to mind the abrasion in the plump flesh, parting her lips with a slide of his tongue dipping past them to taste the herbal tea the wives had given her. She opened for him with a short intake of breath, her small sound of surprise quickly silenced as he deepened the kiss. There was none of that rushed urgency, none of that frantic need driving their kiss now, only the steady burn of lust stoked by this taste and touch. Each instance he attempted to sate his hunger by kissing her only led to a deeper ravenousness, pulling him onto the bed, the towel wrapped around his waist sliding off as he moved under the blanket and carefully maneuvered himself to lie over her, his weight resting on his knees and forearms as he gently brushed against her. The tip of his erection dripped and smeared precum on her bare thigh, the silky skin tempting him into grinding harder against her.

“I missed you, Simone,” he whispered against her lips, breathy and wanting as he watched her slowly blink up at him, a worried furrow wrinkling her brow.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed, thick with sorrow. She shut her eyes against the tears abruptly welling there and her hands came up to lay flat against his chest, neither pushing him away nor pulling him closer as she whispered, “I’m so sorry I never told you. We were… I was… was… pregnant. I lost it. I couldn’t keep our baby alive, I’m sorry, I-”

He cut off her sorrowful apologies with a harder kiss, that aching loss for what never was reverberating too strongly in them both for him to bear another moment of her shouldering this grief alone. When he released her from the kiss, he cradled her face in his hands and spoke firmly, “Look at me. Listen. It was not your fault, Simone.”

Pain crinkled at the corners of her eyes. “But I-”

Her pain would be a useful tool in his kit to wrangle control of her. A trauma this deep could provide the emotional leverage to bind her in guilt to him even further, her tendency toward self-blame already having proven to be a highly effective resource. He dismissed these habitual considerations with a swift distaste.

“It was not your fault,” he repeated.

She shuddered in a sob that rasped painfully in her, her arms sliding around his chest to pull him
snug to her in a needy embrace. He laid over her, flush to her body, careful not to put undue pressure on the wounds she may not be able to feel so much now through the painkillers, and nuzzled the less injured side of her neck in a burst of affection for his suffering child. He could not take this pain away from her, but he could try to guide her through it.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” he said, softer now, into the crux of her shoulder. He pressed a kiss to her skin as he slid up to whisper near her ear, “You’ve gone through so much by yourself; do not go further into that sorrow alone. I’m here. I’m with you now, and I’m telling you the truth. None of it was your fault.”

“Please,” she murmured, her breath hitching in a sob and gripping him tighter in the agony it brought. Her legs opened, rubbing her thigh against his hardened length with clear intent. “Please, Papa, I want… I want it… with you.”

Leif’s cock throbbed at the neediness in both her request and her voice, but he knew her want was deeper than lust. “Simone, you don’t know what you’re asking. You’re fertile right now, we can’t—”

“I know,” she interrupted. She pressed her forehead to his sternum shyly, this conflicting bashfulness and brashness intriguing him. “I want to try with you again.”

His cock responded before his brain could fully catch up to the depraved implication of her desire, drooling pre-ejaculate to dribble warm and slick onto her inner thigh, so close to where he knew she was bare beneath the flimsy robe. The excitement of knowing she wanted him to do this ran countercurrent to the knowledge of what a terrible idea it was, not only for their circumstance here, but for the health of her offspring.

“Darling,” he started, having to swallow to drive out the dark roughness that lust brought to his voice. One of his hands moved to caress her body, the slow touch only meant to calm her but greedy to feel as it slipped under her robe. Her mouth opened on his chest, the soft slide of her tongue licking him making his hips jerk and his balls heavy with the imminent need to come. This wasn’t good. He began to argue against the rapidly growing urge to fill her with exactly what she wanted. “We can’t do that. You’re grieving; it’s only natural that you’d be confused, eager to replace what was lost, but you must consider the risks.”

Her hands slid up into his hair, carding through the overgrown strands streaked with gray, and arched upwards to latch her wandering mouth on his neck. The suck she applied there sent a shiver of pleasure down his spine that radiated up his shaft to dribble more of that conspicuously plentiful precum. In an entirely reactive impulse he could not bring himself to control, his hips drove his cock up to press into the crux of her thigh and the hot dampness he found already collected there made his mouth water in an animalistic anticipation. She had either responded very quickly to his kisses, or her old sapphic predilections had been revived by the women’s touch. Both likelihoods served to further entice his lust, though it was the scent of his daughter’s need beneath him that broke his discipline, as it so often had.

His better thinking seemed swept away by a slow and insistent undertow as he nuzzled his way down her body, kissing and scenting the stripe of brown skin exposed by the gap between the lapels of her robe until his lips touched the tender heat of her vulva. Her shaking gasp drew his gaze up to watch her, flushed and adorably flustered while she tried to control her panicked panting, as he parted the delicate folds with his tongue to just barely skirt over the firm ridge of her clitoris. The salt of her slick, that delectably raw taste of woman, tempted his tongue lower to slip into the source and his whole body buzzed with a flood of hormones drowning out whatever vestiges of resistance might have lingered in his thoughts as her hips rolled slightly to meet his mouth. He moaned in delight, the vibrations of his voice making her hole clench and pulse around his intrusive tongue.
His hands slid under her weight to grip her ass and lift her as he sat up halfway, dragging her bottom half clear off the mattress, and he growled in approval when her heels dug into the back of his shoulders to leverage her cunt where she needed his mouth. The sounds coming out of her damaged throat were desperate, needy, wordless whimpers culled only by the pain preventing her from crying out as he latched his mouth over the whole of her and sucked as he fucked her on his tongue. With a swiftness that served well to please his pride, he felt her erratic throbbing take on the rhythmic pulse of her inner muscles contracting in climax, confirmed to him in the rising pitch of her moans. With a strangled cry, her back arched and her legs closed snug around his jaw and neck, the fatal vulnerability of having those powerful thighs locked right where she needed to crack his spine with a twist a very distant consideration with the thrill of her coming on his tongue.

His hand dropped to fist the demanding ache of his cock, the heavy column solidly engorged to a startling hardness as he pumped it through her rocking against his mouth. When her moans turned to the startled gasps of overstimulation, he gave her beautiful cunt one last lick before gently lowering her hips back down to the bed. She watched him with such open adoration, utterly drunk on her orgasm, the painkillers, and exhaustion, but the love that shined for her father was of a devotion both natural and tempered through years of conditioning. The culmination of his efforts in these moments never failed to leave him breathless. He leaned over her, the underside of his cock gliding over her slick as he cradled her head in his hands and kissed her. With her climax achieved, he rubbed against her, delighted as she rutted into his motions to slide her soft cleft up and down his length, but her impatience was still present.

“Papa… please,” she whimpered, angling her cunt over him, trying to slip him into her. “Need you inside…”

He gripped her wriggling hips and squeezed warningly, his voice ragged and gravelly with a want that betrayed his spoken, “No, darling, this much is enough.”

And it was. It had to be. Though he wanted nothing more than to fill her with his child, that instinctive drive to mate a heady and powerful force, he knew the risks. The slide of their flesh was a shadow of the pleasure being inside her brought, but it had to be enough for now. Like he’d done so many times before allowing himself the full breadth of the incestuous act in her adolescence, he lifted her legs and held them pressed together, his cock snug between her silky thighs as he fucked that intercrural space. The slick slide of his cock sawing against her clit quickly distracted her from demanding more, an effect he was glad for with his certainty that he would not be able to resist her further begging. This had to be enough, and as he fell into a rhythm that filled the room with the wet sounds of their flesh sliding and colliding, relief for both his mental worries and his physical need became imminent.

He chased his climax with an enthusiastic drive against her, aided along by their combined slick and the sight of his daughter writhing to meet each thrust, the sway and bounce of her breasts and the elegant bend of her bruised neck thrown back. He gasped, groaning raggedly when his completion came in flexing waves that pulled his seed in a thick spill up her belly. Whatever protests she may have had to his seed being wasted on her skin went unspoken in her adorably awestruck stare at the pearly fluid smeared over her brown skin. In the blissful fog of fulfillment, he hugged her legs and kissed her ankle, his cock still poking out between her thighs and throbbing as he caught his breath. He wasn’t certain how long he could keep resisting her sex, for he loved her too much to keep denying her. Right now, however, all that mattered was that he had her again.
Chapter 91

Low, quiet murmuring and the distant trills of birdsong pulled Simone from a deep sleep, the mercifully dreamless oblivion slipping away with a languid slither as awareness crept into her senses. Pain sketched itself in broad strokes of contusions and bold lines of stitched lacerations across her body, from the throbbing bands of bruises crushed around her neck to the raw sores of rope burn on her ankles. Between the ache of her chest wounds and the searing strain of her sliced belly, each breath was a delicate balance of expanding her lungs as little as possible while keeping the claustrophobic notion of suffocation at bay. The urge to weep passed over her, through her with a shallow sigh, before she discarded it.

Mornings were always the hardest during recovery, the tender beginnings of new flesh stitching her cuts together giving her something entirely too delicate to rend in the stirring of sleep. Except the slant of sunlight pouring in through the grated windows told her it wasn’t morning anymore. Slowly, with every inch of progress paid in the ache of her neck struggling to hold her woozy head, she pushed and pulled at the blanket tucked around her until she sat up on the edge of this bed. If the grandfather clock across the room was to be trusted, it was nearing 2PM, a fact made more believable by the dehydration driving her to limp to the bathroom.

The voices were wordless noise through the wall as she drank from the faucet, her father’s dark baritone occasionally rumbling low to follow with a chorus of laughter from the others. It was both comforting and unfortunate to hear him there, in all the comfort and misfortune that came with the inevitability of his return since she realized just what this place was. With the faucet still running to drown out the aggravating noise of strangers, she let her robe hang open and examined her reflection, running her fingers over the white trails of dried semen crusted above the white stripe of gauze taped over her uterus. A bitter feeling soaked through her groggy awareness at having been denied what she had begged to receive from Leif, as though his seed could chase out the intrusion Vidar had made upon her empty and fertile womb. Her father’s touch may have brought her momentary relief from the memory of others, but his magic could not trick biology into making that wish come true. She pressed above the width of her incision, the cut spanning the spread of her thumb and forefinger, and she could not stop imagining her belly swelling as her womb filled once more with a life she would love despite the cruelty of its origin. Countless women before her had reaped what the violence of men had sown and she would be counted among them, if not by this method then by the method Bjørn had set into motion decades before.

“Darling?”

Simone jerked from the haze of her thoughts to see Leif’s reflection standing behind hers, his fond stare soft on her surprised one through the glass as he smiled, “There you are. I’ve been calling you for minutes. Do you feel well enough to accompany me to the garden?”

His hair was cut short again and he seemed halfway through his meticulous method of putting on a suit, her eyes catching on the hollow of his throat exposed between the unbuttoned top of his dress shirt. Seeing him dressed and groomed as she’d known him before, with the cultured poise of a man one would never suspect so gleefully capable of bloodshed and savagery, made her teeth itch to bite through that thick façade.

She gave a shallow nod in response, a motion cut short by the protest of her crushed neck muscles, and answered a hoarse, “Yes.”

Leif’s smile widened, the warmth of his gaze burning her through the glass as he stepped into the room with a garment bag slung over his arm. “Glad to hear it. Idleness has never suited your
recuperation; we must establish an active routine to stimulate your mind and body. Here…” He hung the bag on the shower curtain rod and unzipped it as he spoke, pulling out swaths of dark fabric and holding them up in display. “Mr. West — my assistant — has procured you clothing at my instruction. Let’s see how well he chose.”

Simone reached out to the longer gown, her thumbs testing the smooth merlot silk as she noted how the wrap style was designed to drape over one shoulder, the sleeve wide enough to cover her gunshot wound. It was a thoughtful consideration, just not one she could appreciate.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, handing it back to him before continuing, “I can’t wear something like this.”

His smile faltered, his expression creasing into a concerned frown as he said, “Nonsense. You should dress in a manner that appropriately reflects your loveliness, darling girl. Try on the dress.”

“If what I wear should reflect any part of myself, then let it reflect my intentions,” she countered, unable to meet his eyes, her stare hovering hungrily over his exposed bit of throat and chest. A stale trepidation fluttered somewhere in the back of her mind at her boldness, that fear muted by the thick tangle of rage and grief howling above it.

His tone was masked with that same old inscrutable neutrality that typically preceded his anger as he asked, “Do you intend to displease me?”

“No.”

“No.”

His silence was heavy, pressing down on her with a weight that ached in her lungs and inflated that useless fear. She wasn’t surprised when he grabbed her by her wrist and pulled her towards him, but the roughness of his handling still sucked a short gasp from her as he yanked the robe down her arms and pressed the gown to her naked front.

“Put on the dress,” he repeated, slower and lower with the growl of threat added to each word.

Her face burned in embarrassment at how her hands shook when she took hold of the supple material, her already unsteady voice quavering as she asked, “Why?”

“Because when they look at you, I want them to see that I treasure you,” he answered, his response causing her to finally reach his eyes and find the solemnity of his intentions, if not the reasoning. He turned them toward the mirror, gently gripping her chin to force her to face their reflection. “Look at yourself; beaten, bitten, unable to even look me in the eye; you broadcast victimhood. Sympathy is not what your wounds will draw in this place, Simone.”

“I don’t want their sympathy,” she said, regretting the comment when his grip tightened uncomfortably on her chin.

“Some will see what has been done to you as an invitation to repeat it,” he all but snarled. “Try as we might to garner civility in these soldiers, there is no sure method of separating beast from man. You should have learned to hide your wounds by now, after what exposing them had earned you from my brothers.”

Disgust turned her stomach and leeched the blood from her face. “Is that why they…? Because I didn’t hide it well enough?”
His fierce expression softened, as did his grip, and he exhaled a weary sigh before saying, “You are not responsible for their savagery.”

He released her, moving away with his hand dragging through his coiffed hair, and she shivered in the absence of his touch, however cruel it might be. Her bewilderment tangled her thoughts as she watched him pace the length of the bathroom, his newly polished shoes clacking steadily on the marble as his hand came to curl at the nape of his neck. With a shock, she realized he was worried, a state she had rarely witnessed in this seemingly untouchable man. Suddenly, her purpose, this place, this dark legacy she had inherited fell away and she was only a daughter faced with a distraught father. All those old needs to win his approval and affection came bubbling up through the cracks in her heart and she walked to him, her hands gently taking hold of the neutral territory of his forearms to stop his pacing.

“I’ll wear the dress,” she said. He stared down at her, surprise and something indiscernible in his eyes as she forced herself not to wilt away. “I won’t let anyone see a victim when they look at me.”

A bitter smile showed his sharp teeth. “You’re placating me. How sweet.”

His flat reaction stirred a feverish desperation in her that dropped her to her knees before him, her fingers clutching at the smooth gray wool of his pants as she exclaimed, “No! No, I want to. Y-You’re right; I should have been more cautious about how I present myself a-and I will! But this isn’t what they need to see from us! Please, just let-”

“That’s enough, Simone,” he interrupted sharply.

Her mouth shut so abruptly that her teeth clacked together. She swallowed that panic with a shudder as she collected enough of her scattered control to croak, “Sorry.”

Movement above her froze her in place, but Leif’s arms slowly sliding around her as he knelt to the floor gave a comforting warmth that almost burned through her blood.

“It’s alright, darling. It’s only anxiety,” he whispered softly, the low rumble of his rich voice wrapping her in that familiar illusion of protection. “Let it pass, let it pass… Breathe, Simone, in and out, there we go…”

She shut her eyes, clinging to these distant feelings of safety and family from a time before she came to know how truly scarce those aspects were in her life. As raw and vulnerable as Leif could so easily rend her, so could he piece her back together again, and for the first time since he had left her bleeding on Dr. Wallis’ front lawn, she felt whole again. This sweet respite was another fragile bubble bound to burst, but she wanted to hold it as long as it lasted. What she was when she was with Leif wasn’t what she had to be, but it was what she needed.

“I’m sorry, Papa,” she mumbled into the crux of his neck.

“Ssh, ssh, it’s alright,” he hushed her, his trimmed beard scraping her cheek as he nuzzled her. “Part of trusting me is to trust me to know what’s best for you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted, darling girl. Do you see that now?”

“Yes,” she breathed, the lie sweet on her tongue.

Too soon, he rose, helping her to her unsteady feet and then into the dress. Though the material was soft and smooth, the silk brushed irritatingly over the myriad of cuts and bruises too minor for the medic to have bothered bandaging and as Leif zipped up the back, and the restriction of its fit put uncomfortable pressure on the incision where the tube had been inserted through the side of her rib
cage. The lined bodice forced her to maintain a posture that was more confident than she felt, however, and as she glanced in the mirror and ignored the wild tendrils of hair that had escaped her braid, she saw something closer to a young woman rather than the crouched and feral creature she felt inside.

Never one to leave a job half-finished, Leif combed and separated her curls with oiled fingers, gathering and twisting sections with a deftness she could only faintly recall from rushed elementary school mornings when Lisa was running too late to do her hair for her. The memories of being too scared to move as her father had tamed her mane struck her with a strange and unpleasant nostalgia. Simone had always feared Leif; his very maleness had been a rift that had widened between them as time had taught her that singular fundamental difference was a known and studied threat, up until a bridge of attraction had connected that fearful chasm. Before her love had been transmuted into the abomination it was now, however, she had and still did love him as family; a sentiment that she had never detected within him.

“When did this change?” she heard herself ask.

His concentration on pinning down a wayward curl flicked to her face before coolly turning back. “I’m afraid I have yet to master the ability to follow the conversations in your head. When did what change, Simone?”

She bit back the flash of anger at his framing of her as mentally ill with a condition he had fabricated as a tool to manipulate her and everyone in her life, and clarified, “When did you decide you were going to fuck me?”

The question was harsh, the friction of it scraping his nerves in the way he rephrased, “When did I know we were meant to be lovers, you mean? It’s not an unprecedented occurrence between a man and a woman.”

“And that’s the root of it,” she muttered, that anger simmering hot where she could not extinguish it.

“If you have something to say, say it.”

She bit her lip, her glare fixed to the vines of the ivy hanging from above the mirror rather than risk meeting his eye. The last time she had broached this subject with him, the conversation had ended with his cock lodged in her throat and she could not let herself get distracted again.

“You’re not just a man and I’m not just a woman,” she started carefully. The nervous tremor in her voice quivered at the end of each sentence, breathlessness robbing her of the conviction she needed to apply to her words, but she couldn’t let herself stop. Not when it was this important. “There are responsibilities and obligations attached to our roles as father and daughter that I... I don’t think you’ve considered to be as important as they are.”

“Do not doubt that I deeply value our familial bond as well as our romantic one,” he said as he rolled the majority of her hair into a twist at the back of her head.

“I don’t doubt that you value what it has made available to you,” she continued. As he anchored her twisted waves with a barrage of bobby pins that scraped along her scalp with the force of his push, she tried to be brave. “Einar denied your brothers their birthright, but you could have helped them realize what they were. Why didn’t you?”

“Didn’t I?” he countered disinterestedly, his attention diverted on teasing more volume and texture into the wavy tendrils he left out of the bun to frame her face. “I believe I had shown them a fine example of what being a Valstad truly meant during those last days in Vermont.”
“You showed them, but you didn’t teach them anything. Now Henrik is… they butchered him,” she said, her throat closing around the grief choking her. “Henrik is gone.”

“I did not murder him.”

That simmering rage flared in her, tamped down only by her caution. “You let them to grow crooked and untamed. They’re your little brothers, Papa. You were supposed to lead them, not destroy them.”

His brow furrowed slightly in a twitch, quick and subtle, just a glimpse of the danger she was calling. “Are you blaming me for what they put you through?”

“No! No, that’s not— This isn’t about me.”

“Simone,” he sighed, his busy hands going still to cradle her jawline and lift her gaze to his. Her heart fluttered despite herself when she did, both from the warmth of his closeness and the knowledge that he could so easily snap her neck if he simply chose to. “Cruelty creates its own justifications; you will not find the cause or decipher the reasoning behind their atrocities. Mourn for my brothers no further. They have done nothing to deserve your compassion or sympathy and I will not listen to you prostrate yourself beneath them like this.”

“No beneath them!” she snapped. “No, not beneath them. These are your brothers. My uncles. Our family, ours! I couldn’t help them, but you still can!”

“Enough.”

Frustration grated along the edge of her pain-weathered patience, sparking a hasty determination that thudded dully against the wall of his will. She could not dissuade him past his anger; any point not attempted in condemnation of her uncles would be interpreted as a defense of them and therefore an affront to him. The futility of appealing to the bonds of family that had been dissolved decades ago broke what hope she had that these rifts could be mended. It had been too late from the moment Einar had divided his sons, but Leif could not see that the sin of his father had bound him to blindness just as it had left Anders, Vidar, and Henrik to wander blindly into madness. The defeat in this futility stung deeper than the pain she carried, piercing the ghost of Bjørn’s regret, his final failure carried far beyond his grave. The stable shore she had searched for after drifting so long had been swallowed in the same bitter sea. Her family was lost.

The sun had dipped behind the tall walls enclosing the courtyard, casting cold shadows and quieting the cacophony of the caged and loose birds alike. Men and a few women in various interpretations of combat uniform passed by Vidar with a swift dutifulness, each with the steadfast discipline telltale to those who have served death for long enough to burn a serrated edge into their hardness. As he shifted his weight from his aching knees to the sore balls of his bare feet in the grass, he wondered briefly at what these blood-baptized warriors saw in him, what similarities they could detect between their brutalities. All ages, all backgrounds, all nationalities, it was only bloodshed that these devoted all had in common. The ability to take lives, dividing in all of them like a cancerous cell to mutate into whatever made men killers. There should have been nothing that divided him from the rest, but he was a Valstad, set apart by the purported demon at his core. Apparently, not even that royalty status could spare him from what had forced him to kneel in the grass awaiting the consequences of his actions.

He was not surprised when they had cuffed his arms behind his back and shackled his ankles, only
surprised that it hadn’t come to this sooner and regretful that it had come too soon to see his vengeance actualized. The opium swimming through his system had helped, but his calm was not peaceful. Beneath the frozen surface, the dark and frigid waters of his mind were teeming with volatile life, feeding and frenzied on wrath and despair. The two men left to ensure he remained kneeling were perfect statues standing at either side of him, as unresponsive as stone to his questions and requests. That was fine; they had their orders, he had his sins, there was a place for everything and everything was in its place.

A denser silence flooded the courtyard. He looked in curiosity at what had caused such a sudden hush, seeing that those swiftly marching warriors had stopped and stood saluting towards the entrance of the east wing, their fists over their hearts and solemnity soaked through their reverence. The man they regarded was nothing but a gray-clad figure at this distance, but he was discernible enough in the easy confidence of his poise to strike a crack in Vidar’s calm. Leif’s gait was slowed by the tiny slip of dark red tucked at his side, but it wasn’t until they drew much closer that Vidar realized it was his slave. It was getting harder to reconcile the battered creature that had taken his brutality so well with the human she could disguise herself as.

The rage roiling in him scraped at the barrier of his calm to pull his mouth into a grin as he called, “Hello, Leif.”

“It’s good to see you again, Vid,” Leif smiled back at him, his shoes coming to stop one mere meter from him in the grass. “Our last meeting was far too brief.”

“Ah, yes. I still get dizzy spells from the concussion.” Vidar turned his grin to his slave, looking her over with a hungry leer he made sure hid none of his affection. Peeking beneath the gold cuffs fastened at her wrists, the edges of gauze covered the worst of what the ropes had done. Speaking in English, he remarked, “Nice dress, sweetheart. Although, I still can’t get used to seeing you in clothing.”

The iron band crushing his neck shocked him into choking out a bark of surprise that was swiftly shut off by the closing of his throat. He didn’t see Leif move, but there he was above him, his shadowed face still holding the same genial smile as he watched Vidar choke by his hand. Terror, raw and sharp, erupted from his calm.

“You don’t get to talk to her,” Leif said, the shattered silver of his eyes gleaming with a horrible joy.

Black spots danced and popped in the edges of Vidar’s vision, the ringing in his ears carrying all sound far away until that crushing grip eased off him. His airway felt two sizes too small as he hacked and coughed away from that edge of unconsciousness. Below his noise, he heard the panicked pitch of Simone whispering frantic pleas, a normally sweet sound that seemed so strangely distressing when it wasn’t directed at him.

She was pressed against her father, her much smaller frame ridiculously inept at holding him back as she begged, “Stop it! Please, Papa, we don’t have to do this!”

“Darling, why are you protecting him?” Leif asked with a curiosity so detached from the emotional chaos of the young woman hugging his middle.

Vidar couldn’t help but wonder the same. His manipulation of her had not been anywhere near successful enough for her to have thoroughly accepted her role. He needed more time and more patience than he ever possessed to achieve her full and complete submission, yet there she was, defending his life as though he had succeeded.

“He’s family! I can’t lose anyone else, I... not even...” she tried to say, her words quickly eaten up
by a pathetic sob.

A hoarse laugh ached out of Vidar. Of course, he should have guessed that her warped devotion to family would carry her that far into delusion.

“Such sentimentality did not spare you of his wrath, did it?” Leif frowned. “No, darling, his transgressions must be properly addressed.”

With a flick of his hand, a cruelly curved pocket knife unfurled in his grip and knocked all amusement and irony from Vidar. A cold sweat collected in the creases of his skin, beading slick at the back of his neck and knees in seconds.

“In what are often referred to as less civilized times, the punishment for rape was sometimes expected to be carried out by the victim,” Leif explained, turning Simone to face Vidar, his hands closing her fingers to grip the handle of the knife as he pushed her forwards. She staggered, her fear mirroring Vidar’s as their eyes met in terrible understanding of what was to occur by the will of Leif.

“Typically, by carving out the rapist’s eyes or testicles, or both. So, I’ll let you choose: should we leave his eyes in to see his testicles severed, or start from the top and work our way down?”

Fear churned a thick nausea in Vidar’s gut, nearly spilling bile up into the narrowed space of his esophagus as he swallowed to keep it down. Instead, wrath came surging up in him and what erupted was a snarling, “And what penance will you pay?! I might have sampled a taste of what you’ve done to your own daughter, but it was what you raised her for!”

“Hold him,” Leif said, and immediately Vidar was seized by his shoulders and head by the silent guards, his neck craned back to offer his face up.

“It was your fault!” Vidar yelled, straining against his bonds, rage burning through every tensed muscle to tear them through his skin just to reach this monster. “You made her into a slave, what could she do but serve?!”

Simone jerked and trembled stiffly as Leif pushed her hand forward, guiding the blade to Vidar’s face. Her voice was weak, mismatching the vivid terror in her paled face as she said, “Please don’t do this, Papa.”

“It’s alright, darling, your Papa is here to help you,” Leif whispered reassuringly into her ear as he wrapped an arm around her center and turned her fist to angle the blade against Vidar’s left eyebrow.

“This vengeance will give you back what was taken from you.”

“Stop…” she whimpered.

Vidar was losing control of his body, his breath coming in rapid and shallow pants that wouldn’t let him speak even if he could find the words through the knot of his thoughts crashing together. A burning pressure seared in his brow, spreading and deepening like wildfire along his nerves, but it was the sensation of his flesh splitting apart and the knife scraping his skull that made him realize this was happening. Blood poured down his face, hot and thick, and there was nothing he could do to stop this. He saw how Simone was frozen as Leif slowly sawed the blade downwards, and Vidar couldn’t look away from the pinpoint of her pupil while he panted uselessly through the pain. She was paralyzed by what her father was forcing her to do, just as she was so often paralyzed by what they had done to her. An odd guttural sound shoved out of him when half his vision was blocked and then warped by the thin metal, the sound rising in volume with each pant until he was finally screaming as the blade began to cleave through his eyeball. Agony scalded his body and mind, the heat and pressure of the knife twisting, shredding the organ to ruin. The concept of losing his sight from that side forever hit him with a reality he was not prepared to accept. The world, blurred in tears
and swaying in delirium, narrowed.

“ENOUGH!”

The roar rang off the walls to echo in his buzzing skull. The hands gripping his head kept him from turning to that sound as surely as they’d kept him still for the knife, but he knew that torn and ragged voice belonged solely to Dr. Aguiyi. Even through the horror of his mutilation and torture, the fact that the cultists holding him still did not move to regard the command of their leader was not lost on him. The pressure of the knife left him gasping with little relief.

“Leif.” Aguiyi’s gravelly rasp was nearby, flat with disapproval, “you have punished them enough. Come, walk with me, won’t you?”
The blood was on Simone’s hands, the wet turning sticky in the folds of her palms as she clenched and loosened her fists in slow repetition, the slight sound of the platelets bonding and peeling away from each other giving her something to hear that wasn’t the echoes of her uncle’s screams and wasn’t the calm conversation next to her. She could not enter that dark and narrow space her mind screamed to retreat to when the soft leather beneath her puffed out an inexplicable whiff of Anders’ sweat as Leif had sat her down on it. Her father wrapped his arm around her shoulders and the phantom scent was chased out by his, that flicker of suspicion snuffed out before it could ignite the memory of being strangled past the threshold of life. It was tempting to lean into the shelter of Leif’s all-consuming presence, to allow her mind and will to be wrapped in the balm of his control, but she needed to feel the full horror of what she’d allowed. The impulse to retreat was a cowardly and selfish one that she had no room in her conscience to harbor.

Leif’s suit jacket was smooth, the ink on the wool still sharp to her nose in its newness, and she wanted to chase the memory of that scent to each new suit he’d brought home from the tailor throughout her life. Those drab, masculine colors in subtle patterns and textured weaves flashed temptingly down a rabbit hole in her mind that the horror tore her away from before she could even look down that distraction. She was caught between the drag of the blade slicing through Vidar’s eyeball and the present moment, revulsion pinning her like a needle through an insect. Between the two, she turned from the fresh horror of the past and chose to focus on the present.

“It is just so good to have you both here together,” Aguiyi grinned, an easy cheer granting a flourish to his mannerisms as he delicately selected a cigar from the box on his desk. When Leif declined the offered cigar, the old man tucked it between his yellowed teeth and flicked open a lighter beneath the tip, saying between measured puffs to draw in the flame, “After that display, no one will question who holds dominion of your family after that.”

Leif’s hand slid down her back and curled around her waist, its languid movement an unconscious pursuit for touch that made her skin crawl under the memory of how it had only just moments ago forced her through such lurid cruelty. She swallowed, bracing herself against the sticky horror that flashed behind her eyelids each time she blinked and saw Vidar’s splitting and screaming face, and returned to the present. Something was happening here; she had to pay attention.

“It is the matter of my family’s social hierarchy a popular topic in the rumor mill?” he asked.

The sound and tone of her father’s voice coiled a sickening reassurance of terror in Simone’s gut at just how very much the same it remained. Whether feigning smalltalk or forcing her hand to butcher their own kin’s face, he was the same as he perpetually was: analyzing and calculating beneath a veneer of blasé charm. There was always something lying beneath what was said, his words and demeanor the smoke and mirrors to his motives, and she observed carefully for what moved in the undercurrent of what was spoken.

“Not much room for a power struggle between three people, Scratch,” Aguiyi remarked dryly. “Weren’t you the one who said that killing off the competition was not a sustainable tactic to win the game?”

Three people. Between Leif, Vidar, and Anders, Simone would think it obvious who the patriarch of the family was, but Aguiyi was trying to plant doubt in her father’s mind. She watched the stream of smoke from the cigar retract into the glowing ember as the old man puffed it, exhaling in a slow sigh through his nostrils to mingle and vanish into his overgrown beard. She could not detect any subterfuge in Aguiyi’s motives beyond his dedication to Bjørn’s dying request to protect the Valstad
family: Aguiyi had delayed Leif from murdering his brother, and now he was arguing to prevent it.

“What anyone thinks of me might matter to you, but it doesn’t to me,” Leif said, his hand sliding up the back of her neck to card through her hair and send a hot shiver down her spine. “All I want is justice for what they’ve done to her. What you allowed.”

“And it was a very flashy extraction of justice, in full view of the entire courtyard. For someone who claims to not care about what others think of your authority within your family, you sure gave them a lot to think about.” Aguiyi frowned.

“Someone had to establish the notion that any disrespect done to my daughter will not go without consequence. Of course, I won’t have to worry about establishing anything further here if you would be so courteous as to release us from your hospitality, Frank.”

“Your refuge here is contingent on necessity, not courtesy. You need our protection and we would like to have you; you and what’s left and what’s beginning of your family.”

Leif shrugged, undeterred, his relaxed confidence twisting a dread in Simone at what he could be planning next as he said, “Then our freedom will not be contingent on convincing you to release us.”

Aguiyi chuckled and shook his head as he tapped the ash from his cigar into a gold-rimmed teacup. Simone watched as the particles seemed suspended in mid-air before drifting slowly down into the delicate bone china. The nagging sensation of unreality tugged harshly at her old uncertainty that she wasn’t dreaming, but she knew that life was too cruel to allow this day to have been a mere nightmare. Bizarre and improbable had long since become her normal, and as normalcy courted acceptance, her doubt was no longer relevant. Whatever happened, real or unreal, held the same consequences for her. The blood on her hands, the stale presence of Bjørn always lingering in the back of her mind; she had to contend with both. She had to do something more than endure these trials; she had to steer the trajectory of the past away from destroying their future.

Bjørn’s cold hands rested on her shoulders and she heard herself say past the rasp in her dry throat, “This is where we belong. Together.”

“Darling,” Leif warned.

Aguiyi’s chuckle rankled her father, his warm hand cradling the nape of her neck becoming a stiffened grip as the old man said, “See? She understands, Scratch. You let the world see you and they would kill you for it, but we’ve built a better world here, one where you are free to be what you are. There’s nothing out there for either of you but death and indignity at the end of a short chase.”

Leif’s calm held a razor edge of resentment as he replied, “So why not serve the warden that serves me better?”

“So why not?” the doctor echoed, still grinning.

The answer to Aguiyi’s rhetorical question laid bitterly on the tip of Simone’s tongue. The knowledge Maier had imparted to her, the secret that would untether Leif from what remained of his gratitude and willingness to cooperate with the doctor, squirmed hot in her mind like a snakelet trying to tear out of its egg. However, the doctor, for all his secrecy and cruelty, was right. This was where they belonged, if not for the sake of their survival, then for the responsibility they held towards this world their ancestors had both created and been created from. The smoke from the cigar hung heavily all around them, burning her injured throat and watering her eyes as she watched Aguiyi tap the ash into the teacup again.
The secret she had been carrying all this time to free her father from this place would remain unspoken. He must never know that Aguiyi had orchestrated the FBI investigation with Maier, that his captivity under the Marceau’s and their use of his influence and popularity was meant to backfire on them from the very beginning. Aguiyi had used them all, moving them like pawns on a chessboard they couldn’t see, sacrificing and maneuvering wherever necessary for the sake of building an empire in the Valstad name. Ouroboros was theirs and they were Ouroboros’. Aguiyi had won, and now she had to ensure he kept winning, or her family would lose everything.

“Aren’t you tired, darling?” Leif asked, toying with the end of his daughter’s braid as she sat in their bed, sketchbook propped up on her thighs.

The rhythm of the graphite scraping the paper was uninterrupted as she answered quietly, “No, Papa.”

He watched her thoughtfully, brushing the feathery tip of her gathered hair under his thumb, and weighed his options. It was approaching 2 AM and Simone had not moved from the bed after excusing herself from a supper she’d barely touched, the pages of half-finished drawings torn from the book littering the sheets around her. Violent outcroppings of flowers, meandering landscapes, dark and overbearing trees; nothing with a face had managed to make itself formed in her drawings tonight. He could let it go, leave her to sulk in peace for a while longer, or he could address it now and be done with it perhaps prematurely. Patience was no longer his virtue.

“You don’t think so now,” he began, allowing her attention to snag on him before continuing, “but someday you will remember what you did to him, and you will be glad for it. Don’t deny yourself that victory.”

The pencil resumed its rapid little scratches, the cross-hatching revealing the rough texture of bark in another looming tree. In all her temperamental gloominess, he didn’t expect to hear her ask, “When did you start feeling glad about being forced to kill?”

He laid back against the tufted headboard and held in an exasperated sigh at the acknowledgment that there was apparently more than one elephant in the room. “Nothing I’ve done to you is comparable to the training I was put through as a boy. I protected you from all this for as long as I could; don’t mistake my kindness as folly.”

“I want to hear,” she said, tired eyes unfocused on the steady movement of the pencil, “what killing was like for the boy in the picture.”

This time, his sigh did escape. “Darling, you’re speaking in riddles again. Your brain needs sleep.”

The abrupt noise of paper tearing grated his nerves, but the furious strokes of the pencil on the fresh sheet drew his curiosity enough to stifle his scold. Swooping lines and circles outfitted the geometric structure beginning the human figures, giving direction and perspective to the bulks that she filled in with detail until suddenly those shapes became people. A tickle of familiarity buzzed in the back of his mind, exploding into recognition when he saw his own face, so much younger and so very afraid, staring back at him. He knew this picture well, remembered the timer of the camera beeping before the bright flash caught him, his father, and his uncle posed next to his first group quarry. They were so proud of him that day.

He stopped her flitting hand, his much longer fingers engulfing her fist entirely, and demanded, “Tell
me when you saw this.”

“I want to hear it,” she said instead, emotion finally shining some life in her dull eyes. “I want to understand what happened.”

The shine in her eyes overflowed, tears matting her lashes and she rubbed them away fiercely, leaving a smear of gray across the bridge of her nose. Leif’s consternation melted under the drive to soothe his distraught girl and the paternal whim to pull her close carried over seamlessly into his lips catching her gasping sobs in a chaste kiss. He could resent his weakness for his daughter’s tears later; his wanting was still too raw from deprivation to deny further for the sake of lessons he had time to teach some other time. Time, it seemed, was something they would have in abundance so long as they remained trapped here.

“Papa—I don’t…” she murmured against his lips, making him cradle the back of her head to still her and force his tongue past the guard of her teeth to silence her.

Her mouth was hot and unready, her shy tongue slow to respond to the entreatment of his until he felt her shiver in his arms and yield to him with a whimper. He was not blind to the contradiction warring within her. He had cultivated her loyalty and devotion to him as her father and by extension had inflated her loyalty and devotion to Vidar as her uncle, only to so egregiously shove her against the grain of that conditioning by forcing her through an act she would otherwise have been incapable. Verbal assurances of the long term benefit and the necessity of vengeance were not enough to stitch that rift in her conscience together; he needed to apply a more impactful therapy.

“You want to understand?” he whispered, keeping her eyes locked on his as he rolled her onto her back and laid carefully over her. She watched him, her anticipation caught between fear and frustration, as he pinned her wrists above her head, moving his hands away with a silent command to be still etched in the grin that spread to show his teeth. He hummed out a chuckle as he brushed the smear of graphite from her nose. “You already do, darling girl. If you want to understand, look at yourself.”

The thin, sleek slip of a nightgown rolled easily over her hips as he pushed the ivory silk up, baring the strip of gauze taped above her panties. Her hands twitched when he ran his thumb over the bandage protecting her incision, just hard enough for her to feel through the thin padding, and her pain was confirmed in the hitch of her breath and the tightening of her eyes.

“Tradition is an indirect inheritance we receive from our ancestors, a soft context of ‘who’ to accompany the hard design of ‘what’ we receive in the irrefutable physicality of our genes,” he explained, watching the pinch of pain ease out of her features as he dragged his thumb down the front of her panties. “We are more than ourselves. We are the hundreds of thousands of lives before us and we are the hundreds of thousands of lives that will come after we are no longer. You have within you all the same pieces that made me what I am, but it is tradition that arranges those pieces to fit into the right places. Genetic predisposition determined you to be a predator, tradition honed you to be a hunter.”

Her breathing grew shorter, quicker as he stroked her through her panties, putting a higher pitch in her voice when she said, “I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“But you will if you have to,” he replied. He leaned down, the side of his beard dragging along the inside of her thigh as he tugged her panties to the side and smiled at the glistening of her wetness. “You will always do what you have to do. That is another Valstad trait and tradition.”

He pressed a kiss to her labia and the delicate softness of that fold parted under his tongue for him to lick at her tender center, drawing a gasp from his girl that heightened into a moan as he opened his
mouth over her and gently sucked. He heard her drag and twist the bedsheets in her fists, still obediently held above her head, as her body tensed to keep from writhing.

“Ah-h... I can’t...” she breathed, panting as he hummed in pleasure at her velvety softness, the vibrations making her shiver. “I can’t kill him, please don’t make me kill him!”

He smirked against her, teasing the edge of his teeth over the thin hood covering her clit, and she bucked when he pressed a finger to her sopping entry. His cock throbbed and leaked at how she mewled, but he could not indulge in fucking her yet, not without the certainty that it would not result in another pregnancy. The notion of repeating that taboo, however, burned a powerful need in him to do just that. He shifted his hips, pressing his impatient hardness against the bedding to try to relieve some of the pressure, but it only added to the demand that he take what was rightfully his. Aggravated at his undisciplined desires, he grabbed her thighs roughly, his thumbs spreading her cunt open for him to lick deeply inside, and growled at how tauntingly snug her walls pulsed and hugged his intruding tongue.

Her breathless cries were high with need and her back arched at the press of his thumb rolling in tight circles on her clit, drawing her climax closer with each thrust of his tongue. That slightly salty, raw taste of his girl was subtle enough to always keep him greedy for more as he licked deep inside her heat. The smear of precum wetting the inside of his shorts signaled how eager his body was to fulfill the want his instincts tasted in her slick, her drug-induced fertility signaling that animal call to mate in them both. Determined to keep circumventing this dangerous yearning, he reached a hand down and gripped the greedy organ. Unfortunately, the roughness of his hand gave his craving for her softness a much unneeded edge.

“Papa-aah, please… Please, don’t tease…” she moaned, her quavering voice strained with a distress that lit his mind on fire with an urgency to heed, to soothe, to provide.

His grip on her thigh tightened with a bruising force as he restrained from giving them both what they knew they needed. This had to do for now. He couldn’t give Francis the satisfaction of proving his weakness and providing a direct heir, couldn’t give his daughter the heartache of a pregnancy that would almost surely end in a tragedy. He tugged his shorts down, freeing his cock to stroke with more determination.

“Please, Papa, it… hurts,” she whimpered.

Her legs folded around his shoulders, heels digging into his back, trying to push him away as she reached to pull him up. He growled out an admonishment, both discouraging her aggression and uncertain he could resist her insistence much longer, and to his relief she stopped. Without condoms, lubrication, or any even rudimentary form of birth control, this would simply have to do. Her thighs shook, squeezing his neck uncomfortably, as she nearly sobbed in need.

“I can’t…” she squeaked, adorably pathetic in her desperation. “I can’t do this…”

The thick musculature of her thighs tensed and flexed, tightening around his neck further and putting a dangerous pressure on his arteries. He grunted, nails digging into her skin to try to get her attention, but the pressure only increased and sent dark splotches over his vision with a shocking swiftness. Worry bloomed quickly into alarm as vertigo turned the world upside down. He tried to jerk and wrestle out of her hold and the effort ate away the oxygen powering his consciousness in large chunks, his senses muffling and then muting in waves. Survival instincts kicked up a dredge of adrenaline too late as his limbs suddenly became far too heavy to even lift, that heaviness spreading inward until he realized with a more and more distant awareness that he had lost control of both the situation and his body.
Just as his last remnants of consciousness drained sluggishly away, awareness crept back in from the edges, lending sound and light from that darkness. With a gasp, he was torn back into full wakefulness, his heart racing and mind scrambled on adrenaline-induced panic. The brightness assaulting his eyes was from the overhead light; he was on his back, the memory of having been turned and laid out lost to that brief unconsciousness. Panting, trying to collect his scattered senses, his hands found the source of the weight pressing his lower body down before he realized he was pinned to the bed. The soft, warm, smooth curves of his daughter glided under his baffled touch and he lifted his dizzy head to see her seated over his lap, his cock nestled in the snug embrace of her cunt. Confusion halted all progress of sense.

“Simone… what…?” he groaned, pushing the words out from a mouth not yet quite articulate enough to phrase the full question.

“I…” she started. She stared dazedly at his chest, unable to meet his eye as she panted, her breaths shaking and cheeks flushed. “I can’t stop.”

He sucked in a sharp gasp at the stroke of her wet, soft cunt wrapped tight around his entire length when she rolled her hips, the pleasure catching him off-guard and derailing his mind. His hands gripped her waist, but he couldn’t find the will to lift her off him, instead pulling himself up to meet her thrusts as she fucked herself on him. Whatever revelation was storming in the implication of what had just happened could wait; he couldn’t stop himself even if he had the will to try.

“Oh god, oh fuck, Papa, that’s…” she moaned, that pillowy softness flexing hard around him, ready to take them both over the edge. “I want it… need it inside… ah!”

His body made the decision for him, forcing her down to take him fully and grinding up into her hard, mashing his tip against her cervix and her swollen clit into the thatch of hair at the base of his pelvis as he came with an abrupt force. He grit his teeth as white flashed behind his eyes and that satisfying pleasure crashed through him, draining out into euphoria as he held her writhing hips down on him and filled her with his seed. His humanity lost to the primal demand of instinct, the powerful flex and release of his climax tore a feral sound from him, and he was left giddy, panting and laughing when thought trickled through that viscous delirium.

He pulled her down to him in a hug that she all but crumbled weak and bonelessly to, muttering into her hair, “You understand now, darling?”

She shivered against him, curling into herself on his chest, burrowing into her shame, and he laughed. The fearsome creature that had bested him had gone now that she had taken her satisfaction and his girl was once more all sweet meekness with his spent cock nursed of every damning drop inside her. All the same appetites that had made him a beast were present in his cub, adorable in miniature, fatal in their development, and he beamed with pride as she shook with the realization of her becoming.

Vidar’s hand lifted to scratch the itch on his chin, only to be jerked back down to the thin mattress he was cuffed to. He moved to lift his head instead, only to be slammed back down by the sharp pain stabbing through it. He waited until the piercing throb receded back into a cloudy numbness before venturing to even open his eye. The dim light didn’t quite reach the ceiling, giving a horrific impression of a gaping endlessness above him, and he shut his eye to it with a shudder.

“You are a lucky boy, Vidar Valstad.”
That flat monotone cleared the fogginess from his mind with a flash of dread and he pushed past his pain to turn to it, unable to see anything but shapes in shadow. A blinding flash of brightness lit up the room and he winced, panic forcing him to blink the ache away to see who he knew sat at the side of the gurney. The blurry shape of Maier smiling blandly at him from his seat in a wheelchair came into terrible focus.

“Thought you were dead,” Vidar said, his voice ragged from disuse and screaming.

Maier’s smile widened into a Cheshire grin. “Much of my large intestine and liver are. If you had the courtesy to actually aim instead of shooting from the hip, you could have spared me the convalescence.”

“I’m truly sorry I didn’t kill you.”

“Thank you. It is good to see that being here has not dulled the shine of that silver tongue one bit, old friend. Before you ask, they had to remove that eye, but I had them preserve it should you want to display it for parties.”

Vidar swallowed the acid of disdain and bile creeping up his throat, taking advantage of the calming effect of the sedative dragging through his system to actively resist thinking about losing an eye and opting to ask instead, “Maier, what the fuck are you doing here?”

The ex-agent leaned back in his wheelchair, folding his hands over his plain white button-up, and answered, “Baring witness.”
Chapter 93

The needle settled onto the record with a soft hiss that ushered up an orchestra, though the composer and era were beyond Vidar’s knowledge or ability to identify. On the faded paper disk at the center of the record, he could make out that it was Russian, or at least the record itself was made in Russia by its lettering. As with most things he had found lately, a closer look did nothing to decipher the mysteries surrounding him. He let the violins play only to distract him as he interacted with where his eye used to be.

Now that the swelling had receded and the wound had healed without incident over the past two months, the plastic conformer plumped up the patchwork flap of his eyelid to its once natural shape, but the slice from his hairline to his cheek had rendered some of the connective structures and nerve damage too tedious for the medical staff to address. That chasm of baby pink scar tissue confirmed that he would never regain full mobility in that side of his face to furrow his brow or blink with what they had salvaged of his eyelid. He held no lasting resentment towards them for their negligence; they were consistently overworked and lacked the necessary equipment for such delicate repairs.

Nonetheless, anyone who looked at him would see how his life held horrible violence and he would bare the evidence of this trauma for all his life, unable to conceal and lie towards normalcy again. The choice to be anything but what he really was had been cut away from him, but there had never really been a choice to begin with. Insanity had a way of slipping through masks.

The conformer slid out with a scoop of his fingernail and the plastic shell clattered in the sink before he tossed it in the wastebasket.

“I am not sterilizing that thing for you again,” Maier said, his wheels coming to stop at the edge of the bathroom doorway.

Vidar clicked his tongue and ground out, “I never wanted you to in the first place. I’ve decided against prosthesis.”

“You’ve decided against prosthesis like you’ve decided against clothes, then? These are both concepts geared towards the general comfort of those who must look at you, so I cannot say that I am surprised at your predictable lack of courtesy.”

“Pajamas are for pneumonic grandmas and Catholics. If you don’t want to ‘bare witness’ to my dick, then don’t come knocking on my door at five in the fucking morning.”

“If you rose at reveille, I would not have to. Besides, it is nothing of yours that I have not seen before.”

“You’re welcome to get more acquainted with it if you want to give your mouth something better to do than bitch all day.”

“I have not the time nor the inclination, Mr. Valstad. There is no room for penalty chores on our schedule today, so I implore you to not make us late to the morning drill again.”

Vidar wiped the rim of his gnarled socket with short, gentle swipes, still not entirely used to the sensation of rooting around this far inside his skull. “And what service to the glory of Ouroboros is on our schedule today? More inventory? Data entry? Cataloging invoices?”

“I cannot say. We are to report to the Doctor at eleven-hundred.”
The sour pit of Vidar’s stomach dropped in a reflexive panic, dragging back up as he willed calm back into his composure and strapped the eyepatch over his socket. “It’s about time.”

“Not yet.”

Sweat crawled down Simone’s face, dripping off the tip of her nose and chin to add to the puddle on the floor, and she worried that tears might soon join it if she had to maintain the pose any longer. Her entire abdomen burned with the effort it took not to bend or sag in the rigid position, but the board of nails brushing her belly with each shaking breath did well to remind her of her form. These 3 AM workouts were going to kill her.

She watched two more drops fall before huffing out, “Now?”

“Not yet,” Leif repeated, tapping her flank with the long wooden rod he had taken to using to instruct her.

A grunt shoved its way past her teeth as she rebalanced her stance. The rod lingered on her hip, each millisecond of its presence causing her paranoia to rapidly shift between checking her form and assuring herself that her form was perfect until the smooth oak began to slide up her side, dragging her shirt up with it. The relief that he was not correcting some unknown mistake was short-lived when the rod left her only to quickly swat against her ribs in an explosion of unfathomable agony for an instrument so slant.

“AH! OW! Mother-fucking why!?” she shouted, fists clenched and back bowed inward to contain the pain.

“Mind your position,” Leif scolded wearily, tapping her back with the tip of the rod to correct her.

Simone snarled up at him, teeth bared and eyes blazing with a rage that fizzled down when they met his stern and unaffected gaze, but her anger did not abate enough to stop her from grinding out, “I was!”

“You need to practice self-discipline,” he said, and regret doused the rest of her ire in a cold bath of fear when he moved to kneel all the way down to her eye level. “You must not let pain control you, darling. Invite it to flow through you as part of you — a guest in your existence, not an enemy to conquer. Pain is conditional; you mustn’t be ruled by the conditional. Now, mind your position.”

Those too-familiar words hit her with a memory she didn’t want to consider again. She took a calming breath, ignored the shiver that rattled it, and reclaimed her perfect stance in an attempt to draw her focus elsewhere. Arms straight, palms flat on the floor and aligned with her shoulders, all the right muscle groups tight, engaged, and on fire. When the next strike came, she was not surprised. The oak rod cut through the air with an audible whoosh that ended with a slap on her skin and a bright burst of pain in her side, but it did not nearly bowl her over or force out a shout this time. Instead, she sucked in a quavering gasp and held it, shifting her focus until her perception of the pain shifted with it.

The agony that sparked along her nerves also brought the mercy of endorphins to blunt her pain receptors and stimulate the neurological processes associated with pleasure. She knew these biological tricks to mollify and soothe, but the euphoria that clouded everything in a dense and dizzying pleasantness still amazed her. When the rod struck her the third time, the gasp it forced from
her was not one of protest. The rod lingered, suspicion heavy in the weight of it, and she knew he had sensed the shift in her. Her cheeks burned in a humiliated blush that she hoped he couldn’t see from his angle over her.

“That’s enough,” he announced, pulling the rod away from her battered side.

With a heavy sigh, she pushed herself up and wiped the dust from her hands as she walked off the burn and nervousness in her abdomen. The three thick red lines along her side were already inflamed with the promise of bruises to come, ready to join the others that her father had made in his constant mission to instill true discipline in her. Pain was the easy part of punishment. Pain was simple, conditional, fleeting; a rude guest in her body that would take its leave or make a chronic home where the damage was lasting. Transmuting the pain he gave into something akin to pleasure was not supposed to be part of the lesson, but that was the lesson he had taught her in his bed and it could not be unlearned. Simone rubbed the marks, her hand absent-ly trailing down to the pink line over her uterus as she continued to pace the length of the sparse room. Not every pain could be changed.

The pressure of his stare forced the issue to boil to the surface, tangling that knot of anxiety in her tight enough to wring out a muttered, “‘Pain is the most poignant reminder that you are still alive’.”

Leif’s brow twitched in what could have been anything from mild curiosity to guarded shock. “Who told you that?”

There was a good eight feet of space between them, but she wasn’t sure if she could dodge him if he came at her. There was no stuffing this cat back in the bag now, not after it had been clawing at the walls of her mind for this long. Her brave front got her as far as meeting his gaze, then dwindled under the intensity of his focus.

“You did,” she answered. His stillness was even more unnerving than his stare, making her sick with dread at wherever she was treading with this topic, but not as sick as holding it within her. “I was eight, or nine, I don’t… I just know that you showed me the picture of the monk on fire and you said that to me… and then you cut open your arm and...”

The warmth and weight of his blood trickling thickly into her lap charged through her mind with all the horror of that memory. Standing across from him, seeing the old impassive mask set firmly over his expression, she knew he had the exact knowledge of the moment she was referring to and the concealment of his reaction was only confirming the worst of the suspicions that had gathered in her since she’d begun to remember.

She swallowed the rising pit of nausea back down, drawing a shaking breath before continuing, “I want to know why I forgot… and I think you know. Why did you do it? How much did you make me forget?”

Leif’s stillness was that of a predator waiting for the moment to pounce on his prey; all coiled muscles and cold observation. When he spoke, she could not tear her eyes away from the pointed sharpness of his eyeteeth.

“After six years of being routinely drugged, can you really place any confidence in your memories?”

The blithe rebuttal stung worse than any violence he could have responded with. Heat crept up the back of her neck and her throat closed around the outrage that wanted to leap out of her in a shout.

Instead of a shout, she could only whisper, “Gaslighting me is old hat, Papa. I know what’s real now.”
“It doesn’t matter. Even if you remember, even if you find out what happened, it doesn’t change anything,” he said, walking towards her, each deliberate step vibrating through the floorboards to rattle her bones despite their lightness. His hand came to rest on her shoulder, then slide up to gently hold the back of her neck. “Don’t let the past get in the way of our future, Simone. Everything that’s happened had to happen for us to be together. Let the ends justify the means this time, my love.”

“Are these our ends?” she muttered.

He pulled her toward him, his grip on her neck guiding her like a ring through a bull’s snout, and she crashed against the hard length of his torso.

“Are you not happy to be in love with me, darling?” he asked, his other hand threading through her hair to cradle her head against his chest. His heartbeat was a steady drum while hers thrashed in her rib cage. “Is this bond not what you have suffered for?”

“I need to know what happened!” she insisted, pushing down the instinct to flee in the presence of his temper.

His hand tightened in her hair, drawing a mewl from her that sounded pathetic even to her own ears as he tugged her backwards. He leaned down close enough for the heat of his breath to brush over her face as he spoke, “No, you don’t. If you can’t trust my intentions, then trust that there are reasons I have weighed and considered to have come to my decisions and have faith that they are correct according to my ability and judgment. Your lack of faith has caused much trouble; don’t make the same mistake twice.”

He released her with a shove, leaving her scalp tingling as she stumbled to regain her balance and put more distance between them. The heat in her blood made her shake and, not knowing how to contain the overwhelming clash of emotions she feared to encounter past her shock, she moved away from him until her back hit the mirrors that lined the far wall.

A mirthless grin tugged at her lips as she asked, “So, that’s it? Half my life gone behind a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ order?”

“Simone,” he warned, and the scrape of gravel in his tone sent a shiver through her gut.

“I’ve been hurt in a lot of ways,” she said, palms too slick with sweat to hold herself up against the mirror as she tried not to cower. “Bound, whipped, strangled… but I had faith that you would find me one way or another if I could just stay where I could be found. I endured. My faith in you endured, even when I begged for death… even when death answered. Whatever happened, whatever you did… You think the truth is going to break me now?” A dry, shallow laugh panted out of her before vanishing behind clenched teeth. “Don’t lecture me on faith when you’re the one who’s lacking.”

Her ears rang as though she’d screamed it all, but her father stood watching, waiting as though he hadn’t even heard her. Then, he threw the cane aside, the clatter echoing loudly in the unfurnished room and making her flinch.

“I can’t give you back what was lost,” he said, that false calm as cold as his stare, “but if it matters to you so much, I might explain why it was done. Go back to our suite and run a warm bath; I’ll be up shortly.”

And just like that, he turned and left. Simone was frozen, her back glued to the mirror as she tried to reconcile the anger and fear still warring within her, the storm of emotions lagging to catch up to what had just happened. For the first time, she had won against her father’s will.
The morning drill was the same as it had been every day since Vidar’s release from the infirmary; the same lining up in the courtyard to pledge their commitment to their shared path, the same sprint interval training course, the same calisthenics circuit, the same callused hands gripping his as he shared the same wishes for a productive day of service with his Ouroboros brothers and sisters, the same shuffling into the showers and then the mess hall for the same high-protein breakfast. The rhythm of the morning and the physicality of each task provided the distraction to keep him from acting on the urge to panic buzzing just under his skin, but each bite of the egg and mystery meat scramble ground between his teeth like ash after the clock ticked past the 10 AM mark. By the time he saw Maier wheel into the hall, he could no longer imagine that the tremor in his limbs was the effect of a strenuous workout.

“How did physical therapy go today, Dick?” Vidar asked before the ex-agent could speak.

“Well, as you can see, I am still reliant on this wheelchair,” Maier answered with as much terseness as the impassive man could achieve. “Yet even with my limited mobility, I still get through the morning faster than you. I am afraid you must abandon the remainder of your breakfast if you wish to avoid tardiness, Mr. Valstad.”

Vidar’s eye twitched to the gilded clock hanging above the long rows of tables, its sprawling hands only showing it to be just past 10:20, and said, “It’s not that long of a walk to the eastern wing.”

“Dr. Aguiyi requests you attend in your personal attire.”

“What’s wrong with the uniform? The khaki trousers are a little utilitarian, but the V-neckline on these shirts are ready to party. Why don’t you relax and have some eggs?”

“No, thank you. I need to minimize my protein intake. Now, then…” Maier pulled the tray away, the metal scraping along the laminate surface making a sound that expressed the frustration the stoic man never could as he said, “I will escort you to your quarters, Mr. Valstad.”

Leif waited for his daughter’s footsteps to recede down the hall before letting his shoulders sag with the sigh that left him. This was not anything he had been prepared to address since the incident had come to pass ten years ago and all that the decade had accomplished was only to further assure him that he would never have to. Four years of nervously waiting for her memories to resurface and then six years of mind altering drugs to ensure they never would had all begun to crumble in the five short months since her last dose.

Whoever that was in there that accused him of lacking faith was not his daughter. In that moment, the ghost he had once been searching for in her blood had come back alive, but the idea of succeeding did not bring the reward he had so often dreamt it would. That steel in her eyes belonged to an impossible dream he now saw as a nightmare.

Leif rubbed his face, trying to tame the ache that was building behind his skull and, failing, turned from the corner he’d hidden behind and began the trek back to his quarters. The members he passed gave him a wide berth, but their salutes and greetings smothered him with the thickness of their adoration. It seemed that nothing could disgrace him in their eyes, not his desertion, not his
relationship with his daughter, not even his task of occasionally doling out murder among his worshippers. He supposed things could have ended up worse for him than being imprisoned to play the role of a god among war cultists, but this was not where his path would end.

When he stepped into his quarters and heard water rushing into the bathtub, he knew he had to be very mindful of where his path would turn from here. His daughter’s loyalty, while never blind, was becoming uprooted from the source he had planted in her long ago. He stood in the doorway to the bathroom and watched her bend over to test the temperature of the flow. His Simone was a dutiful daughter, an avid lover, and a devoted companion, but that streak of willfulness and rebellion in her could fracture all of that if he allowed it. Perhaps he deserved that, but fairness was not always right and what was deserved rarely served anyone in their line of living.

The squeal of the antique taps turning brought him out of his dread to find her waiting, her gaze still fixed to the water.

“How do you want me?” she asked, each word carefully and deliberately spoken to stave off the quaver of fear.

He swallowed the dryness in his throat and answered with a brief, “Disrobe. Get in.”

There was always the hesitance of shyness in this act, no matter how many times she had done this in front of him and at his command. It was usually endearing, but now as she cast her eyes to the floor and dragged her pants down her hips with a reluctant slowness, he hated it. He wanted her to look at him, to bare herself with eagerness and anticipation instead of humiliation, but he had not conditioned her to be proud of her sexuality. Shame was simply a more effective tool to manipulate.

As she gathered up her hair and stepped into the tub, he pulled up a short stool next to it and started, after a tentative moment, at the beginning, “When my uncle Bjørn was assassinated, there was a general interest among his followers to see that death was not his end but rather his obstacle. To overcome this obstacle, they sent Dr. Benjamin Wallace with a proposition to my door twelve years ago.”

“The same doctor who let us stay in his house?” Simone asked.

Leif nodded. “The very same, yes. He had some theories on genetically predetermined behavior and genetic memory that Bjørn’s followers became very interested in. They wanted him to revive Bjørn through the genetic memory of one of his descendants, and I…” He pressed the heel of his palm to his brow, willing the dull ache of regret to the back of his mind. “I wanted that too. As impossible as I knew it to be, I wanted at least some part of who my uncle was to live again and you… You’ve always been so similar to this man you’ve never met; it gave me hope that maybe, in some small and strange ways, he was in you somewhere and all we had to do was… dig those pieces of him up.”

The silence from his girl was a palpable presence that drew him to notice how still and pale she was, not even the rise and fall of breathing moved her until she asked in a whisper, “Did it work?”

“Of course not,” he smiled. “Even Ben didn’t think it had a chance; it was just a theory he was interested in testing in a human subject.”

“How are you so sure it didn’t work?”

His smile faded as a livid suspicion slunk through the mire of his guilt. “Did Frank tell you anything about this?”

She shook her head, but her glassy stare was miles away from him to be able to tell if she was lying.
He rolled up his sleeves as he continued, “The experiments were a failure, but they yielded some unexpected results. We were able to medically induce a controlled fugue state in you that caused you to be extremely receptive to suggestion without sacrificing your motor control or cognition – you would execute any task suggested to you without bias, regardless if that task endangered you.”

He lathered a sponge in a sweet-smelling soap before reaching out to his daughter and scrubbing slow, gentle circles on her skin. She didn’t react to the rough texture of the sponge, not even as he scrubbed it over the scars at the crux of her neck and shoulder where his bite mark had been carved away. He watched her blank expression curiously; she had always at least tensed whenever that area was touched, even after it had healed.

“We were successful in conditioning you to filter out orders that were given by persons other than myself while in that fugue state, effectively turning you into the perfect soldier. Well, almost perfect. You were unable to form long term memory while induced, and we didn’t realize until it was far too late that this side effect had begun affecting you outside of the fugue state. There was a remarkable consistency in the memories that were affected; only your memories pertaining to me were eroding. We shelved the experiment at once, but it took months before we saw any evidence that this side effect was going to recede. There were times where you didn’t seem to know who I was at all. In a way, this was fortunate and fortuitous. I’m convinced that, had you retained a consistent impression of me as your father throughout your life, you would not have developed a strong sexual attraction to me.”

“Well, thank god for that, then,” she said.

Leif paused in his work of soaping up her torso, surprised at the plainly-spoken but deeply sarcastic comment. That didn’t sound like something she would say, not to him. He resumed scrubbing; he could deal with her disrespect later.

“I did not erase your memories,” he said. “It was an unfortunate accident in our past that allowed for fortunate opportunities to occur in our future, not by my design but by the design of fate.”

Simone watched the suds swirling on the water as she asked, “Is Dr. Wallace still alive?”

“I believe he remains a prisoner of the estate. Why? I will not condone you speaking with him on the subject.”

“No, that’s not…” she trailed off, closing her eyes before huffing out a short sigh and starting over, “Thank you for telling me this, Papa. It answers a lot of questions I’ve had for longer than I’ve known.”

Leif sighed again, this time allowing his breath to carry out the tension that his dread had twisted in him. His daughter was taking this all so well, at least for now. There would inevitably be some emotional fallout once the shock passed, but he would be there to direct her grief to more useful channels.

“You don’t have to pose your questions yet, darling,” he said. He cupped a palmful of bathwater and poured it over her shoulders, rinsing the sweet-smelling suds from her skin to leave her brown and gleaming. “We can talk more about this later, but I want you to know that I’m glad those experiments failed. I simply didn’t know what I was risking back then. I’d never want to give you up for anything or anyone else in the world.”

Her downturned head shot up abruptly, distant eyes alert and pinched in worry as she asked, “What
time is it? I forgot I had promised to make breakfast with Bisi!”

Leif smiled. It was classically Simone to bury and suppress what she could not handle. He could allow her this retreat today, he supposed.

“It’s just now 20 passed 4,” he answered, giving her a pat on her shoulder. “You’d better hurry.”

“Quit rushing me!” Vidar snarled, swiping at Maier’s hands as the man reached up to adjust his tie.

“Mr. Valstad, I would highly recommend you consult a mirror before leaving your quarters,” Maier’s bland monotone droned out with a patience that did not match his insistent grab as he yanked him down to his level. The ex-agent’s strength and skill had Vidar bending at the waist without much resistance. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Fuck off,” Vidar sneered, but did not move until Maier’s deft hands completely redid his necktie. Any delay towards knocking on the door to Aguiyi’s office was a welcomed one.

“Well... let’s see what the old man wants,” Vidar muttered, bracing himself as he lifted his hand, only to jerk away when the door opened.

The heavy oak creaked on the hinges, revealing the Doctor seated amidst his ubiquitous cloud of cigar smoke and gaggle of pretty young wives. Gaggle of pretty young assassins, he reminded himself as he stepped into the dimmed room.

“Vidar!” Aguiyi grinned, yellowed teeth gleaming in the light of the candles strewn around his desk. “So good to see you again! Come, sit down and tell me how you’ve been adapting to the lifestyle!”

“The food could be better,” Vidar said, “but there is a grueling sort of comfort in monotony.”

He smiled against the urge to look away from those terrible pale eyes as he approached, knowing how dangerous it was to let his gaze drift to the women. As he sat in the leather chair across from the desk, however, one of them caught his attention from the corner of his vision. The hairs on his arms and the back of his neck raised in the cold shiver that coursed through his veins when he locked eyes with the silver stare of his once-slave.

“You…” he breathed, the word passing as quietly as a phantom over his lips.

“There exists a measure of safety in how structured each aspect of our daily lives are within the walls of the estate,” Aguiyi went on. Vidar could not will himself to look away from her, the old man’s words drifting into the background all but unheard as Simone’s hand clutched tight over her abdomen, drawing his shocked stare down to where he remembered she’d cut herself open. “Safety is a precious idea among the many reminders of mortality that inundate our purpose here. Inconvenient business, mortality is, but business is booming. Tell me, Vidar, what would you do to secure your survival?”

Vidar jerked out of his shock at the sound of his name on that deadly tongue, swallowing the thickness that clogged his throat before answering, “Anything... sir. I would do anything.”

Aguiyi’s grin settled into a smile that chilled him to the bone. “I know. You’ve suffered, you’ve served, you’ve even sacrificed your beloved. You have proven your commitment to your survival. I must ask you to prove it again.”
Fear numbed Vidar’s face as he forced himself to nod in response. Aguiyi beckoned to someone unseen in a darkened corner of the room and two men dragged a chained and naked older man toward the desk. The leather armrests of the chair squeaked from how hard Vidar gripped them as he took in the prisoner’s sorry condition.

“Vid, I’d like you to meet Dr. Benjamin Wallace,” Aguiyi beamed proudly. “He will be heading a medical research project that we would like you to participate in. Do you accept?”

Vidar could have laughed if he had the breath to. There had never really been a choice to begin with.
Simone could feel Vidar’s eyes on her even after she stepped outside of Aguiyi’s office, his stare coating her in the same dread and helplessness that kept her awake night after night, too afraid of the nightmares waiting in sleep. As she paced, she found herself rubbing her neck, absentmindedly soothing the memories of the pain and panic he had strangled into her too often for her body to forget. The hunger and hatred that burned in his stare reached under her skin no matter how she had steeled herself to face him again. Failure echoed with each tap of her sandals on the ancient stones until the creak of the door opening stopped her pacing.

Bisi’s veiled head peeked out into the hallway, her brow creasing in concern when Simone looked up at her.

“They are about to put him under,” the Igbo woman said. “Are you ready?”

The strangeness of that question snagged a rueful smile at the corners of Simone’s mouth as she answered, “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

The door at the back of the office opened to a sterile white space filled with gleaming medical instruments and monitors displaying a steady stream of data from the sensors attached to her uncle’s skin. It was a stark contrast to the stuffy old-world eclecticism that steeped the room before it, the lack of garish opulence a welcomed departure after months of being trapped in the ancient mansion. Simone had been here only twice before, both times to see the bodies of her uncles. She found it just as difficult to force herself to look towards the metal table, the memories of bloodless white skin still too fresh in her mind to quite believe that they were gone. Vidar’s pale chest still rose and fell with each breath that marked him as the last of her uncles still living, nearly whole but for what she had failed to allow him to keep. The hatred from his remaining eye had dulled under the drugs, but that singular stare did not fail to latch onto her as Aguiyi beckoned her closer.

“Vidar wishes to speak with you before we intubate him,” Aguiyi whispered, his leonine beard brushing her shoulder as he loomed closer to add, “It is only a request. You needn’t fulfill it if you don’t want to.”

Of the few things she could be certain of, she knew that Vidar did not request anything of her; he only ever demanded what he could not take for himself. With him lying there, nearly paralyzed by the drugs that were lulling his brain into a pliant stupor, he could no longer take. Once this was over, he would not take from her ever again. Simone chose to go to him.

The movement of the medical staff attending the equipment around them faded into the background as she drew closer until Vidar filled her focus. The eyepatch he was wearing was gone, leaving the scarred gnarl of sunken flesh bare. Between the grisly wound and the sapphire blue of his eye, she found the wound easier to look at as she stopped at his side.

“Come closer, sweetheart,” he rasped, barely above a whisper.
Apprehension roiled in her belly, making her body slow to respond as she stepped nearer and leaned down until his scent cut through the stench of antiseptics and sterile plastics. The reactive fear that accompanied his scent splashed over her in a cold wave froze her in place.

“You wanted to speak with me, uncle?” she asked, only a little breathy from the panic that clawed at her just beneath her control.

“There you are.” He smiled, showing off the sharp points of his eyeteeth at the edge of a snarl. “I just wanted to see your face one last time before you have me executed.”

“There isn’t…” she started, abruptly aware of how many people were trying not to appear as listening around them. Leaning lower, each inch to draw nearer to Vidar grating against her instincts, she spoke softly, “The barriers you’ve had to build to protect your mind have twisted you, driven you to kill who you could not control. Your executor is biding his time, but there isn’t enough of it for you to come into redemption on your own. We have to dissolve those barriers before your rehabilitation can begin.”

The unkind smile he wore drooped under the weight of suspicion and drug-induced fatigue, his words starting to slur as he drawled, “Who the fuck put you up to this bullshit?”

“I’m just trying to do right by our family’s legacy,” she answered. “Don’t be afraid, uncle. You’re not going to die here; we won’t let you.”

Noise buzzed and hummed through Vidar’s skull, rising from a muddled din until it collected into the sound of a voice. His head lolled, swaying with the room around him, as his eye failed to focus on the man in the wheelchair sitting across the table.

The noise mumbling out of the wheelchair man’s mouth shifted slowly towards language until he caught, “… year it is?”

Vidar frowned, or supposed he did. It was impossible to tell with how numb his face was, the numbness reaching into his mouth and rendering his tongue into a limp wad that he couldn’t figure out how to use. His answer tripped and fell flat on his too-thick tongue, managing a gargled grunt that seemed to satisfy the questioner by the way the wheelchair man wrote something down on his clipboard. Vidar watched the pen move over the paper, already having forgotten the question.

He closed his eye and opened it to darkness.

Weightlessness and silence permeated his perception. A hunger for stimulation rose from this vast nothingness in this dark space. He swallowed just to hear his esophagus click and feel it work, but the sensations were gone to the numbness as soon as they passed to leave him drifting. He could not move his hands to lift them to his face, he could not move at all. His heart raced as dread coated the aching nothingness that hollowed him, panic creeping in like ants swarming through the folds of his brain. The muscles in his body went rigid in resistance, locking his joints as he struggled to move even just a finger. He was locked inside the bleak nothing of his mind. Blood roaring in his skull, his veins bulging in thick ropes just under his skin, he tried to scream.

Relief came in the sharp sting pressed into the veins at his elbow, heat seeping through his blood until his awareness ebbed below the nothingness once more.

Hours melted into days marked by moments of vague awareness that blurred by too quickly for
memory to catch. Clarity came in snapshots of insight, vague memories resurfacing to provide context to his surroundings only to dip beneath his mind’s reach a moment later. The man muttering and shuffling by in odd little steps with his head bowed low like a beaten dog was sometimes Dr. Wallace. The man in the wheelchair with his clipboard was sometimes Maier. The dark figure that occasionally watched from beyond a window was sometimes Dr. Aguiyi, sometimes he was just a demon. The pretty girl who leaned over him and whispered into his ear was only ever ever familiar.

“Your will is my voice, my word is your will,” she would speak into his ear as Dr. Wallace injected something into the tube running up his arm.

She turned his face to her, her hand so soft on his cheek and her silver eyes so gentle. He wanted to touch her, always starving to touch and be touched by her, but he could not move. A buzzing nothingness flooded his veins and stuffed his brain with fluff until there was no room to think, only to listen. She whispered sweetly, each word spoken so clearly and filling him with a sense of comfort, a sense of correctness. He listened as he was supposed to, only ever grateful for the hand on his cheek and the warmth in her attention.

“Follow my lead and live with purpose,” her soft tone would whisper, again and again, each syllable dripping into the emptiness with such lush and beautiful truth.

His body sang with delight and he wanted to cry out Yes, of course, but the words that gurgled up from his throat and skittered from his tongue were not words at all.

The gentle press of her thumb on his lips soothed his confusion; he did not need to speak if she did not ask it. Her hand slid down to cup his neck and delight swept any lingering regret at his ineptitude when he felt how his pulse nudged the tips of her thumb and forefinger. Tears of gratitude stung his eyes with every beat of his heart as hers to claim, every breath belonging to her as it left his parted lips. These things were all he had left to give and they were enough.

“The burden of self is too heavy to bear alone,” her quiet voice filled him until all he could do was listen. The room, the doctor watching them without ever directly looking at them, the smoldering glee from the demon on the other side of the glass, it all fell away in the distance as her voice wrapped around his mind like a soft blanket, warm and so very tight. “To live without the burden of a listless self is to be gifted with clear purpose. I am with you to bear your load and lead you to meaning.”

The comforting weight on his neck pressed down and his head swam with a tingling lightness.

Of course, he wanted to shout.

Of course he was her will. The nothing fogged up around him, thick and heavy, blotting out the light.

What a beautiful purpose to be given.

The lab dimmed until the room was lit only by the blinking sensors and dull computer monitors, but it was enough to cast a glimmer on the liquid Vidar floated in. Simone waited for her uncle’s breathing to even out in drug-induced sleep before pulling away from the sensory deprivation bath and wiping her hand on her dress. His periods of consciousness were becoming more frequent and thankfully brief, all the better to allow this stage of the conditioning to fill in the holes the drugs were
drilling through his mind.

Witnessing how much of a person could be taken, reshaped, manufactured into something so horrifyingly false was too familiar. How much of herself Simone had seen in the reconstruction of his broken mind had shaken the ramshackle foundation of identity she had pieced to hold herself together. The map of scars they were carving into her uncle’s psyche were beginning to travel the same paths that marked her own distorted damage.

She let her gaze wander over his form, his skin having lost what little color it had over the three weeks in the windowless laboratory, almost translucent now to show the blue map of veins that constantly circulated the chemical regimen to reduce his mind to malleable mush. The feeding tube diet was fighting a losing battle on maintaining his mass, but there was healing. The unexpected swelling that had been putting pressure in the Broca’s area of his brain had gone down with the integration of broader steroids strong enough for him to consistently understand speech, though he had yet to be able to form coherent responses.

This was an outcome Dr. Wallace had dubbed tolerable as they moved forward with the procedure. So long as Vidar retained the capacity to comprehend what was said to him, her words could mold him into what he had to become.

There were many aspects of this experiment they had dubbed tolerable. Beyond the calm explanations of risk versus reward, the confidence of the team, the overwhelming buzz of anticipation in the research they were all so fascinated to partake, her old wounds reached up from beneath where she had buried them to sprout new pains. It all made her sick.

Her thumb traced the ridge of Vidar’s orbital bone, so pronounced without the structure of his eyeball to plump the thin skin around it, and let the ache in her chest whisper aloud, “Isn’t life so much simpler when your choices have been reduced?”

“Let him recover, Simone,” Aguiyi’s raspy baritone came tinny and flattened through the speaker in the wall separating them. Simone jerked as she turned, surprised to see the old man still at the observation window. “He needs rest to reconstruct his neural pathways.”

Her fingers curled into a fist behind her back as her lips curled into a smile. “Aren’t you supposed to be keeping Papa occupied?”

The old man returned her smile with an amusement she did not share. “Leif has been quite adequate at keeping himself occupied lately. Have you noticed any changes in his behavior of late?”

“Don’t be coy, Doc. If you’ve got something to say to me, I’d appreciate if you’d please swallow or spit,” she frowned.

He laughed, the wheezing huffs grating her nerves until at last he said, “No, I would rather not be the one to face his wrath for spoiling the surprise. Go on and return to your quarters, girl. I think you’ll find him waiting for you.”
Hyacinth jutted out from the vase, the thick clusters of purple blooming from stalks rigid with a freshness that was undaunted by the late summer heat. Leif accepted the bouquet from the guard without ever having seen who had delivered it. Though he had intended to thank the person who had put their life on the line to bring this to him, it was ultimately for the best that he remain unable to identify them should he be subjected to interrogation. Despite his intentions, he was not altogether certain that gratitude was what he could be capable of when receiving this bittersweet parcel, anyway.

He transferred the hyacinth to a fresh vase and set the arrangement on the nightstand next to his daughter’s side of the bed, adjusting the bouquet until it settled into something he could imagine might bring her some small measure of comfort to look upon. After thoroughly drying the delivered vase, he smashed it against the edge of the bathroom counter, chipping the porcelain until the vase cracked and fell open in two blows. If the guards had heard the racket, they did not mind it enough to risk their health by intruding.

Mindful of the jagged edges, Leif fished out the blister packs of tablets from the hollow base and tucked them into his sleeve before removing the heroin kit. The cameras he had become aware of were well-hidden enough for him to suspect there were others he had not yet accounted for, to which the heroin would ideally provide enough of an explanation towards. Impure heroin was just forbidden enough for him to disguise what other contraband he had smuggled past the security screening. To make the trick more convincing, however, he might as well commit to the ruse.

As he sat on the edge of the bed and removed his shoes, he let the blister packs slip from his sleeve and hide in his loafers before moving on to remove his shirt. It had been a long time since he’d last used, but the kit made the process as simple as making boxed mac and cheese. The tiny metal sterile cup was just large enough to hold the dose without boiling over as he cooked it until it achieved a dark honey color. The vinegary stench was not promising a good high, but he was in no position to be picky about the quality. Before drawing the dose up through the filter, he swabbed the injection site, noting in wry amusement that he no longer required a tourniquet to bulge the veins as age had done that for him.

Lying back on the pillows propped up on the headboard, he pressed the needle into his arm, guiding it deeper inside the vein before slowly depressing the plunger. A hot sting sizzled up his nerves as the dose flowed into his bloodstream, the discomfort lost as soon as it hit his brain.

“Ah…” he sighed, letting his dizzied head fall back as the rush overtook him.

Warmth bloomed where pain had reigned in his body, euphoria quickly clouding his senses in a blissful fog too thick to detect the lies of peace and wellbeing that the drug convinced him were real. All thought took a backseat to a sensation of weightlessness that expanded into a dreamlike state of liquid unreality. The myriad of troubles that kept him anchored to his worries for his daughter and their future together sank away to let him float without a single burden. He was relaxed in a way that even total unconsciousness had denied him; no hint of memories or nightmares haunted this bubble. Complete and total relief permeated his existence.

It was far too sweet for his taste.

When the high began to recede and shift into disorientation, he couldn’t say if he’d been nodding off into that neverland for minutes or hours. The voice calling him was distant, too muffled to identify, but the firm press on his pulse at his wrist and the brush of a hand hovering over his mouth to check
his breathing hinted that it was a medic. Perfect. Everything was going according to plan. The cameras showed enough to tell that he’d smuggled something in through the vase and they would find everything they needed to draw the conclusion that it was only heroin.

The insistent shaking from the hands grasping his shoulders jostled him out of that twilight sleep. Bewilderment muddled the euphoric fog still wrapped around his brain as he found his daughter looming over him.

Simone’s eyes were wide with the worry reflected in her voice as she nearly cried, “Papa? Papa, can you hear me? God fucking damn it, wake up!”

He grabbed her wrists to still her as he swallowed and flexed his tongue to rid it of its sluggishness before responding, “Yes, darling. I can hear you.”

Before he could finish pushing himself to sit upright, her arms locked around his neck and all but crushed him to her chest. He sighed out a chuckle, amused at both her adorable fussing and his severely stunted response time, as he returned her embrace by gently enfolding her on his lap. His darling girl was shaking like a leaf by such a little scare. He would be lying if he said he wasn’t relieved to see such evidence of the tender heart behind her guard. In the weeks since he’d revealed his past experiments on her, she’d been distant, distracted, and indifferent to the horrors surrounding them. He pressed his lips above the neckline of her gown, kissing the flesh hiding where her aorta curled over her tender heart.

“I can’t… I can’t do this alone, Papa…” she whispered, breath puffing against his scalp to send a tingling chill down his spine. “You made me need you. You can’t leave.”

“I will never leave you,” he promised. Smooth, warm skin glided under his palms as he caressed her thighs beneath her dress, the material draping around his wrists as he dragged his touch upwards. “Your friend did not keep you long today.”

Her breath hitched, that little hiccup in her lungs thrilling him as much as the sweet softness his thumbs brushed over at the crux of her thighs. “Bisi… had other plans. I didn’t want to bother her,” she explained. “Is this what you do when I’m not around? Shoot up?”

“That idea upsets you,” he noted, a smile curving his lips as he spoke against the swell of her breast. He had not intended to indulge in the pleasure her body could offer today, not with the regret that loomed so soon now, but the heroin did nicely to blunt his dismay and elevate his desire. “Not to worry, darling. Co-directing a private militia keeps my schedule too full for me to maintain a regular heroin habit. There are better things I’d rather spend my time with than huddling in dark corners with a spoon and needle.”

The little shriek she let out when he flipped her onto her back was cut off by his tongue forced past her teeth. Those sharp points scraped the organ before she remembered to accept it. The injury was a scant thing, just enough to give their kiss the metallic savor of his blood as he licked it into her mouth, and he relished the pause of her tongue upon tasting it. Any way he could invade her pleased the possessive pieces of him that demanded it, no matter how many times or how many ways he had already claimed her. The drive to claim her again and again was a cycle that was fed by its own fulfillment, just as the ouroboros devoured itself to renewal.

“Do you like that, darling?” he asked, voice already wrecked with lust as he yanked her panties down in rough jerks. The elastic snagged and tore at her ankle in his eagerness to rid her of the garment and her shocked delay to cooperate. “Or do you want me to give you something else to hold inside you?”
“I—mmf!” she tried to speak, once more cut off, this time by the cloth of her torn panties being stuffed into her mouth.

He grabbed her wrists when she reached to dislodge the gag, holding them together with one hand while his other reached into the nightstand for a zip tie to take over the task. The clicking ratchet of the plastic strip made her whimper pathetically through the gag. His work of desensitizing her to that fear of being bound had some ways to go. Thankfully, it was a labor he was all too happy to undertake for his child.

“Ssh, ssh, don’t fight it,” he hushed her, stroking her mussed hair behind her ear as he held her arms above her head with one finger hooked over the zip tie encircling them. She stared up at him with tearful, wide eyes that made him abruptly aware of how heavy and full his cock was, straining against his pants. “You know better than to try.”

The next zip tie served to secure the first to one of the wooden rungs that comprised the headboard, binding her to the bed until he would see fit to free her. After absconding his remaining clothing, he set his belt next to her in a neat loop where she could be reminded of what he might do with it if he felt inclined, though she seemed too distracted by his hand wrapping around his erection to notice the implication. Between the two, they both knew which could hurt her more.

“I would have thought that fucking you every night would make you less greedy for dick, not more,” he smirked, moving over her to straddle her chest. As he slowly pumped his length, he said, “Maybe I should just come on your face and leave you wanting, unable to even touch yourself. Knowing you, however, I don’t think it would be long before you start humping the bed like a bitch in heat. It would be quite a show. Should I invite the men in to enjoy it?”

The whine that stuck in her throat was a mournful noise and humiliation darkened the flush that arousal spread on her cheeks. Leif pressed the head of his cock to her face, smearing precum along her cheek as she squeezed her eyes shut and squirmed to move away from his teasing.

“Oh, you wouldn’t like that?” he drawled. She shook her head and he smiled at her earnestness, rewarding that forthcoming honesty with a light slap against her cheek. “You know I won’t let anyone else touch you. Or is that what you can’t stand about it? Are you that greedy? Maybe I’ll bring in one of the guard dogs, see if he even has to be human to make you spread your legs for him.”

A tear that leaked out from her shut eyelids cut across the trail of his fluid, the lewd spectacle of her shame cutting through to his compassion for her. He shoved that willful mercy down with a huff of a laugh. Heroin made him emotionally weak. He pulled the spit-soaked cloth from her mouth, replacing it with his tip pressed insistently against the plush flesh of her lower lip.

Instead of licking as he’d expected her to, Simone choked out, “I want to be good! I should have tried harder, shouldn’t have wrapped anyone else up in this… this sickness. It’s too late for that. I’m trying, Papa. I’m trying to make it right, but… It’s so much harder than I thought. How can I be good if I don’t even know what’s right?”

Leif’s fingers carded through her hair as he shushed her, soothing back that reactive self-blame he had trained into his girl. Training that impulse out of her was proving to be trickier than he could have anticipated; he hadn’t even intended to invoke it this time.

“I’ll take care of you, darling. You don’t need to be certain, you just need to have faith,” he said, and she relaxed into the warmth of his tone and light touches. “You still have so much to learn from me. You must trust that you will learn in time. Trust your faith, Simone. Don’t let uncertainty and shame trick you away from what’s right.”
He guided his tip to press against her lips once more and she parted for him, accepting him into her warm, wet mouth as welcomingly as the faithful received communion. He cupped the back of her head, guiding her as she tightened her lips around his shaft and massaged her tongue along the sensitive underside of his crown with each rocking motion. The sight of her taking his cock in her mouth, of those full lips wrapped around him as she took him deeper with each nudge at her throat, made the rising pressure in his pelvis ache exquisitely with each lick.

“That’s my good girl…” he smiled. She made a small, pathetic noise around him, the vibrations of her voice pulling a ragged sigh from him. “Such a good girl for her papa… I know, I know… You just need it so much, you can’t help it. Don’t worry. I’ll always take care of you.”

He slid out from the seal of her lips slowly, leaving them glistening and puffy from the attention she’d lavished on his cock, and moved down her body.

As he unclasped the eyehooks hidden in the seam up the side of her dress, she whispered, “Was there ever any other way?”

He opened her dress, unwrapping her like a delicate gift, and admired the expanse of her lovely brown skin so free of marks but for what were permanent now. His bite mark at the curve of her neck that had been carved over by a razor, the thin mark across her throat from the scuffle in Vermont, the star-shaped scar above her right breast where the bullet had entered her, the little line stitched at the side of her ribs where the chest tube had been inserted, and the curve she had sliced low on her belly. His Simone was a true Valstad; a victor who had won her right to live by overcoming these trials, not a victim to merely survive them.

“No. We are as we were made to be,” he answered, then opened his mouth over her breast.

Her back arched into his bite, arms strained against her bonds as he sucked at the point of her nipple and ground his teeth into the pliant mound. Her panting moans rose with pain and urgency as he shifted between her legs to guide his cock into her, his prodding needing only a nudge to penetrate her snug entrance with how wet she’d become. The warm, tight hold of her cunt sucked at his intrusion with an eagerness her body had never failed to produce, not even when she had taken him in drugged unconsciousness. His teeth released their grip on her breast to pant through the ecstasy her softness wrought through him. There was never any chance he could have denied himself this delight.

“Good girl…” he breathed, settling into a rocking rhythm that pulled him almost entirely out of her before shoving his way back in. The drag of her walls along his girth had her moaning on the edge of pain beneath him, prompting him to soothe her squirming with the praise she’d constantly craved. “You’re doing so good, so perfect… Ah… That’s it, darling, take it all in just like that. Papa’s here to give you what you need.”

She bucked, trying to dislodge him, twisting to get away and making him grab her hips to press her into the bed. That wild edge was impossible to train out of her, but he didn’t mind the excuse to hold her down and fuck her raw. She cried out so prettily when he drew back and slammed into her, repeating the punishing stroke with a haste that threatened to tear her. He could make it up to her later.

His hand slid up to cup her throat, the threat clear in his voice if not the gesture as he warned, “Don’t fight it.”

“Yes, Papa,” she whimpered. “I’ll be good.”

Both pain and pleasure played over her features as she rode the rising approach of her climax.
through his brutal thrusts. Sweat crawled down his skin as he kept up the pace, the heroin in his system doing well to stave off his orgasm while his daughter began to quiver and clench around him. Her body was drawn tight and each ragged breath was hitched with desperation. He could feel how close she was.

“Say please,” he purred.

“Please, Papa,” she begged, nearly moaning the words. “Please, let me come, please, please…”

A cruel impulse wormed its way into his mind to deny her of that release, but in knowing what was ahead for her after this, he reached between their sweat-slick bodies. Almost as soon as his thumb brushed over the swollen hood of her clitoris, her cunt contracted around him in a pulsing spasm as she came with a high moan. He fucked her through the crest, not letting up as it receded to leave her oversensitive and shaking. She was mewling more than moaning as he continued to punish her cunt.

He circled her clit again, chuckling at how she trembled and jerked, and grinned, “You’re not finished yet, darling girl. Not by a long shot.”

The blood from where the zip tie had cut into Simone’s wrists had dried. She scraped the mess off her skin, letting the running faucet carry it away as she rested her weight against the sink until all that remained were the bright red cuts. The bar of soap slipped from her fingers and clattered into the sink.

“Great…” she muttered, voice hoarse and thick from crying. Her fingers, still numb where they weren’t tingling, shoved the soap around in the basin as she tried and failed to grasp the it. “Come on, stupid. Can’t even do this right. How the fuck are you alive, dipshit.”

Cupping the bar with both palms, she tried to work up a suitable lather only to have it slip out of her grasp again. Before she could spit out another assertion of her ineptitude, a solid warmth pressed against her back and large, weathered hands reached around her to retrieve the bar.

“Refusing to ask for help when it’s needed is a foolish habit, Simone,” Leif chided as he applied a lather to her wrists with a feathery gentleness. The soap still stung and burned in the wounds despite his careful touch. “Trying to catch up with a broken leg will only get you left behind.”

“Yes, Papa,” she frowned.

She glanced at the mirror and caught Leif smiling down at her in their reflection. An uncomfortable warmth squirmed in her belly at accidentally seeing him so unguarded, making her shift her gaze to the swirl of foam circling the drain. That warmth spread to her cheeks in a blush as a hopeful longing sprouted in her heart.

“You’re not alone,” he said, so softly that she turned to see him directly. He dried her off with light presses of a tissue, cautious around her wounds in a way that made that longing ache as he spoke. “You’ve still been acting apart from me, keeping secrets, hiding from me when I can help you… We both know you’re pregnant. We need to talk about that.”

Her stomach turned as she stammered over how to say this without angering him, her shoulders inching up in a wince under his patient stare. Patient, but still waiting.

Instead, she asked, “Do you think we could ask Dr. Aguiyi about getting a bigger place?”
“This apartment is large enough for the both of us,” he responded.

“It is,” she said, letting her agreement steep, careful to not seem argumentative or insistent before adding, “It won’t be just the both of us forever, though.”

“We won’t be here forever, but this can’t wait.” His fingers interlaced in the spaces between hers, his large hands spreading those spaces uncomfortably when he squeezed. “There are too many complications likely to arise with a consanguineous pregnancy, too many that could put your health at risk. We need to talk about terminating.”

She wondered, in a brief moment of horror, if she was going to vomit before managing to rasp, “What?”

“I never wanted this for you,” he said. “Even if you carry it to term and by some miracle it survives, what kind of life would that child have? I promised you a future already and I intend on fulfilling that promise, but I don’t know how long it’s going to take before we find a way out of this. We have to consider what is best.”

Her mouth opened, but no sound would come out as her mind raced, spinning with what he wanted. No matter how hard she worked and wished, he still refused to claim the responsibility left to him by their lineage. Frustration boiled up past the sickness.

“What is best…” she muttered. She prayed to no one that he wouldn’t notice that her knees were shaking. “I’m… Dr. Braun told me that I’m at ten weeks.”

“There’s still plenty of time to change that.”

Swallowing the nausea that roiled up her throat, she croaked, “Ten weeks means it’s your child.”

He nodded, his grip on her hands tightening, grinding the thin bones together as he leaned forward and whispered, “You’re my child. I’m not going to idly stand by while you endanger yourself just to grow another pawn for Aguiyi’s game.”

Fear welded her eyes shut, but she had to know. For the sake of their family, she had to ask, “Papa… What are you going to do?”

His hold loosened, leaving the pain a memory as he answered, “I’m giving you a choice. Think about it, but not too long. I’ll be there for you when you’re ready. I love you, Simone.”

The press of his lips on her forehead eased the twisting in her gut, but she couldn’t bring herself to look up until he left the room. The figure staring back at her in the mirror was the same never-there specter of Bjørn watching her from inside her skull.

“So that’s the surprise,” she murmured, sliding down to sit on the floor. “Just lovely.”

She was so tired.

Vidar waited for the door to open. Shadows passed beyond the window, footsteps and voices muffled through the glass, but no one came through the door. He wasn’t sure if he could walk to open it himself. He wasn’t sure of much, so he sat and waited.
“Fffuhff,” he groaned.

The sound was awkward, too full in his mouth, too fleeting to catch on his tongue. He forced air over that part of his throat to repeat it, but no sound came along that rattling breath. He sat and waited.

The scrape and clack of the keycard lock unlatching made him jerk to attention, his fists clenching and relaxing rhythmically to soothe his excitement until he saw that it was not the girl. He couldn’t remember her name, nor this man’s name, though he felt like knew it sometimes. He knew the names of many things, but not the names of people anymore. He knew that this man used a wheelchair and wrote on a clipboard, that his hair was dark and his accent was of the US, but none of that was his name.

“Good afternoon, Valstad,” the man said as he wheeled closer to him. “Do you understand what I am saying to you today?”

Vidar went back to watching the door. Sooner or later, the girl will come through and tell him how to think and be sure again.

The man wheeled closer, his hands lifting the cotton sheet from Vidar’s lap and touching his bare skin. Vidar was accustomed to doctors touching him, prodding and pricking, taping and bandaging. He flinched when the man’s hand cupped his scrotum.

“Relax, Valstad.”

He did as he was told. He watched the door and relaxed as the man’s other hand wrapped around his penis, the warm and clammy grip unpleasant on the sensitive organ. He wished he didn’t have to relax, but he was unsure if he should wish at all. His penis swelled regardless of what he wished, filling the man’s grip as he pulled the foreskin back and fit his mouth over the exposed head. The wet drag of the man’s tongue made Vidar shiver. Nausea pooled at the back of his throat, but he relaxed and waited.

The door opened again when the girl burst through it at last, but she did not approach him yet. She rushed to the man and tackled him, tipping the wheelchair over and shoving him onto the floor. The man started to laugh, the sound interrupted each time she socked him in the face.

“Maier! You sick son of a bitch!” she yelled. Vidar relaxed and waited as she punched the man again and again, yelling over the laughter, “I’ll fucking kill you if you touch my family again! I don’t give a shit who you work for, I’ll fucking kill you!”

Her knuckles were stained red when she rose, her breathing heavy and ragged from the effort. Vidar pushed himself off the exam table, walked on slow and shaking legs to where she stood, and looked at what she had done to the man. Blood oozed and bubbled from his mouth, drizzled down his chin from his bent nose, but he still grinned and wheezed with laughter. The girl stumbled away abruptly, backing into the wall as Vidar knelt and wrapped his hands around the man’s neck.

He wasn’t sure of much, but he was sure of what she wished.